

# Trajectory of the Institute of Gender Studies at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

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## Introduction

The Institute of Gender Studies (IGS) at Addis Ababa is the only institution for the study of women and gender in Ethiopia. Since its establishment sixteen years ago, the organisation has gone through various ups and downs, marking a lot of achievements and meeting various challenges. This article describes the context in which IGS operates: its objectives, strategies, activities, the challenges faced in carrying its responsibilities and meeting the expectations of various stakeholders. Finally, mention is made of its future prospects.

## The context

### *Ethiopia*

According to a projection made in the 1994 Census, the Ethiopian population is estimated to be 75 067 000; women make up 49,89% of the population. Of the total population, 83,4% live in rural areas.

The situation of girls and women in Ethiopia reflects the unfair gender relationships prevalent in Ethiopian society. Data from the Ministry of Education reveals that girls and women are less represented in education at all levels, especially at secondary and tertiary levels. For example, in the 2005/6 academic year, only 22,3% of the students enrolled in a four-year degree programme were females and only 9,9% of the students in the postgraduate master's programme were female. A similar disparity is observed in secondary schools.

As various data and studies show, women are disadvantaged in the workplace. Data from the Urban Employment survey shows that in 2003, among the total population of the urban areas of the nine regions and two administrative cities, only 42,8% were employed. Looking at the sex-disaggregated data, the survey reveals that only 34,8% of the female population was employed, compared to 51,8% of the male population. Employment in the civil service is also skewed in favour of men. Data from the Civil Service Commission reveals that in 2004/5

there was a total of 351 964 permanent employees, and of these only 31,8% were women. Though women make up about one third of the employees in the civil service, most of them are found in low-status, low-paying jobs. For example, federal data reveals that only 21,8% of the professional and scientific services positions, and 31,2% of the sub-professional services positions, are occupied by women (FCSC, 2005).

Moreover, a number of existing conditions readily expose women in Ethiopia to ill-health. These include low levels of education, especially in rural areas; inadequate or inaccessible healthcare facilities; harmful traditional practices, including female genital mutilation and early marriage; poverty (which aggravates infectious diseases); illegal abortions (especially in urban areas); lack of appropriate nutrition because of poverty and culture; and socially-condoned violence against women (MOH, 2003). This unfavourable situation is reflected in several health indicators.

Regarding political participation of women, there are 547 seats in the parliament and 15 of them are empty. Of the 530 active seats, 117, or 22,1%, are held by women. There are 12 standing committees, and of these, only two – the Women’s Affairs Committee and the Social Affairs Committee – are chaired by women. A serious gender gap is observed in the number of cabinet ministers as well. According to data from the FCSC, of 28 ministers only two, or 7,1%, are women; and only 14,3% of 42 state ministers are women.

Despite the significant attention given to the agricultural sector and the immense contribution of women to this sector, their access to resources, including land and extension services, is limited. In addition, the traditional division of labour and the lower value attached to the contribution of women disadvantage them by limiting their land size, the number and types of agricultural services provided, and other necessary resources and inputs.

### *Addis Ababa University*

Addis Ababa University, the biggest higher educational institution in the country, was established in 1950. Currently it has over 20 colleges or faculties and 1 069 teaching staff. Female staff constitute only 11,1% of the total teaching staff. Similarly, women are under-represented as heads of departments and deans of faculties. Male faculty hold the top decision-making positions – president, vice-presidents, and most of the dean and director posts. Men hold all 15 central administration positions in the University. A similar trend prevails in the administration wing of the University.

The gender disparity in the student body is also highly visible. In the current academic year, women made up only 27,3% of the students enrolled in regular undergraduate programmes and 10,1% of postgraduate students.

The small female population and patriarchal culture on campus make for a very unfriendly environment, manifesting in harassment, violence (including homicide), stigma against female students regarding affirmative action, and the lack of a gender policy. In general, it is an environment that muffles the voice of female students, to the detriment of their academic, social and personal lives. As female students themselves explain, female students who perform well and who frequently converse with their instructors are seen in a negative light; many of them are afraid of moving around on campus in the evenings; they are pestered when studying in the library; and graffiti on campus is degrading towards female students. Until recently it was only the Centre for Research Training and Information on Women in Development (CERTWID) that was expected to attend to academic, social and other issues related to gender.

A Women's Affairs Office was opened in 2007, and staffed by one person. Female students who come to the office for various inquiries and problems related to their personal, social, and academic lives are given guidance and information.

So here – where there is little awareness about or commitment to gender issues; where there is gender disparity in every sector, and where the unfavourable position of women is manifested through illiteracy, poverty, disease, and violence – CERTWID was established in 1991 with the goal of enabling women to empower themselves economically, socially, politically and culturally.

### **The Centre for Research Training and Information on Women in Development (1991–2005)**

In 1989 a group of five women from Addis Ababa University organised the first and most successful workshop on gender issues in Ethiopia. Workshop papers covered a wide variety of themes including education, health, history, agriculture, craft, and science and technology. It was an important event where gender issues were discussed at the university for the first time, and it indicated the possibility that a lot could be done. The workshop was instrumental in the preparation of a project document for the establishment of what was to become the first and the only university-based institute for teaching and conducting research on gender issues.

The Centre for Research Training and Information on Women in Development (CERTWID) was established in 1991 through a project agreement between the Ethiopian government and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) as a focal point to address the problems women encounter in economic, social and cultural spheres. Initially it was one of the units of the Institute of Development Research (IDR) at the Addis Ababa University, directly reporting to the IDR director. CERTWID began its operation with one room and a conference hall provided by IDR as a temporary office.

CERTWID adopted research, education, training, and information and documentation as its main strategies towards achieving the empowerment of women. Accordingly, it:

- conducted, encouraged, sponsored and facilitated research on issues related to gender and development;
- initiated, developed and coordinated training on gender issues, including gender-sensitive research and feminist methodology;
- assisted the government in the formulation of policies and programmes that address the needs of women and remove barriers to their active participation in the development process; and
- strengthened its Information Publications and Documentation Unit through publishing research reports, purchasing and donations.

Over 14 years, CERTWID registered a number of accomplishments in all its focal activities. The research programme had various components: staff research, studies carried out by individual researchers on a scheme of competitive research grants, and student research grants. Especially popular and most successful was the student research grant. This was a competitive research grant awarded to senior undergraduate students and graduate students who wrote their senior papers or MA theses on gender issues. This programme has created awareness, and has helped both students and supervising professors to acquire knowledge and research skills on gender issues. In addition, it has created a wealth of information (46 MA theses and 70 senior papers) on women's and gender issues on a wide variety of topics. Some of the best MA theses and senior papers have been published in the form of research reports.

In the training programme, a number of training workshops were organised for Addis Ababa University (AAU) staff and students, employees of government and non-government organisations working on women's and

gender issues. Some of the workshops were on gender sensitisation; gender mainstreaming; gender-sensitive research methodology; and integrating gender in the AAU curriculum. In addition, CERTWID had a monthly public lecture in which guest speakers from various areas came to deliver presentations and lead discussions.

The Information Publications and Documentation Unit has a library which serves as a resource centre for materials related to women's and gender issues for University staff, students, researchers coming from abroad, and employees of government and non-government organisations working on these concerns. In addition, CERTWID had publications that were distributed widely. These include *CERTWID Informs*, a bi-annual newsletter in which major activities of the centre and current women's or gender issues were discussed. Others are the two-volume *Annotated Bibliography of Gender issues in Ethiopia; Narratives of Three Prostitutes in Addis Ababa; Gender and Cross-Cultural Dynamics in Ethiopia: The Case of Eleven Ethnic Groups; Gender Roles in Agricultural Production among the Sidama of Southwestern Ethiopia; and Some Reflections on Criminalizing Domestic Violence Against Women with Emphasis on Ethiopia*.

CERTWID was able to forge a collaborative project in which, in addition to the establishment of a very big research project, two female students were granted scholarships to complete their graduate programmes in Ethiopia, and one staff member her PhD abroad.

These activities were carried out despite several challenges. One of the problems was the lack of both human and financial resources. For a long time, CERTWID had only one coordinator, two MA-holding academic staff (one of whom was writing her dissertation), and another graduate assistant. These few staff members were expected to undertake all the activities at the Centre, in addition to meeting demands from both the university and other organisations. The university called on CERTWID to undertake anything related to women and gender.

In addition, in spite of CERTWID's attempts to clarify its roles and activities, staff members were obliged to be involved in supporting female students in various ways. Female students visited CERTWID for support with academic, economic, social and personal problems. For example, in collaboration with the Rotary Club, needy female students were provided with a monthly stipend. A similar demand came from outside: staff from CERTWID had given training to women parliamentarians and had presented

papers at various fora, at the request of the Women's Standing Committee in Parliament. CERTWID was also called upon to assist in a number of tasks from the then Women's Affairs Bureau, which fell within the Prime Minister's Office. In addition, staff members were expected to participate in various local NGOs supporting women, as board members and in other capacities.

As indicated above, CERTWID was the most under-staffed and under-funded centre on campus. The university paid only staff salaries; all other activities depended on money raised by the centre. Structurally, CERTWID was at one time under the IDR, which meant no representation in important decision-making bodies such as the university senate. This marginalised it even further.

The unfriendly environment at the university created by male-dominated culture, both in the student body and staff, hindered CERTWID's development. The most discouraging problem was financial administration. This was especially problematic since the centre did not have an administrator. Preparing the financial statements required by donors was the task of the coordinator. In addition, even when the centre used donors' money, it was extremely difficult, for example, to hire a consultant at market price since the university had its own standards of pay. Purchasing equipment took years. As a result, the centre was not able to make the best use of its project funds. There were instances in which attempts were made from outside to appropriate the centre's single vehicle, and in which the coordinator had to beg for a driver to support the centre's activities. All these factors as well as the very low salaries paid by the university, which in no way compare with the salaries paid by NGOs to gender experts, made working for CERTWID very unattractive. As a result, another problem was a high rate of staff turnover.

However, despite these numerous challenges and the feeling that more could have been done, CERTWID has survived and evolved to become the current Institute of Gender Studies.

### **CERTWID relaunches as the Institute of Gender Studies in 2006**

In the early 2000s, CERTWID's structure was reorganised and its operation began to change. It became independent of IDR in September 2000, reporting directly to the Associate Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies, which enabled it to reduce bureaucracy. In 2006, it was upgraded to institute level as the Institute of Gender Studies (IGS), and began to offer a postgraduate programme in Gender Studies. Currently, there are three batches of students, and two batches will have graduated in September 2007.

The beginning of the MA programme was sudden, and enforced by the government's graduate expansion programme. IGS, with its single staff member qualified to teach in a graduate programme, and some outside assistance, launched its MA in gender studies in March 2006 with 22 students: 15 female and seven male. In September 2006, IGS was forced to take another batch of 21 students, which made the work doubly challenging. In the current academic year, 23 students are enrolled, 17 female and six male, making a total of 66 students.

The beginning of the MA programme witnessed a number of problems. In addition to lack of staff, the unavailability of classrooms, library space, and a computer lab for students proved to be serious stumbling blocks. IGS staff had to use all means, including changing their schedules, to be accommodated in available classrooms belonging to other institutes and departments, and utilise other rooms that had never previously been used as classrooms. Finally the university rented a structure – far from the main campus. Though more space is now available, the off-campus location, the need to visit the main campus for all administrative activities, and the distance from the central activity of the university and its visitors, have also disadvantaged the Institute.

One teaching challenge was that of finding qualified MA thesis advisors and examiners, more so at the end of the academic year when the limited staff (currently two Ethiopian and one expatriate) are overworked. Other activities for which CERTWID was originally established, such as training, assisting the government in the design of policies, publication and dissemination of information, and working in collaboration with other institutes tackling gender issues, have also been ignored. Networking with similar institutes in African countries, which would have helped IGS in exchanging experience and sharing available resources, has been very limited.

## Prospects for IGS

Currently IGS is more focused on its teaching activities, and it seems that the experience of the past two years has been very useful. The foundation has been laid and the teaching programme will continue with more rigour. Though there is support from the university, it will take a few years for IGS to become grounded and strong enough to both carry out its teaching, and undertake other activities which have strategic and long-lasting impact, such as influencing policy, and networking in order to collaborate in dealing with national issues.

In addition to providing qualified personnel, equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills on women's and gender issues, to various organisations, one of the benefits IGS should reap from its graduate programme is the possibility of retaining some of its dynamic graduates to work for the Institute. This process has already begun, and students who will graduate at the end of the academic year have already started applying. There is a feeling that the worst is over, especially the crises related to the beginning of the MA programme, and that in a few years IGS will be strong and ready once again to take up the activities that declined for want of capacity, and to tackle new challenges.

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