

Gender Equality in Ethiopia: Concepts, Practices, and Strategies

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With a particular focus on how gender equality is conceptualised in international and national policies and among rural Oromo women in Ethiopia, my research seeks to explore the dynamics in encounters between diverging notions of gender, gender equality, and women's rights. It also involves a focus on how Norwegian-funded development initiatives that address gender issues are carried out and perceived locally. This year I spent four months in Ethiopia, mainly in rural villages in the Oromia region where I did participant observation and interviewed women, religious leaders, NGO workers, and government bureaucrats.

The preliminary findings of my research are twofold. Whereas the discourse on gender equality at international level and among development bureaucrats at central level in Ethiopia reflects a relatively broad conceptualization of gender equality, characterized by a focus on equal opportunities for men and women in relation to political participation, education, economic participation etc. - the discourse on gender equality at the local level seems to be limited to the following: a) gender equality understood as women's rights with particular focus on gender violence and so-called harmful traditional practices (HTP) and; b) gender equality understood with particular reference to work. The local discourse reflected to some extent a focus on change in gender roles, among others voiced in arguments such as "women should start to plough, and men should start to make injera (local bread)." The dominant understanding of gender equality was however framed as "working together in the field in

order to increase production and get out of poverty."

Public meetings arranged by the government were reported as the main source of information regarding this issue, and comparing the rhetoric on the grass roots level with Ethiopia's newly launched Growth and Transformation plan,



one might conclude that the conceptualization at the local level, rather than reflecting genuine local perceptions, is mirroring what is on the political agenda. Informants kept claiming that "we have accepted" gender equality, to stop practicing female genital cutting (FGC), to use family planning etc. However, when probing deeper into these issues, it became clear that this acceptance was not necessarily genuine nor put into practice, but something people would say because of fear of possible consequences if they raised any kind of opposition.

Secondly, all the Norwegian-

funded organizations that I came in contact with during my fieldwork had a focus on HTP and particularly FGC, indicating that FGC/HTP among these organizations might have become a proxy for work on gender equality. In addition, secular as well as faith-based NGOs and also government institutions propagate and use religious leaders as a key strategy. Hence, my research also ended up focusing on experiences and approaches with regard to religious leaders. Preliminary analysis indicate that even though one may argue for the importance of religious leaders as agents of change, it might be a less fruitful strategy if political-religious dynamics are not taken into consideration.



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