

# “*Shed Light in the Hall*”: Gender representation in Ethiopian politics since 1990’s up to 2021

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**Abstract:** Women constitute a significant population in every society. Therefore equal participation and representation of women and men in social, economic, and political aspects are crucial to achieving development. Equal participation of men and women in political decision-making connotes gender balance in the political arena. Gender balance in politics is vital to secure the involvement of both segments of society at all stages of the decision-making process, build a democratic system, and increase the acceptance and execution of decisions. In order to overcome gender inequality, Ethiopia has taken several steps to reform its legal and institutional framework to promote women's active participation in political participation at the national and local levels. For this paper two theories are adopted: Feminist theory is about compensating historical discrimination against women, and human rights-based approach, which denotes equal rights of men and women, including political participation, is discussed in this study. This study examines gender representation in Ethiopian politics, focusing on women's political representation and participation in the parliament. Studies related to the issues were searched, identified, and reviewed. Because the author could not handle primary data from the field, the study relied on secondary sources. The obtained qualitative and quantitative data is analyzed via systematic review. The findings from analyzed data demonstrated that, in Ethiopia, women are still underrepresented in politics, although several legislative and structural steps have been taken to remedy women's historical exclusion from political representation.

**Keywords:** Gender Equality; Human Rights; Political Representation; Ethiopia

## Introduction

Gender equality in politics is crucial to participatory and accountable governance, long-term growth, and social cohesion. An inclusive society is vital for the building of a democratic system and the realization of equality. Political participation is a human right; therefore, enabling women to participate and have a say in issues that affect their lives is not a favor but their right. Women's political representation is an essential manifestation of democracy and good governance. Women's leadership and civic engagement can promote development, increase institutional capacity, and reduce corruption. (Dar & Shairgojri, 2022)

When women get the opportunity to participate equally in political affairs, women's voices and interests should be represented; inequitable gender roles will be changed so that the country will be benefited from the contribution of half of the population. World politics is highly dominated by men, elected or appointed as political leaders and decision-makers, compared to women. (Aboobaker, 2018). Hence, Ethiopia's situation is not much different. Women's leadership or political participation is low in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has adopted bi-cameral parliaments and a federal structure with ten regional states and two city administrations since 1995. Although Ethiopian women account for over half of the population and the constitution envisages women's equality in every political, social, and economic aspect, they do not equally engage in and benefit from the country's economic, social, and political affairs. (Bizuneh, 2016). The rationale is that historical women inequality and existing gender roles expose women to either being excluded or marginalized from the political arena.

Except for a few prominent women who have been able to participate in the governance of their countries directly or indirectly, political leadership in Ethiopia has traditionally been the exclusive domain of men. Nonetheless, women's participation in decision-making has increased. (Meaza, 2009).

Shimelis also added that politics is almost generally a male-oriented, male-dominated activity and female political engagement is not as high as one might think. Due to strongly ingrained societal norms, women's ability to participate in politics and make critical judgments has been questioned. Women's political participation has long been regarded as a critical indicator of societal status. As a result, women's participation in politics and decision-making has received widespread attention in recent years. (Shimelis, 2015)

In this paper, a historical overview of women's political participation in Ethiopia, Conceptual and theoretical frameworks for gender equality, and international, regional, and national legal frameworks guaranteeing equal participation of women and men will be discussed thoroughly. Women's political participation will be analyzed starting from the establishment of the federal democratic government in Ethiopia, and potential barriers will be discussed. Finally, it forwards a conclusion followed by a recommendation to help minimize barriers and improve women's participation in Ethiopian politics.

### **Brief Historical Overview of Women's Political Participation in Ethiopia**

Ethiopia is one of the most ancient and never colonized states in the world, having a history of over three thousand years. Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous country, with a population of more than a hundred million. Ethiopian women have not been excluded from political engagements. Women's political and higher-level decision-making roles have existed since ancient times.

When we see the well-known woman in ancient Ethiopian history, Queen Sheba or Makada, a famous leader during *the Aksumite* Empire, is influential in Abyssinia's politics (Budge, 2000). Queen Eleni, during the year 1450-1522 also played an essential political role in the early modern period. Queen Eleni was appointed a regent for three successive young monarchs due to her outstanding political leadership and diplomatic talents. (Yamrot, n.d). Workit and Mestayit are also women who played an active political role in their provinces during the era of local lords from 1769-1855. Empress Mentewab was also a notable woman ruler during the 18th century (Rita, n.d).

Women have long played critical political roles through proxy power, such as birth or marriage. Emperor Menilek II's (1877-1913) first ceremonial wife, Bafana, was a thorny, clever, and powerful woman who tried to destabilize her husband's throne (Hearn, 2002). Empress Tayetu Betul, Emperor Minilik II's consort, also played a significant role in the Ethiopian victory. (Prouty, 1986). She advised the administration and took part in defending the country against the Italian invasion. Moreover, women battled Italy with a tremendous sense of patriotism in the twentieth century during the Italian occupation between the year 1935 to 1941. (Minale, 2001). Empress Zewuditu Menelik ruled Ethiopia from 1916 to 1930 as her father's emperor Menelik II's successor. (Zewde, 2006). After her death, her regent, Emperor Haieslassie, became her successor.

The tradition has persisted, and women were political participants during Emperor Haile Selassie I's regime. Women were also active political participants in the Workers Party of Ethiopia; there was a strong women's association and women's committee during the *Dergue* administration in the 1980s. Following the downfall of the *Dergue* regime, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democracy Front has taken over power. Women's participation in state politics has increased under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front administration. (Free Library, 2014; Ethiopia Today, 2019). Following the 2018 change in Ethiopia, women's political participation is increasing remarkably.

The above-discussed historical facts show that Ethiopian women played a fundamental part in the country's politics long ago. Nevertheless, we cannot say that women engage in politics equally to men. It is not solely because the government has not encouraged women to take an active political role. (Bizuneh, 2016). Instead, this is because of the male-dominated political structure, from feudalism to the modern system, and many other factors. For instance, men are accepted as the decision-makers in the household, the community, and the nation. Patriarchy is the system that establishes these power imbalances between men and women by assigning males a dominant role and women a submissive position.

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

**Gender:** Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female, the relationships between women and men and girls and boys. These attributes, opportunities, and relationships are socially constructed and learned through socialization. They are context and time specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed, and valued in women or a man in a given context. In most societies, there are differences and inequalities between women and men in decision-making opportunities, responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, and access to and control over resources. ([www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/concepts\\_and\\_definitions.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/concepts_and_definitions.htm)).

**Gender Analysis:** Gender analysis examines the relationship between females and males, their access to and control of resources, their roles, and the constraints they face compared to each other. (<http://ochanet.unocha.org/TI/Gender/http://gender.humanitarianresponse.info>).

**Politics:** The word politics comes from the Greek word polis, meaning everything that concerns or belongs to the polis or city-state. Since city-states no longer exist, this definition's modern form concerns the state. Thus, politics can be defined as studying the state, its aims and purposes, its institutions, and relations with citizens and other states. (Modebadze, 2010).

**Gender equality in politics** has been recognized as an essential global issue since the 1970s women's movement (Minta, 2012). Since then, efforts have been exerted to address gender inequality by placing women in positions of influence because of the assumption that women in power would be more likely than men to represent women's interests (Sapiro, 1981).

### **Definition of Terms**

*Kebele:* means locality. It is the lower administrative unit in Ethiopia.

*Woreda:* means district. It is an administrative level higher than *Kebele*.

### **Theoretical Frame Works**

In this paper, two theories have been adopted; the feminist theory and the human rights approach.

### **Feminist Theory**

Gender is a crucial analytic category in feminist theory, and political action on behalf of women necessitates a basic knowledge of what it is to be a woman. Feminist scholars assert that women should be described in any generic way. (Grosz, 1994). Women must also be included and mainstreamed. (Goldenberg, 2007).

This theory's limitation is generality. Not all women are the same and face the same issues. We can find active participants depending on the growth level of the community in which they live, their families, and the opportunity for education and leadership.

Despite the strong desire to achieve gender equality, solutions presented by feminist schools of thought may not always be women's choices. Perhaps women have different choices. As a result, generalization, mainstreaming, and inclusion without ensuring women's choices are flaws of this school of thought.

This theory faces resistance from men who are already characterized by patriarchal, chauvinistic, and essentialist social construction. So this theory's assertion might negatively impact women's equal participation.

### Right-Based Approach

There has been a dramatic shift in the modern world's view of women's growth and empowerment. The international community has begun to regard women's active participation in their political, social, economic, and health status as their essential ends. This shift in approach reflects a human rights-based approach to women's equality. A stronger emphasis has accompanied this shift in approach to women's advancement on the necessity of a rights-based approach to planning and programming in general. Human rights provide entitlements for rights holders and duties for states.

States are expected to ensure the fulfillment of human rights by acting in a way that allows rights holders to exercise their rights. Human rights demand that legislative, administrative, policy, or program action be evaluated in light of the obligations inherent in human rights. A rights-based approach thus involves building a conducive environment for the enjoyment of human rights. (Goonsekere, 1998). In this theory, political participation is considered a human right that belongs to all human beings.

In this paper, the author adapts this theory to focus on women's right to political participation and its practical implementation in Ethiopia. The adapted theory will also be used to guide the data analysis and presentation.

### Methodology

The methods employed for this study are qualitative and quantitative data obtained from published research, articles, reports, books, international, national, and regional legal instruments, and working papers. Relevant studies and materials on Ethiopian women's political representation, challenges, and legal frameworks are reviewed.

## Findings and Interpretation

### Is There Equal Gender Representation In Ethiopian Politics After 1995?

#### Gender Representation in The House of People's Representatives

A significant change in the political aspects was introduced in Ethiopia after the introduction of the federal democratic system of government under the 1995 constitution. Furthermore, six general period elections were undertaken after the adoption of the constitution, which is why this study's focus is from 1995 to 2021. After the early 1990s, moderate spaces were provided for women; in politics, Ethiopia's new government encourages women to participate in political life and decision-making by acknowledging gender equality in political and economic matters. (Tom, 2014). As a result, women have become more involved in politics and entered upper and lower houses.

Since 1995, women's representation in the House of people's representatives and the House of the federation has been rising. In parallel, several Ethiopian women's civil society organizations have arisen (Gemma, 2013). Women have been increasingly represented in the regional, city council, *Woreda* council, and *Kebele* administration positions since 2000. (Meaza, 2009). As demonstrated in table 1, in 1995, women in the House of people's Representatives were only two percent, which increased in the subsequent five elections.

In 2000, women had 42 of the 547 seats (7.68%) of the Ethiopian House of People's Representatives (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 2003). The government established a 30% quota for women in 2004, which was reached and exceeded in subsequent elections.

In 2005, a woman called Birtukan Midekssa became the first leader of an opposition party known as the Coalition for Unity and Democracy. Women made up 117 of the 547 seats in the House of People Representatives in 2005, accounting for 21.4 percent of the total, and the number of women in the *Woreda* council has risen to eight percent. (Ethiopian National Election Board report, 1995, 2000, and 2005).

In 2010, women held 152 (27.8%) of the 547 House of People Representative seats, accounting for 10% to 13% of cabinet ministers (Kebede, 2020). Women have 26 percent of seats on regional and local councils. Furthermore, numerous *Woreda* and *Kebele* councils attempted to achieve 50% women members of the council in 2010 (Wabekbon, 2006).

In 2015, women held 212 (38.8%) of the House of People representatives' 547 seats and 6.6 percent of the council members at the lowest level, *Woreda* and *Kebele* councils. The recent general election was conducted in 2021. Women held 195 of the 470 seats in the House of Peoples' Representatives (41%). (Ethiopian National Election Board report, 2021).

**Table: 1 Women's Representation in the House of Peoples' Representatives**

Year	Total seats	Women's seat	Percentage of women seats
2021	470	195	41%

2015	547	212	38.8%
2010	547	152	27.8%
2005	526	117	21.4%
2000	547	42	7.68%
1995	547	15	2.01%

Source: developed by the author from the sources discussed in the text. December 12, 2022

Note: Women's political representation in the parliament from 1995 to 2021. Women's representation in the first general election conducted in 1995 was two percent. The number was growing through the next elections; moreover, high growth was registered in the 2021 election.

### Women's Representation in the House of Federation

When we come to women's representation in the House of the federation, the number of women members currently constitutes 30.56 percent of the total member, meaning women held 44 seats in 2021. Recent women's participation in the Ethiopian political landscape offers a chance to improve gender equality around the country and end long-standing gender inequities. (Ethiopian National Election Board report, 2021).

### Ministers

Women ministers were less than 9% when we compared them with men. When Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia's current Prime Minister, took office in 2018, 50 % of the government's top ministerial positions were given to women. Never before in Ethiopia have so many high-ranking government positions been held by women.

### President

In 2018, the joint session of the House of Parliament and House of people representative appointed Sahle-Work Zewude as the first woman president of Ethiopia. She was the special representative of the secretary general and head of the U.N. office to the African Union. She also has extensive diplomatic experience, having served as Ethiopia's Ambassador to some nations. However, she is not directly elected by the people.

### Women's Participation in Opposition Political Parties

In 2021, political parties registered 1,976 women as candidates, with six women running as independent candidates. For candidates competing for House of people representatives and regional council elections, most political parties have various qualifying requirements. As a result, more female candidates for regional council elections were registered, i.e., 22 %, compared to 16 % for the House of people representatives. (Ethiopian National Election Board report, 2021).

There is limited women's participation in opposition political parties in Ethiopia. For instance, in the 2021 election, most opposition parties allegedly struggled to include women on their lists. Only 13 political parties met the 20% criteria of registered women candidates to qualify for additional financing, despite some parties having particular gender policies. The main reason is the lack of a welcoming environment for opposition parties, budget constraints, fears of persecution, and fewer women engagement because of society's deeply rooted gender role. (Ethiopian National Election Board report, 2021).

Generally, Women's participation in the country's politics is under improvement compared to the last time. Although women's political participation has progressed, Ethiopian women continue to be economically, socially, and politically marginalized. The hope is that improved representation in the federal government will positively impact and improve the lives of more than 50 million women and girls.

### What Are Challenges for Women's Political Representation in Ethiopia?

Women's participation in Ethiopia's political arena is still unequal to men's. Women are disproportionately underrepresented in decision-making roles at all levels. Furthermore, they have had limited success obtaining political clout in legislative bodies. Moreover, the number of female leaders and decision-makers at various levels of the decentralized government structure remains low (MoWA, 2006). Women are prevented from running for political office for various reasons, which will be addressed in depth below.

### Socio-Cultural Factors

In Ethiopian tradition, there is a gender role assigned to men and women. Women are expected to do house chores, cook, care for their children, do farming, and do laundry rather than engage in activities outside the home.



According to popular belief, women are expected to follow rather than lead. Stereotypical views of women are significant roadblocks; cultural preconceptions about women's leadership qualities and lack of assertiveness due to patriarchy diffusion are just a few of the obstacles that keep women from participating. (MoWA, 2006).

The social structure is patriarchal. It is the primary bottleneck for women's participation in politics. This patriarchal worldview dictates what a woman is and is not (Bari, 2005). Most Ethiopian societies overlooked the feminine essence. Women were forced to see men as intelligent, intellectual, gifted, lucky, perfect, and strong, while women were considered weak. (Meseret, 2010)

In this way, one may argue that built political weltanschauung was a significant obstacle to women's political participation. The culture, tradition, socialization, and custom in their most extreme forms are gender stereotypes.

#### **Religious Factor**

Religion is an essential source of cultural beliefs in most countries (Kunovich, Paxton & Hughes, 2007). As a result, in many communities across the country, religious beliefs are one of the antiquated cultural attitudes that keep women out of the mainstream of leadership. As a result, women's exclusion from religious groups and leadership may harm their social status and limit their political and public-life alternatives. Religion has historically been used to exclude women from social and political life, and all significant faiths feature arguments about women's inferiority to men and embrace long-held outmoded attitudes and notions that politics is a filthy game performed by men. (Kunovich, Paxton & Hughes, 2007).

#### **Economic Factor**

Women's historical experience of discrimination puts them at a disadvantage position economically. To a greater extent, the socioeconomic status of women plays a significant role in enhancing their participation and representation in political decision-making. In this regard, women's social and economic status directly influences their participation in political institutions and elected bodies. (Shvedova, 2002). In other words, the lack of economic resources is one of the biggest obstacles preventing women from participating in politics in significant numbers.

#### **Lack of Social Capital**

According to Mercy (2017), women commonly lack social capital. Women considered that sharing their concept might result in social retribution, either morally or physically, because they previously lacked social capital or recognition. Lack of social capital stifled women's political participation and undermined their confidence to contribute constructive ideas to political and decision-making challenges. After all, this condition compelled women to accept men's political decisions. Women's active players and facilitators in political issues are rare in Ethiopia.

#### **Lack of Willingness among Women**

Women lack the willingness and confidence for political participation. (Mahat, 2003). The issue began with the women themselves. Because they had evolved impossible psychology, some women were not circumspect in their aggressive political activity. They were afraid of men's criticism in order to maintain control over the political arena. The fact that they believe society does not trust them is the factor. Given the obstacles mentioned above, it is logical to conclude that women are hesitant to enter politics because they are afraid of being judged and that society would devalue and disregard what they say.

These traditional patriarchal values will not be abolished overnight. It is impossible to underestimate the impact of gender roles and expectations on individuals. There are Economic, social, and cultural burdens on women, and there is little desire to participate in politics. There is also gender in sensitive media, election systems, funding, and resources gap. The challenges, as mentioned earlier, affected the representation of women in Ethiopian politics before and after the 1990s until now.

#### **What Are the Legal Frameworks for Women's Right to Political Participation?**

##### **International Legal Frameworks**

International human rights instruments are standards for right based approach. Ethiopia has an excellent record of ratifying core international human rights instruments. In the following section, we will see core international human rights signed and ratified by Ethiopia, which is the baseline for a rights-based approach to gender equality. Furthermore, the regional and national legal frameworks will be discussed, respectively.

##### **The United Nations Charter**

The United Nations Charter, adopted in San Francisco on June 26, 1945, set the groundwork for the international protection of women's human rights. Since its inception, the international community has vowed to preserve women's human rights worldwide. Its preamble says we, the People of the United Nations, are determined to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for treaty and other sources of international law are to be maintained. (UN Charter, 1945).

##### **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**

The UDHR is the other most important international legal instrument, providing the foundational legal basis for protecting women's human rights and gender equality. According to the UDHR, acknowledging all members of the human family's inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights is the foundation of world freedom, justice, and peace. It also notes that United Nations member states have reaffirmed their commitment to protecting human rights and the equality of men and women. Article 1 stipulates that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and are entitled to all rights. (U Nations, 1948).

### **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**

The states parties to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights have affirmed that the inherent dignity and equal rights of all human beings are the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world. All ICCPR member states are responsible for protecting men's and women's equal rights to fully enjoy all civil and political rights guaranteed by the agreement. (U.N.G. Assembly, 1966).

### **International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights**

The right to equality in economic, social, and cultural life is envisaged under ICESCR. The right to equality of men and women is one of the fundamental human rights inherently conferred to every member of a given society, and it is regarded as the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world we live in. (U.N.G. Assembly 1966 ).

### **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women**

CEDAW is a more comprehensive women's bill of rights for the advancement of gender equality and the full enjoyment of women's rights and freedoms. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which protects women's rights, has been a baseline for guaranteeing women's political rights. (Elsevier, 2013).

State parties to CEDAW agreed to: Include the principle of gender equality in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation if it is not already in place and to ensure the practical realization of this principle.

In response, the Ethiopian government established a Women's Affairs Minister's Office in 1992, which a woman led with ministerial rank. (Michiko, 2006). In connection with this, numerous Women's Associations have been founded, and they have strived to protect the social, economic, and political benefits of women and their members (Forum for Social studies & Atos Consulting, 2012).

### **Regional Legal Frameworks**

#### **The African Charter on Human and Peoples 'Rights (Banjul Charter)**

The Banjul Charter has confirmed that every human has the right to life, bodily integrity, and personal security and that no one can be deprived of these rights arbitrarily. All states' signatories to the Banjul Charter are required to abolish gender discrimination and ensure the protection of women's rights as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights treaties and declarations. (Organization of African Unity, 1981).

#### **African Protocol on the Rights of Women (Maputo Protocol)**

The African Union enacted the African Protocol on the Rights of Women (2003), technically known as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, to abolish discrimination against women and defend their rights. It states that every woman has the right to the dignity of being a human, the right to legal rights recognized and protected, and the right to develop her personality freely.

### **National Laws**

The 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia constitution strongly emphasizes women's political involvement and representation. The constitution also aligns with international and regional conventions for women's rights. Article 13 of the Ethiopian Constitution affirms fundamental rights and freedoms to be interpreted per the Universal Declaration of Human Rights principles and International human rights Instruments. Article 35 further specifies that women should be given equal access to social, economic, and political participation (FDRE constitution, 1995). This constitutional provision also clearly stipulated the need for affirmative action to rectify women's historical inequality and discrimination. Such policies aim to give special attention to women to empower them to compete and participate in political, social, and economic realms on an equal footing with males. Article 25 of the FDRE constitution also guarantees equality before the law to all people and outlaws gender discrimination.

Additionally, policies and initiatives such as the 1993 National Policy of Ethiopian Women, the 1993 National Population Policy, the 1997 Cultural Policy, and the 1996 Development and Social Welfare Policy, as well as the 1996 Federal Policy on Natural Resources and the Environment, also aimed to create enabling circumstances for gender equality. The government issued the Ethiopian national policy on women in 1993. Because most women in society are disadvantaged, the policy's goal is to institutionalize their political and socioeconomic rights by developing appropriate structures in government institutions, allowing women to take public office and participate in decision-making at all levels. In a nutshell, the policy emphasizes gender equality and female empowerment (Michiko, 2006).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Women's representation is widely acknowledged as a critical component of inclusive, just, and accountable governance, long-term growth, and social cohesion. Women's empowerment and full engagement in all aspects of society on an equal footing, including participation in decision-making and political leadership, are essential for achieving equality, peace, and development

Ethiopian women experienced discrimination, but it does not mean they have no say in the country's political affairs. Although a patriarchal society is prevalent, women have been participating in the political arena since immemorial.

Nowadays, there is a change in understanding of the importance of women's participation, and the government is paving the way to facilitate women's equal participation with men in the country's political aspect. Hence, gender equality has recently become an essential topic in the politics of Ethiopia, and the number of women in governmental positions has been steadily increasing. Several women are taking part in the political system.

Nevertheless, facts and figures show that, even currently, the participation of women is not at an equal level with men. Socio-cultural factors, such as the patriarchal social system, women's lack of willingness, economic burdens, and limited social capital, are among the challenges that limit the participation and representation of women in Ethiopia's politics.

The Ethiopian government's efforts to reform laws to enhance women's political participation are encouraging. Women's engagement should, however, be executed into meaningful participation at all levels and in all aspects. Implementation can be accomplished by removing barriers to Ethiopian women's meaningful political participation, encouraging women's participation in peace and security issues, and meaningful contributions to gender-responsive budgeting at the macro level.

Ethiopia's government should support and promote civil society organizations working on women's rights to better realize equitable political participation for men and women. Awareness raising is vital since everyone should understand that women's involvement is as significant as men's in the political building of the country.

Encourage and strengthen Ethiopian women's empowerment programs and initiatives, enhance women's equal engagement and international networking, and stakeholders should consider gender mainstreaming in all development aspects.

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