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# The Setawee Way: An Articulation of Ethiopian Feminism

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## Abstract

In Ethiopia, women's organizing and mobilization is not new, however, outward claims of *feminism* and vocal allegiance to feminist ideals is a movement that has recently taken traction within the country. Despite following its own timeline, this resurgence in Ethiopia also takes place amongst the feminist movements found in the different nations on the continent. In Ethiopia, this contemporary iteration connects to broader discussions of the significant factors of migration, immigration, globalization, capitalism, modernity, and the new technological age. Subsequently, most of the scholarship pertaining to women's socioeconomic issues takes the cultural or anthropological mode of exploration. More recently, scholars and feminists from Ethiopia and on the continent in general, have produced work that focuses more on the lived realities of women. With the goal of contributing to such production, this thesis thematically organizes and documents the current articulation of feminist thoughts and ideas in Ethiopia. For that purpose, I combine a literature review of African feminist theorists in order to situate the study, along with the qualitative data I garnered during my feminist ethnography fieldwork in the summer of 2017. This data is validated through the voices and experiences of seven contemporary Ethiopian women from semi-structured interviews I conducted during this ethnography. Further enriching the analysis, my own experiences are analyzed and integrated within this report. Documenting these voices and experiences validates women's perspectives as necessary work for Ethiopian intellectual property. I argue that despite feminist action always being prevalent, the outward claim of feminist ideals that the women's organization, Setaweeet has implemented, provides a much-needed space for Ethiopian women to seek intellectual stimulation and debate, feminist training, support, and solidarity. Further, I propose that with the new technological age, women's organizations such as Setaweeet are able to have a platform with

more reach than ever before. My articulation unpacks the different reasons why feminist movements are necessary in Ethiopia, what events have worked in the past, and what Ethiopian women themselves want to see for the future. This study aims to portray the possibility of solidarity within difference that can help better the lives of Ethiopian women as well as aid in the development of gender equality everywhere.

Key Words: Setawee, Ethiopia, feminism, contemporary, solidarity, globalization, movement

The Setawee Way: An Articulation of Ethiopian Feminism

by

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B.A., Metropolitan State University of Denver, 2016

Thesis

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## **Dedication**

Leswa...

Ena, lesum.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *For her... and for him too.*

## **Acknowledgements**

Without the mentorship and guidance of Dr. Winston Grady-Willis and Dr. Jacqueline McLeod at the Metropolitan State University of Denver in my last year of my undergraduate studies, I would not be able to have come to find my passion in feminist scholar activism while at Syracuse University. I didn't show them enough while I was there, how integral they have both been to my growth as a person, so I take the opportunity to thank them here. I thank the African-American Studies department at Syracuse University for this opportunity to study and explore an issue close to my being. A special thank you to Dr. Sehin Teffera of Setaweeet and the whole Setaweeet staff and members that showed me the utmost love and kindness and fostered with me, the best family kinship during my ethnography; one I never knew was possible, and one that is sure to have lasting impact on my life. Pomi, Mahi, Metti, and Alex, I am blessed to know you and call you friends and interlocutors in research activism. Your positive words and best regards for me have done more than you can possibly imagine. I thank the women of Ethiopia, my mother, grandmother, my sisters and the domestic workers with personalities big and small, whom we all know and love in Ethiopia. You are my inspiration, my passion, and the path to my liberation. I thank you for this privilege of bringing our voices into the greater discourse. I thank my thesis advisor and professor, Dr. Gwendolyn Pough as well as my thesis readers Dr. Mouctar Diallo and Dr. Casarae Gibson for their support and contributions to my work. A special thank you to Dr. Rochelle Ford whose family has been a joy to know in Syracuse. Finally, the utmost of thank-yous' to the Administrative Assistant, Ajajielle Brown of the African American Studies Department at Syracuse University along with the staff in the main office, whose continuous and dedicated work must never go unnoticed.

Ameseginalew. Thank You.

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## **Introduction**

## Genealogy and Self-Location as Ritual Decolonizing Tool

As I come to this work, I am not only informed by my literature review and fieldwork, but also through my own experiences as an Ethiopian born woman, currently living in the United States. I was born in the small neighborhood of *Addis Ketema*, the closest ghetto near the biggest trade market, *Merkato*. In Ethiopia, I do not remember which I was made to know first: if I was poor or if I was a *girl*. Nonetheless, I remember understanding at a very young age that both identities did not translate to power in the way I understood it to be

On a particularly cold Addis Abeba<sup>2</sup> evening, I walked to the white van that would take me to the airport where the aircraft that would ultimately sever me from my home awaited. My relatives, neighbors, friends, and others shouted out lots of advice and favors as my small limbs climbed into the doorway of the white van. I heard shouts of “Don’t turn into a *Pente* (Protestant)! Don’t forget us!” And one person said, “When you get to America, grab the money they walk around on the ground and send some back to us!” The last assumption was one I too believed to be true, and the one I had looked forward to most. I was going to pick up all the money, and buy my grandmother a house; I was going to send back so much money all my neighbors were going to be taken care of forever. Despite anxiety over the trip, I assured them that I would indeed send some money as soon as I got there. And then I left my home in search of a *better* one.

I arrived in Denver on a cold, November, night and as I ascended the stairs to my mother’s apartment, I asked her why the stairs were made from wood. Wasn’t everything made from Gold in America? And where was all the money? I had come to the States believing that

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<sup>2</sup> I use the non-Western spelling of the capital city of Ethiopia (from ‘Ababa’ to ‘Abeba’) as anticolonial methodology throughout this Thesis. The accepted/dominant spelling of the word is incorrect but has yet to be challenged/changed.

the ‘help’ my people and I needed resided here, and despite not finding the money I expected to be on the ground, the belief that America was better than Ethiopia calcified as I integrated into the Western schooling system.

As I grew up, I knew in the back of my mind that I ultimately wanted to return to Ethiopia and fulfill my promise of *helping* my people. During the process of my education, I came to understand that to help *my* people; I must first help myself understand my *herstory*.<sup>3</sup> In *Indigenous Methodologies*, Margaret Kovach, states, “My critical perspective on the world was solidified through academia, but it did not begin there” (8). Taking Kovach’s words to heart as well as her utilization of a prologue as a decolonizing tool, I can reflect on my complex ways of knowing through both education and my embodied knowledge, and make it transparent in this chapter. I left college after completing 2 years in the Natural Sciences to run away to California and discover myself. Five years later, I returned to Denver, enrolled in the local university and declared an Africana Studies major and an Anthropology minor. In the last year of my study, I took a Women of Color class. In this class, I was presented with new works by Black and Latinx feminists that would greatly shift my thinking about my and other Ethiopian women, as well as, other Black and brown women’s lives. The life of my mother, my grandmother, and all the other unsung *Shero*es in my life that I had not yet acknowledged as useful information for my own growth and knowledge bank, began to surface in my thinking.<sup>4</sup>

In the first year of my graduate study, I decided to research feminism in Ethiopia and explore the contributions that women in the Ethiopian diaspora have made back to the native

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<sup>3</sup> As opposed to the commonly used term of ‘history’. This is an intentional utilization to decolonize language and normative masculine terminology. As I provide a gendered, historicized, articulation and analysis in this thesis, I use this terminology throughout.

<sup>4</sup> Again, this use of ‘*shero*’ as opposed to ‘*hero*’ is disrupting masculinist language and terminology; especially as I speak about the women in my family who have impacted my life.

country. My positionality as an Ethiopian born woman, who has spent most of her life here in the United States had greatly influenced me to explore the ways in which other women in the Ethiopian diaspora have advocated for women's rights in Ethiopia. My goal for doing this was so that I could follow the path they have laid out as well as provide a way that others who want to do similar work in Ethiopia, could use as reference. During this process, I came to realize the importance of first exploring the women's movements and organizations already prevalent in the native country to understand the ways they address and articulate their own needs. In this exploration, I want to be mindful to turn a reflexive eye on my own understanding of feminism in the US context and how that differs as well as relates to the already present (although not necessarily defined as such) feminist action in Ethiopia.

As I am expanding in both my knowledge consumption and production simultaneously, I have come to realize the ways in which my grandmother, mother, myself, and other Ethiopian women are knowledgeable in ways I initially was not able to recognize. My longing to give back shifted from that which calls for a revolution that seeks to liberate seemingly "lesser" others, to that of exploring the ways Ethiopian women have already been doing such work. This shift in consciousness is the propellant for my exploration in these following chapters.

My intended audience is primarily women in Ethiopia and women in the Ethiopian diaspora. I realize that while some Ethiopian women in the country may not be educated through formal schooling, many have the desire to learn. I recognize my privilege of my access to Western higher education and how that translates to having status, especially in Ethiopia. Through this privilege, I also recognize that I am being allowed a voice; a recognition that then urges me to return home, to amplify other silenced voices. The main goal of this thesis is to

legitimize the agency of Ethiopian women and the means through which we/they work together in resisting the oppressions prevalent throughout the country.

I reclaim myself, and my body as subject and originator of knowledge that is constantly being added to and subtracted from, through positive unlearning, and evolving. My lived experiences, collectively with all aspects of who I am, what I think, and all the identities I identify with are encountering transformations that occur through decolonizing the knowledge I already have. I believe that your biography becomes your biology.<sup>5</sup> In writing truth to power about Ethiopian women, I hope to spark a revolutionary act that aids in the liberation of women everywhere.

### **Gendered Historicized Context**

The emergence of women's movements and organizing in Ethiopia can be traced as far as the formation of the nation itself. Ethiopian scholar Abraha writes, "Women in Ethiopian history have made noteworthy roles in the overall state building, development and democratization maneuvers; however, these roles remain invisible and unrecognized" (Abraha, 47). Ethiopian women have always found ways to exercise their agency despite oppressive laws, practices, and ideologies prevalent in the cultural ruling of the different ethnic groups in power in the rural areas and throughout the entire nation-state itself.<sup>6</sup>

In the early twentieth century, the Ethiopian Women Welfare Association was set up to be followed by organizations such as the Armed Forces Wives Association and the Ethiopian Young Women's Christian Association, just to name a few (Biseswar, 130). There is little

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<sup>5</sup> I believe that telling of any story in truth has power to transform individual, familial, and community identity and destiny for the better, and aids in relinquishing past ailments, weaknesses, and failures and transforms them into strengths for the future. "Telling my story another way lets me forgive you" (Kandasamy). "To write is to become" (Minh-Ha, 17).

<sup>6</sup> The state here refers to an institutional apparatus that includes the government, the judiciary, and the bureaucracy made of up the directorships of all these institutions (Carty).

scholarship on the impact of these organizations to women's issues in the country as most of the organizations were, as Abraha articulates, "characterized by undemocratic settings where authoritarianism, patriarchal hierarchy and exclusive political culture challenged women's activism" (Abraha, 47). Wars and battles (Battle of Adwa) throughout the history of Ethiopia also include the courageous yet often invincible actions of Ethiopian women both on the front lines and behind the scenes.<sup>7</sup> Still, women have found ways to mobilize at the grassroots and political levels while also exercising their agency in the private sectors in their homes and communities. These creative, public, and private means of organizing from Ethiopian women illuminate the notion that Burgess speaks on in saying, "women's movements [do] not have to have a single organizational expression, and may be characterized by a diversity of interest, forms of expression and spatial location" (Burgess, 102). With this understanding, dominant and incorrect attitudes pertaining to the stagnant advancement of women in Ethiopia can be challenged and thus, I argue that despite a difference in models of women's organizations on the continent of Africa, Ethiopian women, follow our/their own steps forward in fighting for women's rights.

Scholarship that centers and documents the everyday lives and interpretations of life from the Ethiopian woman's point of view is scarce and in need of exploration. Within the context of modernity and the new technological age, feminism in Ethiopia is gaining a resurgence through self-identified feminist movements such as the women's organization, Setaweeet in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia. This exploration documents the interpretations and utility of feminism for the

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<sup>7</sup> Battle of Adwa is the now infamous battle between the Ethiopian Empire and the Kingdom of Italy which resulted in Ethiopia resisting colonization. Many women were a part of this battle yet have little scholarship centering their experience, only alluded to in relation to the men who fought/lead in the battle. (Mennasema, 43).

contemporary Ethiopian woman and argues that these voices are important and valid knowledge to existing research on the country and continent.

The self-identified feminist movement, Setaweet, serves as my entry point into this exploration. This women's organization was also the site for my externship in Ethiopia during the summer of 2017. Due to the nature of this exploration and my research interests, I employ a conceptual/theoretical framework of feminism that is heavily informed by my coming into feminist consciousness in the United States through the work of Black feminists. I provide the qualitative data found in the chapters of this thesis garnered through my feminist ethnography and methodology. I am keen to employ feminist reflexivity during this process of analysis similarly in the ways that I practiced feminist reflexivity during my ethnography. In Ethiopia, I engaged in cultural analysis and literature review, participatory research through full participant emersion and observation. Also, I conducted semi-structured interviews to better understand how Ethiopian women define feminism for themselves and how they explain in their own words what the current needs for women are in Addis Abeba. Through a critical discussion of my participation in the Setaweet organization, my goal is to explore how women in Ethiopia are a source of knowledge production by showing the way women across class, age, and ethnic boundaries have worked together to translate their concerns into activism in Addis Abeba. Also, I provide a deeper understanding of how feminist action is articulated and enacted in the landscape of Ethiopia so that it may better inform future ways in which transnational feminist solidarity can be formed with women, such as myself, in the Ethiopian diaspora.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> While I use the term "feminist" here, I acknowledge that women in Ethiopia do not necessarily claim themselves and/or their actions as such. In this study, women who claim the term as well as women who don't see that as a necessary step to activism are included.

## **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

Pulling from my learning through texts authored by Black Feminist scholars such as bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Patricia Hill Collins, I consider the intersectionality of race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and other identities that simultaneously play into the oppressions faced by Ethiopian women and employ these in my feminist analysis and interpretation of interviews as well as experiences in Ethiopia. Also, I utilize works by African feminist scholars such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Nina Mba, Amina Mire, and Patricia McFadden as well as Ethiopian feminists, writers and authors such as Sehin Teferra, Pomi Ayalew, and Rebecca Haile, to contextualize this articulation and ground it on the African continent. In employing African feminist scholars from/on the continent in conversation with knowledge informed by Black, Indigenous, and Third World Feminist scholars I was exposed to in the U.S., I highlight that Black women globally share similar oppressions and concerns and can inform means of navigating and resisting against inequalities transnationally. Collins further articulates this point and I agree with her when she says, “Black feminism participates in a larger context of struggling for social justice that transcends U.S. borders. In particular, U.S. Black feminism should see commonalities that join women of African descent as well as differences that emerge from our diverse national histories” (Collins, 11). Echoing this sentiment, African feminist scholars Johnson-Odim and Nina Emma also state, “As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” (15).

In addition to these frameworks, I also utilize a gendered approach to the Pan-African perspective to inform my theorization. I contribute to a gendered pan-African lens through incorporating African feminists and African women theorizers that have traditionally been



excluded in Pan-Africanism. In including those perspectives here, it is both a critique of traditional masculinist pan-Africanism theorists as well as an example of the breadth of information that African women have to bring to the discourse on the continent. Similarly, legitimizing young Ethiopian women's voices is a direct challenge of African masculinist thought that renders women invincible and voiceless.

I argue that using a critical feminist lens is decolonizing knowledge production and through this methodology, my aim is to legitimize Ethiopian women's interpretation of their own lives. I conduct this research through a detailed discussion of both scholarly literature and those of the alternative press (Ethiopian/African blogs, websites, and social media). There are constraints and limitations posed to this exploration as I was heavily involved internally with the organization which can lead to bias, and I was also visibly and audibly located as "diaspora" amongst the population I navigated within and outside of the organization.<sup>9</sup> I will discuss limitations in detail in the conclusion of this thesis.

## **Methodology**

I employed a mixed-methods approach of collecting data during my feminist ethnography. The qualitative data presented in this thesis was collected through my experiences as a Setaweet member as well as part of the staff as an intern with the title, Setaweet Activist Researcher. The participants for this study were recruited as a snowball sample from relationships garnered through Setaweet. For the semi-structured interviews, Setaweet members volunteered after I provided a short description of the study and asked attendees on different occasions if they would be interested in joining my exploration. I engaged in interviews with

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<sup>9</sup> Diaspora here refers to both the denotation of dispersion from one's homeland as well as has social connotations of one who has deserted the native land and is somewhat seen as a privileged "other" that is not faced with the negative or limiting realities of "ordinary" Ethiopian life.

current Setaweet members and the participants that I include in this thesis are all young women around the same age and education level. I also spoke with visiting Ethiopian women in the diaspora who reside in the West but happened to be on vacation or doing different work/school activities during the time I was there for my fieldwork. Further, I spoke with women whom I made friends with and met in different places just to get an overview of how women generally were feeling about the topic of women's rights and feminism in Ethiopia. I communicated with some participants on the phone to set up time and locations to meet for the interview. Other participants were interviewed before or after the monthly Setaweet Circle event during the month of June and July 2018.

The qualitative data provided in the second chapter is derived from semi-structured interviews that I conducted both in Amharic and English; often, it was a mixture of both in a single interview. Participants were encouraged to express themselves as well as possible so there was fluidity in the use of language during our interviews. Then, all the interviews were translated and transcribed in English. I am fluent in both Amharic and English, I am also familiar with the Ethiopian culture and idioms. Therefore, I was the only translator of this research and translations were modified to better emphasize the main focus. I acknowledge that through the process of translation, I may not be incorporating the full voice of the individual, however, I have chosen interviews and comments that speak to the analysis presented in the chapters. I do not use names, ages, or any other signifying factors for my volunteers, I use direct quotes that aid in the focus of emphasizing the feminist movement. All the transcripts, digital and transcribed, were kept in a password-protected computer which only I have access to. The purpose of a mixed-methods approach in providing the qualitative data is to yield the most efficient and useful

interactions to articulate what Ethiopian feminism currently looks like and illuminate possible areas to theorize about where it is heading in the future.

In total, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted. The length of the interviews depended on the participants' answers and the number of follow-up questions, but on average, the interviews lasted about 45 minutes. The participants chose the location and the time they wanted to be interviewed. All the participants were aware that any part of the interview could and would be used for my master's thesis. The youngest participant was 18 years old for the purpose of consent and there was no maximum age limit. However, the age of the participants of the quotes I include in the chapters are not indicated alongside the analysis.

Before the interview, potential participants read through the IRB-approved consent form both in English and Amharic. However, providing the consent forms proved awkward for the social means of interaction in the circles I was in and I quickly shifted to verbal consent. I made sure that the participants were fully informed about the study and the research process. I explained to the participants the audio recording process and showed them the device. The participants were aware that they could stop the interview at any time, if they felt uncomfortable answering the questions, or decide to withdraw from the study. I explained no names or demographic information that could identify them would be used. I informed my participants that my study was exploratory of the whole movement as opposed to wanting to collect individually specific data. The interview did not begin until I was sure that I had answered any and all questions from the participants, and consenting participants, either signed the consent form if they were used or gave me a definitive verbal consent on tape.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked participants to say their first and last names, and the name(s) of their mothers. In Ethiopian culture, a child takes the first name of their father

as their last name. Asking my participants their mother's name was to set the precedent for the feminist methodological approach to this qualitative study that aims at centering and validating the everyday realities for Ethiopian women and amplifying women's voices. Evoking the names of our mothers and grandmothers informs the transnational solidarity praxis of working across differences in varied genealogies. The participants were aware that their names wouldn't be used but none of the participants had any issues with it if it were to be. After the introduction, I asked a version of the following questions:

Research Questions:

Question 1. How did you come to hear or be involved in Setaweet or other women's organizations?

Question 2: What does feminism mean to you?

Question 3: What is the best way for organizations such as Setaweet to provide intervention in dealing with gender equality in Ethiopia?

Question 4: What are some strengths you see in women's organizations such as Setaweet in Ethiopia?

Question 3: What are some weaknesses you have observed in women's organizations such as Setaweet?

Question 4: In the future, what capacity would you like your own involvement to be in Setaweet?

Question 5: What is the most enraging aspect of life as an Ethiopian woman in Addis Abeba?

Question 6: What is the most inspiring aspect of life as an Ethiopian woman in Addis Abeba?

All participants did not get the same questions but a variation of the ones I have included above. I was open to allowing the interviewee to focus on areas they felt were more important.

For this reason, I only include dialogue in the data chapters of this thesis that are relevant to the areas I chose to focus on.

Class has been a prominent point for discussion as herstorical African feminists have been critiqued because of their proximity to male power; either through their husbands or fathers. Further, current discourse has also had similar objections to African women's organizing and theorizing as most of the knowledge comes from women who have had the privilege of education on the continent or abroad. Therefore, I emphasize the importance of feminist reflexivity during this ethnography and the analysis that was required in completing this thesis. I agree with Essof as she says, "Feminist self-reflexivity... enables critical lessons to be drawn from experience" (126). Thus, I acknowledge my own class positionality in my desire to articulate the feminist activities from Ethiopian women and amplify there are far more women and perspectives than the ones I choose to incorporate in this thesis. Also, I acknowledge the constant resistance in the informal sectors of African societies and in the Ethiopian familial home that do not have adequate place here in this thesis.

Further, this thesis also contributes to the contemporary African feminist praxis of not just simply "writing back" to Western feminists and or Western thinking about/on Africa and African women but rather, also providing Ethiopian's own theorizing for ongoing feminist work on the continent. Through this articulation, this thesis affirms what Pumla Dineo Gqola relays in saying, "theory is constructed in sites which are traditionally, under white supremacist capitalist patriarchal logic, assumed to be outside the terrain of knowledge-making" (Gqola, 11). Ultimately, this thesis is an exploration and articulation of Ethiopian feminisms with aims of contributing to what Gqola further explains is "opening the terrain of Blackwomen's representation and theorization to new signification" (15). This thesis contributes to that notion

I write as a cisgender, non-exclusively heterosexual, Ethiopian feminist researcher who is currently receiving graduate education in a Western institution. As an Ethiopian woman interviewing other Ethiopian women, I could understand, on a personal level, the cultural norms and social values imposed on the women that I was able to engage with. At the same time, talking to a feminist researcher encouraged the participants to converse freely with me about their ideas about gender inequality and feminism in Ethiopia. It is important to note that since all my participants were found through direct connections with my membership and presence in Setaweet, this could have caused slight discomfort or pressure in answering questions directly related to Setaweet and its impact. However, I believe that the rapport I had with the participants, and my positionality as an Ethiopian-born woman similar in age as they were, allowed me to communicate better and to interpret their responses with a more conscious feminist reflexivity.

In Chapter One, I use literature review to provide a snapshot of African feminism and incorporate the names of African women in herstory that were feminist through their actions and some who accepted the label as noun. Also, I make the argument that pre-colonial societies in Africa didn't always have division based on oppression of women and that the mere biological evidence of being a man didn't always mean that one was also in the top of society. I use the Yoruba and woman-woman marriage as examples of such societies that live outside the "biologic" epistemology of the West, that privileges sight as a tool for deciding who and what is oppressed. I situate African feminist theory and theorists as my Black feminist framework is also enriched and informed by herstorical African women.

In Chapter Two, I provide qualitative data garnered through my semi-structured interviews as well as my experiences as a participant researcher, to articulate what Ethiopian

feminism looks like. Setaweet, the organization, has also coined the term to be able to stand for *Ethiopian feminism* as a whole. In this chapter I spoke with seven contemporary Ethiopian women covering issues of street harassment, dealing with resistive family and friends when in the search for feminist consciousness, what they would like to see for the future of Setaweet, and the women's overall thoughts and opinions about women and gender issues as it pertains to Ethiopia.

In Chapter Three I reorient my thesis back to topics discussed in Chapter One and situate the Setaweet way in African and Third World Women feminisms in hopes of illuminating the anticolonial struggle that unites the global struggle against capitalism and systems of domination wherever they may be. In doing this, I assert that transnational solidarity can be formed across mediums such as Facebook in that they provide a non-physical space with limited protections, albeit more so than on the ground, for activists and acts of solidarity. This transnational aspect is in my belief the more realized ideals for what once was Pan-Africanism aims. When we recognize the systems that are at play that harm and oppress people, and especially Women everywhere, regardless of the different ways we react and feel it, then there are great political advantages to acquiring goals.

**Chapter One:**

***Herstory of African Feminisms: a Literature Review***



## Introduction

I cannot begin to articulate African or Ethiopian feminism without also noting that my coming into feminist consciousness is informed by my localized experiences as a young girl in Ethiopia *and* my growing up in and being educated in the States. So, I agree even further with Essof when she explains that, “For those claiming to be feminist, there is an intrinsic link between personal experience and the coming to a feminist consciousness” (124). When I grew into the awareness that my desire to liberate Ethiopian women was one that was also rooted in a settler view, it ignited my passion to focus more on the articulation of the ways in which women were already liberating themselves in Ethiopia. To do this work for my thesis, I use a literature review in this first chapter to look at feminist theory and action throughout the African continent to show that however contextual and specific analysis should be, there is and has always been resistance and proactive feminist action from African women throughout herstory.

Through literature review and reflexive feminist analysis, I provide a snapshot of African *herstory* that is rooted in feminist action by providing a background on herstorical feminists from the continent, as well as incorporating prominent African feminist theorists to discuss the trajectory of feminism in Africa today. Doing this work dispels the popular notion and prevailing debate in contemporary African society that somehow feminism is un-African. Zimbabwean feminist scholar Shereen Essof further articulates this misconception when she speaks on this critique that feminism is not African and thus has no relevance to Africa’s political social and economic realities. She describes the misconception as being allocated to what she names as, “an elite, bourgeois phenomenon, an invention of the West with no real value, or meaning to African women” (Essof, 125). I argue that instead of dismissing real work due to tensions with the West, it is best for African feminists and African writers to take heed to

feminist activist scholar Amina Mama's suggestion that it is better to "retain the concept of feminism and make it our own by filling the name with meaning" (Mama, 125). Hence, this chapter simultaneously writes back to harmful Western, Eurocentric stereotypes of African women as well as writes back to flawed African notions that feminism is inherently Western by providing this literature review of African feminist theorizing and herstorical African feminist action.

First, I come to the paradoxical understanding that my set categorization of 'women' and 'gender' and the universal oppression of *them* as "other," is also a Western construct that is rooted in uplifting the *visual* or biological interpretations of such categorization. My learning is at times contradictory to my experiences and thus, my articulation has points of these contradictions. However, I see these to be sites of difference that are not binary to illumination or awareness and can still serve useful for African scholarship. I see sites of contradiction as possible locations of strength and in practicing reflexivity and transparency in places where I do see them, it can inform areas where they are not as visible.

Before highlighting prominent African feminists, through the work of African theorists, I acknowledge the different implications and articulation of "sex" and "gender" in different cultural societies that don't necessarily interpret either/or in the Western Gaze. I acknowledge the distortion of the vast implications that Western imperialism, has constructed sex, gender, and male/female binary in its Eurocentric gaze on the African continent. By highlighting societies that thrived outside this patriarchal epistemology and then noting the African women who resisted before and during the colonial period, I contest the discourse of the victimized and immobile African woman.

## Defining Gender and Sex in the African Context

In “Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects,” Oyeronke Oyewumi explores the fallacy of feminism as an underlying understanding of the universality of the oppression of women. She does this by problematizing the biological category of the *sex* of women and the cultural interpretation of gender. Because there can be no universal implications of such, especially in societies that don’t follow what she calls a “bio-logic” then the dominant Western feminist understanding is flawed. Oyewumi explains:

From a cross-cultural perspective, the implications of Western bio-logic are far-reaching when one considers the fact that gender constructs in feminist theory originated in the West, where men and women are conceived oppositionally and projected as embodied, genetically driven social categories...On what basis are Western conceptual categories exportable or transferable to other cultures that have a different cultural logic? This question is raised because despite the wonderful insight about the social construction of gender, the way cross-cultural data have been used by many feminist writers undermines the notion that differing cultures may construct social categories differently (11).

Oyewumi uses the Yoruba culture and people who did not have a binary gender system of categorization before Western intervention. In this African culture, the embodied sex of a woman did not equate to the translation of one without power or status, as well as the bio-logic of male being that of dominant and powerful. Dominant Western discourse sees gender as a universal categorization and feminist activism here (the Global North) has been rooted in the understanding that all women everywhere are oppressed. However, the Yoruba people and culture in Nigeria show a different mode of life. Oyewumi explains, “The Yoruba social order requires a different kind of map, not a gender map that assumes biology as the foundation for the social” (13). Continued, she further articulates that, “In Yoruba society...social relations derive their legitimacy from social facts not from biology. The bare biological facts of pregnancy and parturition count only in regard to procreation, where they must. ...the nature of one’s anatomy did not define one’s social position” (13). Oyewumi’s explanation illuminates the inherent

Western duality created by discourses of biological difference that doesn't leave room for other ways of knowing. Without African, and indigenous feminists of color, feminism as a mode of analysis falls on these distorted universals.

While Oyewumi's direct dismantling of the western gaze and problematic ascriptions of feminist theorizing to Africa is valid, her rigid outlook on African feminists that live outside of the continent can be read as a scolding and alarming. In her text, she is very critical of Western trained African feminists who fall into this bio-logic and ascribe false universals to all societies. While she urges for reflexivity when doing this work, she is pessimistic about the lasting impact that Western trained African feminists can have for the continent. To those such as myself, who are budding into radical feminist consciousness and concerned with doing the very work she insists is necessary, her cynical understanding of the work that can be produced by African feminists who live abroad can at times be discouraging. African scholars from all nations must be allowed to start this knowledge production, being reflexive and aware of biases, and allowed to make mistakes if we are ever to start our own theorizing. Younger generations are seeking mentorship from previous generations of African scholars who have come before us and have done the work. However, this mentorship should refrain from authoritarian and hierarchal notions of age and African scholars must also keep in mind to allow the younger generations to make mistakes we can learn from. Through this committed, coalitional, sisterhood in solidarity, younger African scholars trained in the West can explore and open our minds up for better theorizing, renaming, and producing knowledge for future generations. I acknowledge my positionality as a Global North trained African and my transparency as such, is to provide this chapter as a snapshot of African feminisms and lift these voices who have done the work in the continent. I acknowledge the breadth of African theorizing and feminist action cannot be

articulated in a few pages and I hope this exploration encourages other women to start doing the work. If African feminism is a post/decolonizing one, then it recognizes what Gqola names as “the inevitability of the contamination of the colonized with practices of the dominant imperial culture” (Gqola, 13). I argue here that the recognition of this contamination and feminist reflexivity is decolonial and feminist praxis that can inform and enrich such work.

I argue that this praxis is decolonial in that, as women of color in the academy, traditional heteronormative, patriarchal, hegemonic disciplines don't leave room for subjectivity nor self-reflection. In my own experience, notions of objectivity clouded my vision as I was struggling to see and locate myself. Objectivity as a practice is overtly enforced in the academy and the training/indoctrination starts early in education. My experiences as a Black woman in the United States who is constantly faced with oppressive structural and ideological challenges has informed my agreement with Audre Lorde's famous assertion that “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” Being reflexive and transparent in the subjectivity of my work is in direct contrast to the expectations of academia. Thus, I position this praxis as decolonial as it goes against the hegemonic instructions and falls in line with the anti-colonial African feminist theories.

Further building on Oyewumi's discrediting of the universality of gender and oppression, we come to understand that pre-colonial Africa functioned outside of ways that traditional Western feminist analysis failed to understand.

Lorna Schiebinger notes in a study of the origins of modern science and women's exclusion from European scientific institutions that “difference between the two sexes were reflections of a set of dualisms principles that penetrated the cosmos as well as the bodies of men and women.” Differences and hierarchy, then, are enshrined on bodies; and bodies enshrine differences and hierarchy. Hence, dualisms like nature/culture, public/private, and visible/invisible are variations on the theme of male/female bodies hierarchically ordered, differentially placed in relation to power, and spatially distanced one from the other (Oyewumi, 8).

This hierarchy is visible even on the macro level of common references to the continent as “Mamma Africa” or “The Motherland.” While most countries refer to the land in feminine terminology, the nation-state is almost always posed as masculine; a hierarchal difference that is rooted in oppressive patriarchy. This method of ascribing gendered identities to nations is further explored by Amina Mire when she says, “European imposed African colonial rule in Africa had been founded on four closely related themes: dualist epistemology; white male prerogative; denigration and dehumanization of the African female body and feminization and colonization of the African space” (Mire, 4). The settler-gaze and colonial discourses that have come to shape most of African politics, policy, and discourse mimic the male/female relations and assume the gendered-Eurocentric view of the West. Beyond feminization, colonial discourse infantilizes at best, and dehumanizes at worst, both the country and the female bodies that occupy it.

With these dominant gendered ideas of feminism, we can see how the discourse around African women and their seemingly absent feminist agency has been obscured. As I mention before, this obscurity has led to many failed interventions from Western feminists and a plethora of negative writings on or about African and women of the Global South. Due to the violence that has been inflicted by and through the writing of some Western, white, feminists, it has created tensions between Western and African or Global feminists, and, stalls the necessary transnational solidarity formation and exchange of knowledge/information that needs to happen.

My early, misguided attempts at liberating Ethiopian women were rooted in these misunderstandings and re-inscriptions of Western epistemologies to my native country. However, to do the real work that translates the lived realities of women that exist outside of Western epistemological ideals, it must be rooted in contextual and intersectional feminist

analysis. Marina Lazreg in her article “Decolonizing Feminism” highlights these misrepresentations that have tainted discourses and solidarity among feminists. She speaks further on relying on universal understanding of gender and modes of oppression by saying:

The dissenting voice that objects to the gynocentric language of difference unwittingly reinforces the prevailing representation of herself, if only because she acquiesces in the notion of difference as opposition, as polarity. The totalitarian character of the existing representation of difference appropriates differential items haphazardly, and incorporates them into a structure that becomes autonomous and stands for the lived reality of Third World women. An abstract anthropological subject deemed “oppressed” is thus created. Studying this constructed subject is not for the purpose of understanding her as such as it is to gather documentary evidence of her “oppression.” Ironically, the language of liberation *reinscribes* relations of domination (71).

Through the work of African feminist scholars, especially through Oyewumi’s work, the Yoruba people have found attention as evidence of gender and oppression non-universality; especially in societies outside of Western epistemologies. Other societies such as the Nnobi Igbo, the Ashanti and early Egyptian dynasties paint the picture of a pre-colonial Africa that functioned far differently than the dominant discourse that paints the African woman as a silent, oppressed and victimized “other.” In these societies, economic and political power, and in some cases the path to be ruler is matrilineal. African scholar Amadiume writes about one such example when she says that the “Arab method of conquest of nations in Africa was by marrying local queens because succession and inheritance ran through the mother” (Amadiume, 10). In other African societies, woman-woman marriages provided a complex set of advantages and was a common practice; even this is often obscured in discourse for its existence outside of the “nuclear” family ideals of the West.

I argue that being outside of this binary and “bio-logical” paradigm of gender-as-oppression centers Africa and African society as inherently *feminist* due to the non-existing realities of the oppression as understood by modern feminism. If feminism fights for the equality

of the sexes in political, economic, and social realities, then African societies that were not inherently oppressive can be viewed as having already achieved that goal of feminism. The Yoruba, matrilineal societies of Nnobi Igbo, Jelgobe, Merina and Vazimba the dynastic matriarchy and other evidence of advanced women's agency in Africa should not be seen as a mere exception to the rule, but as the rule in precolonial Africa (Amadiume, 94, 95). As Ifi Amadiume further articulates, "The legacies of precolonial, matriarchal Africa remain a strong contending force" (Amadiume, 54). These are legacies that need not to be forgotten.

My aim is not to paint a positivist analysis of African societies but to highlight how whatever difference or oppression women may have faced in pre-colonial Africa, the oppression was exacerbated by Western intervention on the continent. Due to imperialism, colonialism, globalization and the growing export of Western ideology, the oppression of women in Africa today has come to orient in similar ways as women are disadvantaged across all sectors in society in most African countries. The marginalization and oppression of African women is evident in the lack of political participation, feminization of poverty, lack of land and economic independence, and prevailing attitudes for traditional/domestic roles for women. The material realities that these inequalities have are better understood through incorporating African women into the discourse and the failure to do so has resulted in many failed intervention attempts in development. However, it is important to note that there are still societies in Africa (and in the world) that have not yielded to an *oppressor/oppressed* mode of life.

For the remainder of this chapter, I focus on the feminist action by African women due to the oppressive realities that have been cultivated under this Western patriarchal invasion. I argue that African women have always resisted infringing powers and patriarchy, and often times through overt action. As discussed, there were many African societies that functioned outside of



the gender-oppressive paradigm, then, it is not surprising that African women would be at the forefront of the resistance of impeding, imperial powers and that African women remain today that continue to resist marginalization and oppression.

### **African Feminist Action**

Some of the oldest civilizations in the herstory of the world are found on the continent of Africa. Thus, as far back as it is traceable, while they didn't always call it feminism (the noun), there were women who were feminist (the adjective or verb) in finding ways of opposing the patriarchy (Salami, 2013). Due to the herstory discussed above and the fact that non-binary difference was not rooted in subjugation and oppression, African feminism after colonialism and today is what Wane explains as being "about decolonization" (Wane, 8). African women resisted at the onslaught of imperialism attempts in Africa and have not stopped despite its neo-colonial contemporary realities. In describing African feminism, Minna Salami, in her article, "A Brief History of African Feminism" writes:

African feminism as a movement stems also from the liberation struggles especially those in Algeria, Mozambique, Guinea, Angola and Kenya where women fighters fought alongside their male counterparts for state autonomy and women's rights. African feminist icons from this period are women like the Mau-Mau rebel, Wambui Otieno, the freedom-fighters Lilian Ngoyi, Albertina Sisulu, Margaret Ekpt and Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti among many others who fought against colonialism as well as patriarchy, often through protest (Salami, 2013).

This quote by Salami provides the snapshot of the feminist action found throughout the continent and shows how African women were prominent actors in the fight for liberation against colonial powers. The fight for liberation informs the resistant action that African women display when speaking out against the nation-state or other oppressive forces prevalent on the continent.

One such exemplary African woman is Adelaide Casey Hayford, who was born in 1868 and was a prominent cultural nationalist in the Gold Coast. In 1914, Hayford separated from her

prominent husband and went on to support herself as well as her daughter. Despite great difficulty of doing it alone, she established a school for girls in Freetown to progress her nationalist and feminist ideals (Okonwo, 43). Through the work of African scholars such as Cheryl Johnson-Odim, we learn of the complex and courageous life of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria born in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century who was also an activist and educator. She organized against market prices that hurt women who worked there, was an early campaigner for women's votes in Nigeria and organized workshops for illiterate market women to educate them on policies. She too, went on to open a school for girls in her country. Amadiume further outlines the different women of the different African nations that made significant impact on their societies:

Women in Ghana, West Africa, not only have a deep history of strong women in political struggles, they also have a long heritage of matriarchy in women's economic and cultural systems. More recently, however, not only women and girls in Ghana, but all women in Africa, share the story of a famous Ashanti woman called Yaa Asantewa, who led the fight against British colonialism in 1901, in the first year of the last century (Amadiume, 49).

Other African Queens and women have been demonized due to their nationalist ideals and painted negatively by the imperial powers that sought to enslave them. Women such as Queen Aminatu of Zazzau and Queen Nzigna of Angola all resisted patriarchal infringement into their lands. These informed realities of African women in pre-colonial times openly exhibit strong leadership skills, economic independency, and unity based on a women's culture of agency. Amadiume further highlights the independent agency that African women enacted when she says:

Colonialist policies when applied elsewhere in Africa, for example Ghana, Cameroon, and Cape Verde, also met with resistance from African women. It was precisely African women's grounding in economic production, particularly in agriculture, trade, marketing, management, women's organizations, and a matriarchal culture that made it possible for them to resist and survive the corrosive onslaughts of imperialism. Examples of African

women in anticolonial resistance movements include the Gikuyu women of Kenya during the Harry Thuku Disturbances in 1922 and again in the Mau anticolonial war in the mid-1950s; Igbo women of Nigeria during the Women's War of 1929; Kom women of Cameroon during the Anlu Uprising in 1958 – 59; and women in South Africa throughout the antiapartheid struggle. Women resisted colonial imperialism in various forms that involved demonstrations, riots, and war. Women also fought in the liberation movements in combat as guerrillas, as health workers, as teachers, and as political workers (64, 65).

I provide these evidences of African feminist action to highlight how despite some African women's rejection or dismissal of the label "feminist," it is clear that through resisting colonization, mobilization, and even taking up arms when need be, African women in the past and the present can be read as de facto feminists or as having a feminist ethos. This is due to the relation of African women's resistance to the definition of feminism as being an active response in the effort to gain political, social, and economic equality of the male and female sexes.

In Ethiopia, it is said that there is no colonial herstory, however this is a misconception as there has been a long record of Ethiopia fighting off Western powers and at times negotiating with them. During the Battle of Adwa (during the Italo-Ethiopian War 1895-6) is the now infamous battle between the Ethiopian Empire and the Kingdom of Italy, which resulted in Ethiopia resisting colonization. Many women were active warriors in the line of fire as well as outside in different means that aided in the state's success in withstanding colonization (Mennasema, 43). Women such as Likelesh Beyan, Kelemworq Tiruneh, Shewareged Gedle, and Sewanesh Abreha acted as guerrilla fighters and were integral to the conflict. (Bizinueh, 15). Women who had previously been kept from acquiring land, became fighters to make sure of the state's granting land to participating soldiers. Despite the state negating this reparation, women mobilized and found creative means to resist both the state and the imperial patriarchy.

Outside of the prominent women in African herstory that have gained attention, there are also many instances of women in the domestic and informal sectors that exhibit resistance and

agency. Women in the marketplace have mobilized against harmful practices and law. Women in oppressive domestic situations have resisted, often in creative means such as child-naming to show the level of happiness they have in the family, and through song, art, and literature. More attention can be put on the means in which women in the informal sector operate their feminist action. For this chapter, I acknowledge I don't give the women in the informal sector their due attention, as it's not the focus of this thesis; I leave that for work at a later time. I have to note however, it is a great fallacy to believe that any woman in any circumstance does not have nor know of the means in which to express her agency.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I provided a snapshot for different feminist theorizing and action on the continent of Africa. Problematizing gendered notions of feminist intervention and discourse provided a look at societies in Africa that were not under the inherent Western universality of gendered oppression that Western feminism strived to "solve." Seeing these societies and different non-patriarchal ways of life paints a picture of the continent that is outside the settler-view of liberating the desolate African woman. Further, I looked at how a herstory of matrilineal cultures and economic independence informed African women's struggle for decolonization. Hence, the current ideal for African feminism is an anticolonial one. I incorporated nations in Africa that had women fighting alongside men in liberation struggles, protest, and active engagement. I acknowledge that there are many, many more exemplary African women than the ones I mention here in this chapter.

While the attribution of the term feminist as a label is often contested due to the complex realities in which African women have been misrepresented violently by western feminist discourses, the existence of feminist action that spans much longer than the trajectory of "waves"

cannot be contested. It is important to always turn a reflexive eye on any discourse that seeks to show the oppression of African women without also providing the complex ways in which this oppression is not singular but rooted in other relations of power in society. This work can only be done in centering and allowing African women to speak for ourselves. As I have highlighted in this chapter, African women have always spoken despite any perceived idea of silencing. As Amadiume writes:

African women can and do speak their conditions, needs, and rights, and have played an important role in the cause of social justice. African women's conditions and concerns got onto the agenda of national and international institutions and agencies due to real sacrifices and bravery of African women themselves acting as feminist, even if not quite identifying themselves as such" (Amadiume, 48).

Here, Amadiume reiterates the importance of a historicized, contextual, intersectional analysis of African women's lived realities. This work is done by and from African women ourselves and asserts that we are fully aware of the conditions and concerns that we are faced with as well as asserts that we are capable of articulating and addressing these concerns.

Current neo-colonial structural programs and modes of economic development undercut African women once more. It is these realities that stand in the way of complex relations of power and agency on the continent. African feminisms, thus, are diverse and in need of more voices as contextual representations are required to speak to the concerns of African women. The inclusion of African feminists in contemporary discourse is one that is still growing and seeking more voices to add to the dialogue. This is the justification and importance of my exploration in this chapter and further in this thesis. As we begin to incorporate these theories into practice we can continue the real work that is required after dismantling all the negative stereotypes in writing back to Western discourse. We then begin to write towards ourselves and African nations to develop dialogue on the future of our society that isn't set on silencing any

group of people. Complete integration and empowerment for the African woman will then empower the continent to stand up against continued, oppressive forces that are and have been too prevalent.

In my next chapter, I explore some of the ways that the Ethiopian women of Setawee are making strides toward empowering themselves and the nation. In this articulation, I am providing the contextual, herstorized, material realities of Ethiopian women through their own voices. I write for and with Ethiopian women and this, begins the work of validating young Ethiopian women as knowledge producers and theorizers.

**Chapter Two:**  
**The Setaweet Way**

## **Introduction**

Using feminism as a theoretical concept, coupled with feminist reflexivity as methodology in my own analysis of my experiences, I explore the meaning and utility of feminism and feminist action in Addis Abeba today. In this chapter, I center the experiences of contemporary, young, Ethiopian women. I do not make the argument that my analysis is universal for *all* Ethiopian women however, I provide these voices as valid and useful knowledge for the focus of this chapter. Using data from interviews conducted through my fieldwork in conversation with my participant observation, I provide this articulation of Ethiopian feminism.

I argue here that despite the differences, there are many similarities in the experiences of contemporary Ethiopian women that can be used to theorize and document feminism in the country. I aim to provide an exploration that can be used to build on the production of knowledge and future theorizing for feminism in Ethiopia. I title this chapter after a discussion with Setawee staff in the beginning of my fieldwork while at the office location about how Setawee is not just an organization, but a movement... a lifestyle... alive. We discussed coming up with qualities and attributes of that lifestyle; the Setawee way.

### ***Setawee:***

The point of entry for my fieldwork is through my relationship with the women's organization and self-identified feminist movement, Setawee. I was granted an internship position with the title of Research Activist during the summer of 2017, from May 2017 to August 2017. My involvement with this group shapes the explorative nature of this chapter and overall thesis.



As articulated by African feminists discussed in my literature review, feminism can be loosely defined as the activist response to gain economic, political, and social equality for the male and female sexes. However, this is a very general definition and has been obscured by Western interpretations of feminism. The literature and activism that occurs in the name of feminism has been saturated by discourse that centers and highlights the middle-class, White woman's experiences. Crenshaw writes, "early feminist texts such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* placed white middle-class problems at the center of feminism and thus contributed to its rejection within the Black community" (Crenshaw, 156). Similarly, in the ways that feminism is/was rejected by different groups in the United States, the perceived Western concept is often dismissed within the context of Africa as well. This grave oversight in early scholarship has had the negative consequences of aiding the hegemonic response by co-opting the language and techniques of this form of activism to further distort the intentions and goals of feminist organizing. This distortion has thus border-crossed and the mere term *feminism* sparks similar negative reactions all over the world, not excluding the location at the center of this discussion, Ethiopia.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes that "feminist struggles are waged on at least two simultaneous, interconnected levels: an ideological, discursive level that addresses questions of representation (womanhood/femininity), and a material, experiential, daily-life level that focuses on the micro politics of work, home, family, sexuality, and so on" (Mohanty, 64). Women's organizations such as Setaweet aim to dispel these negative distortions and provide the necessary feminist intervention for women in Ethiopia in a wide variety of events, discussions, and publications that address these interconnected levels of intervention. Setaweet's objective is to positively affect women's issues in Ethiopia by targeting strategic means of intervention on three

platforms: language, curriculum, and media. Setaweet believes that an ideological change will then fuel the material changes needed in Ethiopia. These initiatives are tackled through different events, conferences, media presence, online campaigns and more. First, I provide the mission of the organization using their own words found on the official website:

*Setaweet* is the first feminist movement and business in contemporary Ethiopia. *Setaweet* meaning ‘of woman’ in Amharic indicates the purpose of our movement which is the articulation of Ethiopian feminism - the struggle for equality between Ethiopian women and men. *Setaweet*, which was founded in 2014, is a home-grown Ethiopian movement that aims to articulate what feminism means for Ethiopian women. We are particularly engaged with investigating Ethiopian languages and cultures as avenues of equality, and we believe in constructive dialogue and a collaborative work culture. All women are welcome at *Setaweet*, and Sisterhood is our hallmark.

As a business, *Setaweet* PLC provides a range of services for private companies, NGOs and schools. *Setaweet* PLC is also the custodian of the *Setaweet* movement which was created to actively pursue gender equality through consciousness-raising efforts. The *Setaweet* Circle is a woman-only meeting group that meets monthly, and our Open Sessions which are open to all members of society engage on Ethiopian contemporary issues of culture, media and language (*Setaweet.com*).

Keeping this mission in mind, I analyze data collected through my observation and participation in Setaweet events for the time I was in Addis Abeba, along with the qualitative data I collected through the semi-formal interviews, to provide a snapshot of the articulation of feminism to young Ethiopian women of today.<sup>10</sup>

### *Critiques and Limitations*

The prominent critique towards feminist movements and women’s organizations has been the similar opposition to the term feminism. In Ethiopia, due to previous movements and the history of marginalization, Setaweet has been pegged as being an “elite” woman’s organization. However, most of these critiques come from women and men who have not engaged with the

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note here that in this thesis, and in Ethiopia, for myself and the women involved in Setaweet, The Setaweet Way stands in for Ethiopian Feminism.

organization themselves or have not attended any events sponsored or put on by the organization. Also, there is evidence to suggest that this initial observation has more to do with lingering feelings of inferiority than it has more to do with actual exclusion. However, the use of English during academic sessions was visibly exclusionary. Due to the language of the academia being English in Ethiopia, Setaweet's aim at curriculum change and media representation is more important than ever. Many, if not all, of my participants as well as the women I observed in Setaweet countered this critique through their experiences but were not blind to the threat posed by the language. In my own experiences, I saw the intersectional reach that Setaweet abides by, despite the popular notions. Through the words of my participants and my description and analysis of events, I position Setaweet as a movement for the everyday Ethiopian woman. As one participant said:

The strongest part [of Setaweet] is bringing women all together but it's also a contradiction because the weakest point is that it's not ALL women because our circles attract a lot of privileged women. I would like to see not just privileged women. I would love it if we went more for illiterate or uneducated women in the city... and telling them about feminism and we actually learn about how they think...we can rely that feminism shouldn't be an abstract thing. We should be able to tell and break it down to every woman regardless of education level in terms of what she can understand and identify with...and that's a big challenge for everyone.

Here, my participant is speaking on the challenge of reaching rural women, women who work as domestic workers, women in sex work, women with little to no formal education, women who occupy the "lower class," and illiterate women, amongst other marginalized groups. Due to societal and dominant ideologies, these women are often double marginalized. One, they are women, and then, second, their positionality as lower class women, without much public access or overtly "visible" agency, renders them invincible even further in Ethiopian society. All of my participants spoke on the necessity to incorporate strategies to bring in these women into

Setaweet. All of my participants also spoke on the importance of speaking in non-academic language because that can alienate and scare-off non-traditionally trained and educated women

### **The Setaweet Way advocates emancipatory knowledge:**

#### *Monthly Setaweet Events: Setaweet Circle*

After ten days of being back in Addis Abeba (on May 20, 2017/ 12 Genbot 2009), I ascended the stairs to the *Setaweet* headquarters in the Commet Building; located in the Haya-Hulet neighborhood of central Addis Abeba.<sup>11</sup> Here, I was introduced to my first Setaweet Circle event where I also got a glimpse into what I would be a part of for the next three months. The discussion this evening happened to be about the utmost taboo subject--at least according to my childhood memory of a repressed and silenced population of women in Ethiopia. It was a Saturday evening and there were about 5-7 women present for this discussion; varying in race, ethnicity, age, and religious preference. What ensued was a surprisingly transparent and disarming exchange about the “first time” having our periods. Living in the states, this topic, while not as taboo as it is in Ethiopia, was still not something that was commonly discussed. This discussion served as my welcome and as well as validated that I was indeed in the right place; a revolutionary, transformational space of and for transparent and forward-thinking women.

I was able to feel this way because of my embodied knowledge as a young girl in Ethiopia. Women on their periods were considered dirty, sinful, and often discouraged from appearing in public spaces, especially the church. Even after immigrating to the United States, periods in my familial home were never discussed but there was an understood silence about it

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<sup>11</sup> This is the Amharic equivalent of that date and I utilize this tool of writing both dates as decolonizing methodology.

being a personal *problem*. Even I hid the blood-stained underwear from my mother at the age of 12 because I was fearful of the consequences. While my mother did not reprimand nor scold me, I was still never made to feel like I could discuss such *intimate* issues out loud, even with her. Due to this experience and memories of teasing from boys in both continents pertaining to a woman and her period, my first Setaweeet circle of discussing this topic openly was truly a different reality than the one I expected in my return to Ethiopia.

This revolutionary feeling was later echoed by my participants as more than a few women expressed feeling similar notions after their first introduction to Setaweeet. One of the first interviews I conducted was with a young woman who had been involved with Setaweeet almost from the beginning of the movement; about 3 years prior to the summer we met. She shared:

I came constantly to the open sessions and to every circle they had. I never missed an event because it was a new circle for me. It was not something I found in my home or family, not something I found at school or through my friends. These circles incorporated conversations and fueled my intellectual capacity, something that I had never gotten before. For me, this was a serious change [And I liked it]!

For women who reside in the capital city of Addis Abeba, realities of education and upward mobility are greater than they are for those women relegated to the rural areas. However, young women, even in the city, fight to be taken seriously or have their opinions be appreciated and taken into consideration. It is still common to find both men and women, young and old, who relegate a woman's place as being in the domestic household. Discussions of politics, current events that are not rooted in the "gossip" sector, or any exchange of ideas are not commonly encouraged from Ethiopian women. For those women who have tried to speak to deaf ears, the Setaweeet circles present a completely different energy. One that is rooted in sisterhood, to be read as solidarity, honesty, and, for when we need it, a safe space to voice concerns.

In my experience as an Ethiopian woman, this first meeting served as a safe space where women can be treated as sisters no matter what background they come from. While this was my first Setaweet Circle (women-only sessions), this feeling of revolutionary action would accumulate and be enhanced as I got a chance to be more engaged with the Setaweet staff, members, and extended network, and also began participating in different events. From this initial gathering, followed by a full introduction the following Monday at the office to be introduced to the team, I became part of Setaweet with the official title of “Research Activist.” From this point on I intentionally use the team “our” when speaking of the organization because of the synergy and complete role I took in being an active member and part of the staff for the duration of my feminist fieldwork externship in Addis Abeba.

The next Setaweet Circle took place on Tuesday June 13, 2017/ 6 Senay 2009- Setaweet Circles are often held the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of every month unless special, more intimate events such as the first circle I attended take place. This way, members who do not have immediate access to computers or their e-mail know that a circle will take place and can show up with confidence that we have an event going on that day. *Setaweet* held one of our *Setaweet* Circle events titled: “Critical Analysis on Women’s Representation on Advertisements” presented by *Setaweet* member, Firaol Belay. The event was based on her MA thesis at Addis Abeba University Graduate School.

Our office door opened and the first woman to join us for the event walked in around 5:30 PM, this gave myself and the other *Setaweet* staff a sense of elevated hope for a good turnout for the evening. Traditionally punctuality is not a common practice in Ethiopia and events can be greatly affected by this cultural norm. However, as the night progressed, women from all walks of life entered those doors to embark on a journey of discussion based on

fellowship, learning, growth, networking, and friendship. What followed was an eye-opening and enriching engagement about our role as women in resisting the constant negative stereotypes presented across mainstream media; not only here in Ethiopia, but across the world. This Setawee Circle proved to be informative as well as engaging and set the precedent for increased participation in other programs Setawee hosted. During this much-needed presentation, important dialogue about why there seems to be a hegemonic women's identity representation in media linking her with the familial home and never her "own" places ensued. Many of the women in attendance were forthcoming with lots of questions. One woman asked *why* there was a problem of aligning a woman's identity to her family, children, or husband and why that could be potentially harmful for her and other young women who may not necessarily choose that life path. The presenter responded to this question by stating that "hegemonic women's identity is linked with family and home, this reinforces the patriarchy using our tradition(s) as the guardians of these norms." Belay was adamant about noting that it is not the women who chose to be wives and mother's that are the issue but rather, that the domestic sphere is the only overt option that many Ethiopian women have or are given.

One of the means by which Setawee aims towards ideological changes throughout Ethiopia, pertaining to women, is through challenging our representation in media. This event directly addressed this initiative, centered the voice and academic research of a Setawee member and scholar and provided the space for her to lead a much-needed discussion. The presenter relayed that, "media does not simply reflect or mirror reality, media creates and re-presents a "new reality." If Ethiopian women want to bring the change we want to see in our country then we must challenge images and ideology that we do not believe in.

**The Setaweet way challenges oppressive images, ideologies and behavior wherever they may be:**

On the second Tuesday of the next month, July 11, 2017/ 4 Hamle 2009, the Setaweet Circle was also another presentation from Setaweet member, Enguday Alemayehu, who presented her recently defended Master's thesis that investigated the impact of having feminist pedagogy in classes; especially those founded in the Gender Studies department at Addis Abeba University. Her presentation was titled: "Reflections from a Feminist Classroom and the Need for Curriculum Change." During this session, members discussed the necessity and means to cultivate and encourage critical thinking skills for young Ethiopian women, not only in classrooms, but also in life in general. Alemayehu posed the question, "what would change if classrooms were more egalitarian and harnessed a safe space for critical thinking?" Classrooms in Addis Abeba, despite being in the capital (often also interpreted as *modern*) city in Ethiopia still harness a lot of oppression and oppressive instructors as well as peers when it comes to women in education. Women are often shamed into not voicing their opinions, if they have any, and punishment for being wrong has deep social and academic ramifications. Alemayehu presented her finding that, "Students who were treated as experts in the knowledge they choose to share diminished fear of authority and opened up for more dialogue."

At Setaweet, both of the points that Alemayehu posed have found space to flourish. Setaweet exists as a space that strives to harness egalitarian and non-hierarchical modes of expression while also stimulating intellectual dialogue and rewards for critical thinking, in that, it allows for growth in perspective. My observations as well as answers from my participants echo this space of encouragement and the feelings of being allowed and unafraid to say anything while at Setaweet. Opposing a culture of reprehension and sensitivity to disagreement or



opposing views, Setaweet promotes feminist pedagogy in academic as well as social events that has garnered it a reputation of being unique in Ethiopia.

The inclusion of Setaweet members as presenters in these circles provided a space for practicing presentation skills, sharpening answers to questions, and working on areas of more development. These skills are useful in true upward mobility and enhancing soft skills for not only our presenters, but also the audience who is listening carefully, and asking questions and engaging in critical discussion. Both sessions were in English but Amharic translation was available. As the language of the academy in Ethiopia is also in English, the presenters had the task of also making their presentations accessible for our intersectional circles who welcome women from all walks of life. *Setaweet* seeks to decolonize knowledge by using the dominant language of Amharic during our discussions when English is not necessary (particularly during non-academic presentations). However, this language discrepancy played an integral part for my participants and other women who were wanting to join *Setaweet* but were fearful because of language limitations. I will discuss this in more detail later in this chapter.

### **The Setaweet Way fosters dialogue with the Ethiopian Community: Setaweet Open**

#### **Sessions:**

Besides the monthly *Setaweet Circle* events that are open to only women, *Setaweet* also provides a space for continued dialogue with all in the Ethiopian community through its monthly *Setaweet Open Sessions*. In the month of July, Setaweet, along with the organization, The Yellow Movement, held an event titled: “A Conversation with Male Feminists” in a classroom at Addis Abeba University in 6 Kilo. Hearing Ethiopian men speak on why we need feminism, and articulating that in our native tongue to the room full of both young women and men was a most promising and uplifting conversation. While resistance to feminist action comes from both

women and men, Ethiopian men display a higher and aggressive negative outlook. This is due to the misconception that feminism advocates for the subjugation of men instead of equality of the sexes. This was an important event to highlight that there is in fact a population of Ethiopian men who are either self-identified feminists or feminist allies to convey the message of equality to the broader community. The men spoke about topics pertaining to how their positionality as men in Ethiopian society has caused them to house sexist ideals and further spoke on the importance of always being self-reflexive in their intentions and actions, especially those that directly affect Ethiopian women. There was great debate about how feminism is not a rejection of Ethiopian culture but a method for heading towards greater equality for both men and women. The panelists also spoke of how socialization hurts men in Ethiopian society as well, especially pertaining to pressures of being the bread-winner and/or the pressure to perform a certain kind of masculinity. The panelists dispelled the notion of the “man-hating” feminist woman or that feminists are trying to subjugate men. For many Ethiopian men, being an ally and then even speaking out about it is not a common occurrence, so having Ethiopian men relate notions in this event, such as one participant’s work and articulation that “sexism is in me,” is revolutionary and a necessary part for the *Setaweeet* initiative.

This session was then followed by a highly-attended discussion provided by a prominent member of the community and a *Setaweeet* ally, Semeneh Ayalew a PhD Candidate, who presented his Doctoral dissertation titled, *Women, Popular Modernity and The Ethiopian Revolution (1940-70)*. Here, a jam-packed room full of people were presented with a deeper understanding of the role that women played during an important time in Ethiopian herstory through what Ayalew coins as “cultural brokers.” He relayed the knowledge that despite the invisibility of Ethiopian women’s contributions, Ethiopian women such as Mary Armade were

active participants in the formation of Ethiopian history and culture.<sup>12</sup> He said, “history and culture is interpreted...modernity is translated by the modern institutions of culture.” Women who were often in the informal sectors of Ethiopian life during that time (and even now) are at the forefront of these institutions.

Not only was this very informative with new knowledge, it was also presented by an Ethiopian male who displayed the utmost respect and understanding for the state of women’s issues in Ethiopia, a pleasant change from the constant objections I got from Ethiopian men. Ayalew said, “Women, cultural brokers, cultural benders and breakers, vanguards of modernity are integral to all progress! [and] Their stories need to be told!” While Setaweeet is a women’s organization, we realize that feminism benefits us all and that alliances with men are beneficial to the end goal of greater equality. After the discussion, the room was open to questions and comments that went beyond our allowed time which signified interest and need for more of these types of discussions in Addis Abeba. I found this type of interest to be common whenever we did any Setaweeet event or participated alongside other events. One of my participants during my interviews recalls this event as it was one of the first she had the opportunity of attending:

I loved the presentation about women’s popular modernity movement. Growing up in a German school and then my early life in a German environment, I never knew or learned much Ethiopian history. Learning about the huge impact Ethiopian women had in our history was a wake-up moment because... I just never knew... and [this new knowing] was very empowering.

The lack of education on Ethiopian women’s important roles and contributions to Ethiopian society that my participant spoke about also informs Setaweeet’s aim in ideological transformation through curriculum changes within the Ethiopian education system. Like my

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<sup>12</sup> An Ethiopian folk singer from the 1930’s to the 70’s, one of a few early female business owners, Armade pushed cultural norms and provided a space for Ethiopian women’s sexual liberation and openly discussed her opinions.

participant, other Ethiopian women (and men) rarely learn about any positive contributions of Ethiopian women in herstory. For those who can get private education, the herstories they learn are almost always exclusively Western. The lack of representation of Ethiopian women in education points to the double-invisibility that Ethiopian women in herstory have and shows why it is necessary to inform curriculum changes in the education system. Implementing gendered curriculum within the Ethiopian educational system is a prominent ideal and goal for Setaweet initiatives from the organization's inception, during the time of my participation, and for the future.

**The Setaweet way celebrates culture and tradition but knows these are not static and don't need to harm women:**

While there is some reference in the scholarship to matrilineal, pastoral societies in Ethiopia, the dominant hierarchy has been proven to be a highly traditional and patriarchal one. Bisewar writes that “within this hierarchy, women are relegated to the bottom... They are expected to show the utmost respect and submission to their husbands, a trend that has also found justification in religion and has been maintained for centuries” (Biseswar, 140). Submission, self-sacrifice, and silence are perceived attributes of a virtuous woman and instances of anything else have huge detriments to one's social standing in the community. These strict gender roles are emphasized through an even stricter socialization processes and then further legitimized through the community that serves as its own “identity police.” The blanketed expectation of gender roles becomes an unspoken norm for Ethiopian women and opposition to it is usually fueled by negative personal experiences.

I wanted to understand what experiences led to my participants awakening to feminist consciousness and led to their involvement with *Setaweet* or other women's organizations.

There were many similarities in the journey that my participants took as the age, education, language, and religious backgrounds of the women who participated were similar. My participants mentioned the resistant and at times oppressive attitudes displayed by family members that shows how much ideological shift needs to happen in Ethiopia.

Almost all of my participants except maybe one, spoke about family members and common practices at home that disadvantage Ethiopian women and young girls. The challenges faced in the familial home was a common discussion during monthly *Setaweeet Circles* and Ethiopian women expressed the weight of having to always bear the household chores while their brothers did not. Many women also had mothers who adhered to this way of running the household and often discouraged male presence in the kitchen or cleaning areas of the house. These experiences played a critical role in how some of my participants were led to find other ways to understand the world. One participant said:

I used to be more of an organic feminist. I would fight for women naturally, always questioning or pointing out places and people who were sexist or oppressive. More specifically, during a family gathering one night, my uncle expressed a sentiment that is usually heard around Ethiopia saying, ‘It is because she is a woman that she is behaving like that!’ to which I responded, “What is the matter with her being a woman, does her vagina diminish her skill-set?”

My participant is reflecting on a common dismissal of women in the work place or public spaces. If an Ethiopian woman is seen reacting in an emotional way or challenging the views and contributions of men in the workplace, her actions are seen as hostile, unwelcome, and “less than” the appropriate, accepted behavior. Men and women alike make comments about periods, children or husbands at home, or other factors that could contribute to a woman’s “clouded” judgment and inability to complete a given task. The notion that a woman’s response is fueled by emotional triggers infantilizes and dismisses her contributions.

The social capital of family is one that is held very high in Ethiopian societies, notions of virtue and what constitutes as a “good” Ethiopian woman are oftentimes in stark contrast to mainstream notions of what feminism is. For these reasons, coupled with patriarchal understandings in the dominant religions such as Ethiopian Orthodox or Islam, Ethiopian women come across a lot of backlash or push-back from their own families when they seek liberatory circles such as Setaweet. Further, paternal units and siblings resist any push-back or agency that Ethiopian women try to enact in search of self-emancipation.

My youngest participant, an 18-year-old, recounted one of the early experiences that ignited her feminist consciousness. At the time of this experience, she was about 12-years of age or younger. She described a chilling yet sadly considered “ordinary” tale of being harassed and stalked by a man her friends and her had hired to take pictures during a birthday pool party. After meeting her and taking the pictures, the photographer began to stalk and harass my participant and even went as far as showing up at her school. It got so bad her mother had to take the photographer to court (filing a formal complaint is not a common consequence most men who engage in harassing and harmful behavior face) to make him leave her daughter alone. When faced with a complaint, the photographer claimed my participant was wearing a swimsuit that made her look older than the 12-years of age she was at the time and he felt he was in the right to pursue her. The opinion of women and children of Ethiopia is oftentimes violently repressed which has aided in the complete disregard or utter denial of the women’s point of view. My participant described a man who was completely ignorant to the fact that his actions could be seen as scary and harmful.

Despite her mother’s resistance to the photographer and taking him to court, my participant’s mother was angry that her daughter was taking pictures in swim wear. My young

participant explains further, “My mom said why you would take a picture in a bikini! (like it’s your fault). That really got to me and for like a year I didn’t go swimming and my head was all messed up from this experience. I got into feminism and read about self or victim blaming and realized that was what was happening to me and my peers.”

In Ethiopia (as well as in most places), whenever a woman experiences sexual harassment or abuse, the response is to question what she was wearing or doing to provoke the assault. Women are expected to navigate the world without provocation of men and to expect men to want to act in harmful ways if they are dressed provocatively, openly speak-out against a man, or are out too late at night. For my participant, feminist discourses on victim-blaming put a name to the dominant responses she endured and legitimized her feelings and experiences as valid.

This same participant also remembers a different incident that dealt with a close and familiar domestic worker in her family’s home. This domestic worker was asked to get something from the neighborhood store but my participant had forgotten to give her money. As she went to meet the worker at the store, she observed the neighborhood kids saying obscenities they would never say to her or her younger sister. My participant was aware that her class positionality made her safe from the misogynist and abusive comments the neighborhood boys were saying to her domestic worker.

After running back home to notify her mother, my participant was again met with what she now knows to be victim blaming:

My mother said, “Then why does she go to the store a lot then?” I responded, “She could go there a thousand times a day and they have no right to say that to her!” My mom says this is how it is and how it has always been... and it will never change. But I believe it will change! One hundred years ago, even this [points to the buildings that are around] wasn’t here... so it will change!”

My participant and I laughed with a tinge of sadness that feminism was, at the end of the day, just the radical notion that women are people. We laughed about the mutual understanding that Ethiopian women would like to walk home or to and from other places whenever they wanted without harassment and violence. We looked at each other with a deep belief that a new day was coming.

*Cat-calling/sexual harassment: “Lekefa”*

Cat-calling as a severe and constant form of sexual harassment is something most women all over the world can relate to. In the context of Addis Abeba, it is so prevalent and embedded in the habits of both men and women that it is a hard notion to contest or advocate against. Most men have normalized this negative way of engaging with women and would even call it part of our culture. One of the most challenging aspects about combating “cat-calling” in the Ethiopian context is the internalized sexism, patriarchy and Stockholm syndrome that leads women into considering the abuse as an act of appreciation or admiration.<sup>13</sup> Cat-calling and public sexual harassment is a consistent discussion amongst Setaweets and other women in Addis Abeba. In addition to the stories of harassment we also discussed the best way to combat the harassment and empower women to resist on the streets as well as in private locations. This intervention is one that Setaweet believes comes from consciousness-raising discussions with both men and women, holding men accountable, and not simply “passing-by” when these things happen, but coming to the aid of any woman in need when any occurrence of this is observed on the streets.

While this public form of abuse is something many of my participants shared, one in particular recounts when it got violent. She told me about getting grabbed and then hit for not stopping for the young man who was calling out to her. While I assert that this is violence and

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<sup>13</sup> Stockholm syndrome refers to a condition in which captives, or the abused in any situation, form loving and caring attitudes for the abuser.



violating, I want to state how severe this form of abuse can take shape. For example, there are many instances of rape, gang rape, severe violence such as acid attacks on the face and body of young women, and other harmful ways this sexual harassment manifests on the streets of Addis. As one of the bedrocks of Setaweet is sisterhood, we believe in standing up for and validating the lived realities of fellow Ethiopian women. We believe that witnessing and standing together encourages confidence when speaking up and also counters the feeling of isolation that resisting can create. In order to combat this prevalent issue, we discussed public actions of solidarity on the streets or in other areas where this behavior is observed. Another participant shared a story about a similar experience she endured:

I don't understand how women are just not more aggressive! A lot of days when something like that happens I have an instinct to just go punch somebody.... I've gotten used to it, it's been a couple years, but sometimes it gets so bad and personal and other times there's physical things that go with it... just two weeks ago this guy punched me. He said "hey pretty and then punched me in my arm. I had to walk back to hit him back". There are kinds of things you don't have to get used to. You should resist every single time. They say you will get tired if you resist everyone that comes at you like that. I believe you have to call it out each time.

In going back to defend herself, my participant made an active choice to risk her safety in order to exercise her agency. Often, women just ignore these types of instances so my participant's choice is exemplary of the type of resistance that Setaweet aims to foster in young women. Since there are direct threats to safety in such a response, Setaweet reiterates the importance of numbers and showing up to witness for one another; even for women we don't know but observe going through this in the public or private spaces.

While these stories are alarming, they are tame in nature in comparison to the constant abuse and harassment women face from the time they leave the house, until they return. It has remained an unchecked and unchallenged abuse for so long that people conflate it with the culture of Ethiopia or how one shows appreciation. The Setaweet way encourages public

resistance and voicing dissatisfaction as well as coming to the aid of any woman who is observed enduring abuse in public under the guise of “cat-calling.”

In this conversation about common ideology and perceptions of culture, another participant said, “Even though I had feminist-like attitudes when I was younger, you never get affirmation from your peers or family, or anyone really.” In order to bridge this generational misunderstanding and also to pay homage to those women who came before us, Setaweet held an event that invited the mothers of Setaweet members to a traditional coffee ceremony. The event was held at a single mother’s collective in order to promote business there and for almost four hours, we were able to speak with and commune with the mothers and clear up any misconceptions about what we do at Setaweet, and what we see for the future. The common urge from the mothers was how our involvement with Setaweet and our work can actually translate to our material well-being, i.e. jobs and education. The Setaweet way is an avenue for true upward mobility in that it is a source of ideological inspiration for those who want to work in women’s rights. Setaweet also provides a platform and location for internships and employment within the organization as well as provides the opportunity to make connections through networking or referrals to other organizations or job opportunities. One of my participants remembers how her involvement in Setaweet allowed her to practice various skills and grow as an agent for change:

The transition [into becoming Setaweet staff] was not organic, I had actually had to ask and work for it. I came constantly to the open sessions [and] to every circle they had, I never missed one, because it was a new circle for me, it was something that I did not find in my home or in my school or through my friends circle. There was so much conversation and intellectual capacity [in those meetings], it was a serious change! After I came for about a year, I wanted to be more involved, I began to ask what I can do to contribute... I’m saying I’m a feminist, [so] what do I do now. So, I talked to Sehin and the cofounder of the Setaweet collective, and I told her I want to be more involved, they were happy, they started giving me like little works like “do this, please design for us” ...or do you mind doing this for us---you know how Sehin does not push everyone—and

I was like so excited to be involved. At some point, it evolved to me being responsible to a lot of things, and I started proposing my own ideas/projects and arranging running circles. After Setaweet moved to being a business a plc, I became more involved, because one, they needed a permanent person, two: even though I had a full-time job outside of Setaweet, I was always about—Setaweet! Lunch time it was my Setaweet work, tea time, it was Setaweet, early morning 1 o'clock 2 o'clock-- 8 o'clock it was Setaweet, so after that it was when we got funded to do full time work, I moved to Setaweet... and I never looked back! (excited)

After her integration into Setaweet staff, my participant also remembered how the organization fostered her inspiration to further her career. She told me that through the recommendation of Setaweet's co-founder and director Sehina Teffera, she was accepted into graduate school and seeking a second Master's degree in Germany. One of the main bedrocks of *Setaweet* ideology and articulation of the utilization of its brand of feminism is in sisterhood/solidarity across difference(s) and encouragement, inspiration and “being there for other women.” Through this exposure to the women in the Setaweet circle, and having a space for women to present their academic work allowed for the crystallization of passion in a sector that most Ethiopians still do not understand nor see a need for. My participants reflects on this inspiration and said:

Setaweet had a serious impact on me of what I wanted to do for the future. I did my first masters on peace and security. I've always wanted to be involved in politics and policy making but I didn't know in what capacity of policy making I wanted to be involved in: Do I want to do peace and security? Do I want to do constitutional reform? Or parliament, or economy? But then [after exposure and membership in Setaweet], I was like... women's rights... is my thing...

Setaweet, while promoting emancipatory thinking, does not align itself with only one way to liberation as being a “career” woman as opposed to women who willingly go into marriage and motherhood. Setaweet advocates for more options to be allowed women, whatever they may be. We support the choices from all women but are reflexive in the knowledge that some choices may not be inherently feminist. While “sisterhood” is in solidarity across difference, we strive to

also make it known that more choices are available to women in Ethiopia and encourage bravery in trying out those options.

**The Setawee Way provides a space for grievances and success stories, a space to be heard:**

At is customary in the monthly *Setawee Circle* events, we went around the room to introduce ourselves as there are always new as well as old faces who come to the meetings. We gave our name, our occupation (if we choose) and one inspiring as well as one enraging thing that has happened to us within the last month as feminists and/or as women who live in Addis Abeba. The answers to these questions highlight thematic similarities of why feminism and feminist intervention is needed here in Ethiopia. Not surprisingly, these are consistent issues that women face globally. Many of which I myself have faced here in the United States. The thematic elements are not static as they intermesh together to provide a picture of inequality that must be addressed. The following are some of the reoccurring themes that I observed during these discussions:

*Exclusion from participating in events*

While cat-calling always works to make women visible, another layer of oppression is in being excluded in a wide variety of areas because one is a woman. The exclusion serves to completely render the woman's body and mind as invisible, dispensable, and unimportant. Exclusion of women from participating across mediums is observed as women are marginalized both in the public and private sphere of our lives. A *Setawee* member recounted an incident where her young daughter was going out to play football/soccer and was told she could not participate, merely because she was a girl. She also remembers how a similar incident had happened to her years earlier when she was a young girl. When it happened to her young

daughter, it felt even worse than when she was excluded. This cycle of oppression in exclusion is a negative experience that a lot of women I spoke with had observed. One participant noted:

I think about the idea of occupying the public space, whether in a bar or on the street... any other public space, gym... wherever you go... it's mostly men. It is as if Women don't like have the time, or freedom... not necessarily legal freedom... but they probably have so much to do to be in leisurely places. It is as if women in Ethiopia do not have Social liberty. Everywhere, it is mostly all men, and the women who are there, are all diaspora women. Ethiopian women are discouraged from occupying public spaces and are just encouraged to stay home.

My participant's experience is one that I too had observed and one that has also been accepted as common practice in Ethiopia. There are ideological notions that a woman who is seen "out and about" is unfavorable, "loose," of low honor, and/or disrespectful to her family. Due to these ideologies, native women don't frequent public leisurely spaces; especially not alone. Women who are observed in these spaces are often accompanied by a male companion or partner. In the domestic sphere however, women, young and old, are seen busying themselves in the kitchen or engaging in other domestic duties. Problematizing this exclusion and lack of visibility of women enjoying leisurely activities is essential in Setawee's feminist activism.

Not surprisingly, the exclusion is not merely from sports or leisurely activities but other members of Setawee explained the pains of being overlooked in the workplace. Exclusion in the workplace is enacted through directly ignoring women altogether, stealing women's ideas and passing it off as his own, or not being open to listen to women's ideas and comments at all. The workplace has become a microcosm for the oppressions faced by Ethiopian women in other areas of their lives. Exclusion as a mechanism to stall women's rights is practiced all over the world and thus also situates the struggle for women's equality in Ethiopia, in the global, transnational feminist struggle.

After overcoming the difficulties of gaining education, survival, and taking care of family life, the women that do gain employment are faced with double oppressions. Often, the presence of women is alluded to some sexual connection with a man in power at the workplace/company and this false ideology is used repeatedly to disregard any participation. Setawet members have described meetings where their ideas were disregarded only to be praised when the same idea is pitched by a male employee. This exclusion has deep psychological effects and further has implications in the pay inequality as the woman's role is often diminished or overlooked to justify the lower payment women receive in the workplace.

*Yesayt Geber/ Women ("pink") tax*

As both violent cat-calling and exclusion have implications on the economic standing of women in Ethiopia, the next theme deals with another economic (as well as psychological) effect of being a woman in Ethiopia. In observing the differential treatment I, as well as other women, received, I coined/translated the term "Yesayt Gebir". *Yesayt Gebir* is a similar equivalent of what the West terms, the "Pink tax".<sup>14</sup> In a popular article titled "Pink Tax' Forces Women to Pay More Than Men", the Pink Tax is explained as being "so named because of the color of products directly marketed to girls and women, refers to the price difference for female-specific products compared with the gender-neutral goods or those marketed to men" (Ngabirano, USAToday). Women are paid less for their services, and then expected to pay more than their male counterparts for most products. The same article further explains, "Price discrimination adds another layer to the wage inequality women face, making it harder sometimes for women to make ends meet" (Ngabirano, USAToday). The implications of the pink tax in the West and

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<sup>14</sup> *Gebir* is the Amharic word for "tax."

*Yesayt Gebir* in Ethiopia, further contributes to the feminization of poverty observed around the world.

Not only do Ethiopian women pay more for goods while being paid less in the workplace merely due to their gender, a *gebir* is also in affect through other means such as (but not limited to): lack of service in public restaurants, banks, traditionally non-feminine stores; a refusal of entry to prominent hotels and meeting places (without the presence of an accompanying man); and often being considered free and available and/or a sex-worker if not accompanied by a male at all times. For women who are constantly faced with these never-ending oppressions, life can be psychologically taxing in many ways. Setaweet provides the space to air these grievances amongst understanding peers and contributes to women's wellness in that, women don't have to constantly "hold it all in." These comments and practices are very common in most gathering places in Ethiopia. For myself, all my memories as a young girl of any gatherings were tarnished with sexist, ethnocentric, and often incorrect comments and ideas about the world; and mostly about us women in it. From the onset of the first Setaweet meeting I had the opportunity to be a part of, what these gatherings provided was a different reality than the oppressive cultural identity of Ethiopia; that at times can seem untouchable. Being in spaces as the one Setaweet provides offers a different narrative of Ethiopian culture and is evidence of what initiatives and organizations such as Setaweet are able to achieve.

**The Setaweet way is audaciously hopeful about the future for Ethiopian women:**

I got a chance to ask my volunteers the hard question of *how* a shift in Ethiopian culture that aims to uplift women can be achieved. While the answers were different, there were many similarities. This next section articulates what my young participants are seeking for the future from organizations such as Setaweet in Ethiopia. My youngest participant said that

“consciousness change will happen when we realize our [the] long-term dreams we have put together.” Some of these long-term goals are articulated by another participant when she said:

For me, making it inclusive is a huge matter. I would like to see Setaweet chapters in other areas in Ethiopia outside of Addis Abeba and I believe we can actually achieve this goal! I mean, we could do different workshops... but for sustainability, to bring awareness and advocacy, we need that in every region. We need to work on curriculum and modules in different languages. We are 9 regions in Ethiopia... and I want to see a Setaweet chapter in each. Multiple if we can!

This participant was the microcosm subject of my whole experience in coming to this work. The young lady who was born in and educated in Addis Abeba was already engaged in the work that has transformed her life and others. Her case study shows once again that feminism is not a western concept, and feminism in action and consciousness is very much alive in the contemporary Ethiopian woman. My participant also is reflexive on her own positionality as an educated Ethiopian woman who resides in the capital city, Addis Abeba. My participant’s work takes her to rural areas of Ethiopia and this is where she sees the next steps for Setaweet to go.

I want to see it [Setaweet] grow, I want to see a day where we book our session 6 months in advance, proper T.V. and radio representation and even our own programming! From grade-schools to universities, I want us to work with the government to work through implementing our curriculum across Ethiopia, I want to express our vision to the higher ups, the minister of gender, of education, of media... These are my long-term dreams.

Another participant said:

I think it [Setaweet] should be geared towards making it as mainstream as possible. Being very accessible to everyone in every part of the country or even just here in the city is very crucial. Also, I would like to see something about self-defense techniques and classes! There is a lack of communication amongst women’s organizations and at times we forget that other people are also trying to do things, and thinking that you are alone is a problem. I would like to see more coalitional work with women’s organizations in the future.

And another said, “I believe in storytelling, putting the stories out there, putting pressure on the government to be as serious as possible on punishment [for those who are found guilty], so that



they handle legal cases justly. Also then what... after the rape there is also trauma and addressing that should be another program we should be involved with.”

The hopefulness my participants as well as other Setaweet women exemplified is informed by their vigor to be involved and aid in bringing forth this transformation. Their commitment to the work despite understanding the challenges, illuminates great areas for transnational solidarity formation with other feminists who are globally engaged in this work. This positive outlook they embody is one that is in stark contrast to archaic notions of a static “culture” that is beyond reform. While there are many people who don’t believe these changes can happen, these young women of Setaweet are committed to doing the work that will ultimately help even the most cynical of people.

#### **The Setaweet Way seeks to provide feminist training:**

Whether it was during an interview some members of the Setaweet staff and myself did on relevant topics on Ethiopian radio, or in the questions after our co-founder and director Dr. Sehin Teferra did a TEDxYouth Addis Abeba talk, or during one of the various Setaweet events, two common questions that I encountered were, “How do I get involved?” and “How or what were the ways that one can be a feminist?”

My participants, other Setaweet members, and other women as well as men who are allies of Setaweet, all agreed that it was apparent that now more than ever, while some people had rigid notions when it came to feminism, a greater amount of people were eager to learn more and ask questions of how to get involved. The high volume of questions after Dr. Teferra presented at the Ethiopia TEDxYouth talk shows that at least the interest is there and the necessary dialogue is happening. In furthering this dialogue and engagement with the community, misconceptions of feminism and Setaweet can be cleared and areas of focus can be cultivated. Questions that we

got saying, “How do you train feminist action or feminist consciousness?” Or “How do I become feminist?” shows a new era of critical thinking and spaces for activism in Ethiopia. Setaweet answers these questions by coming from a place that doesn’t assume to know all the answers but is willing to look for them, together. What another participant named “feminist ethos” was the energy found at the Setaweet headquarters every time we were there. The outward claim of Feminist as noun and resistant ideologies of Setaweet made the joy of finding these connections that much greater.

Being proud to be called feminists and taking initiatives to change the ideologies of being called a “mother’s child/children” or publically congratulating and awarding father’s and other male figures for conscious and mindful living, are some ways that Setaweet has mediated feminist training through online campaigning. Also, Setaweet has and is currently (at the time of this thesis) addressing this training through pitching several television programs that tackle these issues in Ethiopia. Finding pride in those things once allocated to be “less than” or unnecessary (such as evoking mother’s names and ethnic origin) as a means to bring about the lived realities of women as being valuable to our community are other ways that Setaweet is advocating for women’s equality in Ethiopia. In the near future, Setaweet aims to put on a feminist conference to address this need of feminist training that the people and the women of Ethiopia expressed. It is my hope to rejoin the organization after the completion of this Masters and contribute to the planning and execution of this conference.

**The Setaweet Way understands solidarity is political:**

Accepting the term feminist and unapologetically asserting it, is a means of resistance and a source for pride for Setaweet. We align with other feminist movements globally and know there are benefits of aligning with a global movement while acknowledging the contextually

specific means that women need intervention in their lives in Ethiopia. We find usefulness in taking up the term “feminist” to align with global struggles to aid in the formation of transnational feminist solidarity. We uplift and confirm the necessity for voicing individual, contextual stories and experiences and also assert that there are patterns of commonality of oppressions faced by women globally. This transnational feminist solidarity has found voice in the social media landscape and this medium has been very integral in my participants as well as my own ability to articulate our needs and find support. I unpack and articulate a discussion on the social media landscape in more detail in the next chapter.

### **Chapter Three:**

## **Transnational Solidarity Praxis and the Utility of Social Media in the Setaweet Way**

## **Introduction**

As I've previously stated, and believe in the importance of restating until this is uncontested, women in Africa have been at the forefront for the struggle for independence and have actively worked, and still do so, to ensure and fight for their rights. This resistance is shaped by Africa's own history of women's economic independence, vibrant cultures that promote community pride, and a long history of matrilineal societies that have shaped the values for resistance against authoritarianism and colonial rule. Thus, African feminism is situated in an anticolonial struggle. The struggle against both the oppressive settler state as well as the nation state link African women's struggle to that of the struggle of transnational feminists globally. In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which Ethiopian feminism is situated in the global struggle for equality and equity. First, I draw parallels between prominent African feminists and feminist thought and link this with the articulation I describe in Chapter Two, to show the possibility for a greater transnational solidarity network. Transnational solidarity is important because while technically Ethiopia doesn't share a colonial history with the rest of Africa, it is evident that the "independent" slogan is now more for appeasement than having any visible benefits to the country, especially for Ethiopian women.

The second part of this chapter describes in detail the story of one of my participants from the semi-structured interviews I conducted during my fieldwork. I relay her story of sexual harassment at the hands of a university colleague to provide an analytic of the utility of social media in transnational solidarity praxis; as that is the site for her most effective resistance during this experience. Social media, especially Facebook, was a prominent useful factor I observed during my fieldwork. Facebook is the location where I saw the Ethiopian women I interviewed as well as the other women I observed, went to connect with the outside world and build like-

minded communities. The anonymity of on-line social media spaces, however limited, has had great benefits. I utilize the story of my one of my participants to show how social media can provide safety because it can move beyond the confines of the nation-state. Facebook provides access to a wide network of people all over the world—and not only other Ethiopians. Most importantly, social media sites like Facebook can be a tool to force people to be accountable for harmful actions that would otherwise fly under the radar and go unpunished.

### **Ethiopian, African, Transnational**

Ethiopia's long history, culture, and pride is one that is heavily rooted in both the nation-state and its citizens exhibiting some false sense of superiority and perception of higher morality for withstanding impending, imperial attempts by Italy in 1896 as well as in 1935. While I am not making light of this commendable feat, I am choosing to focus more on the realities of claiming such victories when Ethiopia, according to the International Human Development Indicators scores very low across the board.<sup>15</sup> Ethiopia is among the highest on issues such as high rate of poverty, low literacy rate, income inequality, life expectancy, little to no access to heal care, and many more other indicating factors that prove that “independence” hasn't brought much progress for human rights in Ethiopia. While such measurements can be flawed and misleading, I saw firsthand the visible economic disparities and the neo-colonial mode of life that is the reality for most of Ethiopia's citizens that correlates to the findings in the HDI.

Ethiopian history is one that is marked by a lengthy masculinist imperial rule, a highly patriarchal form of governance that has been complacent, but not entirely solely at fault, for the state of its citizens in the country. In *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory*,

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<sup>15</sup> The HDI is a method of measurement proposed by the UN that measures a country's achievements in a variety of terms such as education and attainment, life expectancy, infant mortality rate, and adjusted real income among other indicators for all countries.

*Practicing Solidarity* Dr. Chandra T. Mohanty describes forms of rule that show that despite Ethiopia being outside of this “colonial” history, the country was clearly influenced by its own masculinist history as well as by the transformation happening in the world. She writes, “[a]ll forms of ruling operate by constructing, and consolidating as well as transforming, already existing social inequalities. In addition to the construction of hegemonic masculinities as a form of state rule, the colonial state also transformed existing patriarchies and caste/class hierarchies” (61). Despite being outside of colonial histories, similar forms of rule took root in Ethiopia through pressures of modernization and globalization as the new neo-colonial mode of life. As the natives in other colonized countries were marginalized, this too further marginalized African women. Similarly, in Ethiopia, as the country itself was marginalized, Ethiopian women were pushed even further.

Girmay Abraha, an Ethiopian scholar, writes that, “[t]oday’s Ethiopia is the extension of past authoritarian rules and oppressive principles. Political repression in Ethiopia has led to the closure of spaces for critical voices” (50). This limitation is even more severe for Ethiopian women as speaking out is not seen as a virtue of a “good” women. So, it is within this space of necessary critical voices that Setawet’s work and activism is rooted. It is this struggle against a masculinist, patriarchal nation-state that allows for solidarity within the global antiracist, anticolonial, transnational movement. Also, it is due to the constant restraint of these spaces that I present social media, specifically Facebook, as a site for different means of resistance for and from Ethiopian women. Dr. Assefaw Bariagaber writes about how social media sites like Facebook can affect the monolithic appeal of the nation-state. He writes, “[t]he world is increasingly changing from a “space of places,” a feature that made the nation-state relevant, to a “space of flows,” a feature that is increasingly making the nation-state irrelevant” (11). It is

through social media's often uncontrollable, *viral*, means of spreading information that the nation-state can be weakened, and work that aids the native country can be done in a landscape that knows no physical bounds and provides greater possibilities. The strict, conservative, authoritarian rule in Ethiopia represses any opposing ideologies and grassroots mobilizing that is not sanctioned by the nation-state. In using Facebook to pose activism campaigns and open discussions with opposing viewpoints, Setaweeet has been able to escape the silencing of issues we find are necessary to engage with.

During my fieldwork in Ethiopia, I was involved in constructing the Setaweeet Facebook page and managing its overall social media presence. I observed how monthly emails, and posts on social media platforms pertaining to current issues were engaging a lot of dialogue. This exchange was not only with people who live in Ethiopia nor was it only involving people who only identify as Ethiopian. Observing this surge prompted me to think of the ways in which social media has been integral as a site for resistance when it comes to the Setaweeet way in Ethiopia. I argue that social media provides a "new" space in this global technological age and has potential to be very useful for the goals for transnational feminist solidarity formation and praxis. Informed by transnational feminist scholars and using one participant's response and personal story, I explore the possibilities of positive use for social media.

It cannot be said enough that Setaweeet acknowledges that feminist ethos has always existed in Ethiopian herstory. However, Setaweeet takes on the challenge that comes with labeling and claiming feminist/feminism outwardly in a hostile native and global environment. The Setaweeet way understands the benefits of aligning with global feminist movements for certain political gains in our specific as well as general societies. In the goal of forming solidarities, it is necessary to graph and articulate what a transnational feminist praxis and



solidarity will look like for organizations such as Setaweet in Ethiopia. Evoking Mohanty's call that a "just and inclusive feminist politics for the present needs to also have a vision for transformation and strategies for realizing this vision," in this chapter, I also present means for future solidarity building with other feminists active in the global struggle for women's equality, specifically within Setaweet and its reach in Ethiopia (3).

Ethiopia's location and my argument of articulating feminism within this context also lends itself to the contestation that since Ethiopia doesn't share a colonial history it is outside of the solidarity formation of anticolonial struggles. Due to the geographical and socio-economical positionality of Ethiopia and Ethiopian women, I ascribe this struggle within the term Third World or Global South feminisms. The continuation of the struggle in Ethiopia then has to align itself with solidarity in the transnational feminist agenda. I agree with Mohanty when she describes this solidarity as having "political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance... Thus, potentially, women of all colors (including white women) can align themselves with and participate in these imagined communities" (Mohanty, 46). What Mohanty articulates is that there is no need to perform "sameness" or claim that all Third World Women experience oppression at the intersection of their marked and unmarked identities similarly. Aligning the Setaweet way in this transnational feminist solidarity praxis allows for a politically motivated activism that is decolonizing in its goal of challenging systemic domination, power and oppression, wherever it may be found. Setaweet understands that the oppression of women globally is not static but informed through political economies and the practices of masculinist nation-states and imperialist, colonialist agendas. In understanding the macro implications of women's oppression, Setaweet can form alliances and coalitions of solidarity whose aim is to disrupt and problematize these historicized systems of oppression.

Ethiopia is located in the area that is labeled “third world” in the global discourse. In her text, Mohanty offers a broad definition of Third World that I find useful for geographically locating Ethiopia in this struggle of Third World feminist activism:

Geographically, the nation-states of Latin America, the Caribbean, subSaharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, China, South Africa, and Oceania constitute the parameters of the non-European Third World. In addition, black, Latino, Asian, and indigenous peoples in the United States, Europe, and Australia, some of whom have historic links with the geographically defined Third World, also refer to themselves as Third World peoples (46).

Mohanty’s definition allows for positioning Ethiopian women’s struggle for equality along those of Third World feminists who reside in the Global South as well as Women of Color and Indigenous feminist struggles from the Global North.

Setawet acknowledges that accepting the term “feminism” aligns the Ethiopian struggle with other women (and men, and other identities) globally. Setawet understands the need for an antiracist feminist praxis because the Setawet way understands we are all resisting oppressive, capitalist systems that target the women of each society most; especially poor women, disabled women, non-heterosexual women, and other intersectional marginalized identities.

As highlighted in Chapter Two, some of the issues that Setawet challenges pertaining to the oppression of women in Ethiopia are: cat-calling and sexual harassment, exclusion from public spaces, dismissal of contributions in the workplace and dismissal of important contributions to the domestic/private sphere. These are global issues that transnational feminist scholarship address. In highlighting the connections of oppressions and violence that women face to a wider normalization of violence and oppression, feminist scholar Nadjie Al-Ali writes,

We need a long-term and holistic strategy against harassment that includes a campaign for a fairer economic redistribution, against neo-liberal economic policies, and, crucially as well, a campaign against the systemic marginalization of women in decision-making processes, both within governmental institutions and many opposition and dissident contexts (125).

The praxis of specific campaigning that Al-Ali articulates speak to the oppressions I highlight in Chapter Two and in this chapter as well. In acknowledging that feminism will not be sustainable unless it is reach is everywhere, Setaweet aligns itself with transnational feminist agendas and finds usefulness in joining in solidarity with Third World feminist agendas as well.

### **Social Media in Ethiopia: Facebook as a Provisional Site for Resistance**

Facebook as a platform has extensive utility for activism. It is a vastly used resource that joins families, friends, and strangers who are thousands of miles apart. While there are both negative and positive uses for this social media platform, I focus on its positive use and argue that it has potential to be a great tool for solidarity formation across transnational feminists globally. Using an intersectional lens to unpack how my participant utilized the platform to voice her experiences of sexual harassment allows for a different analysis of the event itself as well as an analysis for the new space cultivated on Facebook.

It is also important to note that Facebook, and other social media platforms, have been incremental in activism of Black and brown people in the United States as well as in different locations all over the world. Facing silencing and erasure in media and other traditional platforms, Black activism such as the Black Lives Matter movement, and the informal but very prominent utility of Black Twitter show how these on-line spaces can be used to counter the hegemonic disruptions and silencing of marginalized groups. In her 2017 Doctoral dissertation, LaToya Lydia Sawyer positions this on-line space in a similar argument that I am posing here in this chapter. She writes:

I suggest that we recognize that organizing radical movements require a bit more than simply the process of mobilization. It requires not only a political consciousness, but a sense of connectedness that we often don't get from the media that that allow us to come together...So, that work has to be taken up in the organizing of movements, and then we can use the social media to assist us in that process (103).

Sawyer's work presents the organic connections that can be made through on-line communities as being able to be translated to real solidarities that can help in political gains.

I embark on this process for the goal(s) of challenging the controlling images of women in Ethiopia, to confront paradoxes in Ethiopian culture, to legitimize young people and young Ethiopian women as producers of knowledge and resistance with inherent power. Further my aim is to contribute to the understanding of global social protest against social inequalities as displayed on Facebook and to legitimize social media as a digital space when oppressive forces repress "real" spaces for social protest and solidarity formation. Lastly, my goal in this section is also to highlight the connections across social protest and harness transnational solidarity coalitional praxis globally. In this feat, I argue as Paik and other feminist scholars have indicated, "The very process and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent" (8). Paik's claim is evident in Ethiopia as the repressive landscape has pushed women to find resistance in a landscape that is much harder to control, social media.

One of my participants was pushed in this way and I describe her story and method of resistance for the remainder of this chapter. On the day of our interview, my participant and I met at a trendy hotel in the city and we chose this place because they play live jazz music, and we had both previously expressed our admiration for the art-form. Over some beers, and an extremely comfortable energy between us, we discussed the reasons why she was so furious at the Gender Studies Department in Addis Abeba University's main campus in 4 Kilo. She told me the story of how she became the first woman in the herstory of the institution to file a lawsuit against a male colleague at the university. For over a year, she fought with the institution that she works for as a professor in the Law Department, to get the administration to bring punitive

charges against the male colleague who was guilty of harmful, violent, predatory sexual harassment. It baffled me that even as an employee of the institution she was not able to get the necessary intervention and aid that she needed. My participant is beautiful a young lady, with vibrant and contagious energy, and wears a smile on her face often. When she told me about this experience her expression grew defeated, yet, she was adamant that she was unwilling to give up. She was employed as an educator in the Law school department of Addis Abeba University's main campus located in the capital. In an ironic, yet important coincidence to note, she taught Gender in Law at this institution. Along with her role as an educator, she was a founding member of the advocacy group The Yellow Movement that is open to both women and men with goals of challenging the culture of violence in terms of domestic abuse and sexual violence that affect women. Comprised of law students and staff, The Yellow Movement is a prominent, vocal group on the campus that has garnered negative reactions from the University's administrative staff while contrastingly showing positive influence and support from the student body and greater community of Addis Abeba.

During her time as an educator in this department, my participant experienced extensive sexual advances and harassment by a male senior educator who was also a married man. She tried to thwart off his advances but he only persisted, so she decided to act. She filed an official complaint against the man and sought the very intervention The Yellow Movement seeks to provide for the women that need it. However, to her utmost disappointment, this initial complaint only fueled gossip and negative attitudes toward her amongst her colleagues in the University. Instead of the officials investigating her story, she, a single, young, woman in a position of lower status than the predator, was pegged as either enticing his advances or wanting to fabricate events in order to seek advancement for her career. As the culture of Ethiopia is one

that values the voice and experience of a man over that of a woman, the reaction from her colleagues was not surprising. However, being a prominent activist and a member of the staff in the law department, she had hoped that the officials would at least put in a little effort to remedy the situation.

After almost a year being thrown around the ring, and having her case postponed without any explanation nor any punishment given to the predator, my participant decided to go a different route in order to seek justice. She spoke to me about the culture of embarrassment in Ethiopia and how “shaming” someone via a public platform could be useful in this instance, especially since formal means were proving futile. Despite many contradictions in the fabric of Ethiopian life and culture, both men and women want to project themselves in the utmost positive light to the global community. Since transgressions are often discussed in all gossip circles, people are often protective of their reputation to make sure it falls in line with the identity of the dominant Ethiopian Orthodox Christian ideology. With this general understanding of how the culture in Ethiopia is performed, my participant took her story to an on-line news outlet in an effort to go public with her story. Her story was published in print, but most of the circulation was via online platforms, the largest of that being, Facebook.

I quote from the article that was published about my participant’s story to utilize her own as well as the publications words in articulating the incident:

One of the co-founders, a law lecturer at Addis Abeba University [participants name omitted] said that women are subjected to sexual harassment and gender abuse in Ethiopia on a daily basis. [My participant] from Addis Abeba said that even women with high societal positions suffer from sexual abuse every day. “Ironically, I was at a university meeting about gender equality and empowerment when my colleague, who is a government official, put his hand down the back of my dress,” [she] told Independent.ie. “I couldn’t believe it. I told myself I was just imagining it but then he slipped his fingers down to my underwear. I was so shocked that I just got up and left. I am quite a small woman, and quite childlike, so men act very sexual towards me. Even though I am

privileged and have a good position in society, I am still subjected to this abuse” (Devine. Abeba.independent.ie).

This quote utilizes my participants own words of her experience to locate the material realities of this experience and move it beyond the realm of discourse. She thought she was imagining it due to the audacity and the relentlessness of the abuse. This has grave consequences on the psychological and emotional well-being of women as most women choose to ignore or repress incidents such as these. The online publication further articulates her experience through her words:

I was very ashamed but as a law professor and a female activist I am always encouraging my students to take action against this kind of abuse. If I didn’t stand up for myself, how could I expect people who are less privileged than me to do so? They said I needed evidence and I asked other people who were at the meeting when I was abused to testify. Most refused and one man even testified against me saying that I made it up. The man who abused me had a high position in the university and so he was very powerful. Nobody wanted to testify against him and face losing their jobs” (Devine. Abeba.independent.ie).

Sadly, the reality of a lack of support from peers and shaming that occurs when women speak up, as my participant expressed, is all too common for women in and outside of Ethiopia. What my participant did next was a bold move on her part and shows her commitment to overtly resisting oppression and following her own advice that she gives her students. The publication further explains:

[My participant] knowing that she needed solid evidence, went to her colleague’s office and put her phone on record. “I wanted to catch him admitting he had abused me or if he did anything again I would have it recorded. My friend waited outside the door and I told him to come in if he didn’t hear anything after 10 minutes. My [predator] colleague didn’t suspect a thing and figured I was there to get more of what he did the last time. So dismissing our agenda for the meeting, he started touching me asking ‘show me where I touched you?’ He starting pushing me around and pushed me onto his sofa, grabbing me by the back. I immediately paged my friend and he knocked on the door as if he was waiting for us to finish. I hate to think what would have happened if my friend wasn’t there” (Devine. Abeba.independent.ie).

The author of the article continues:

[She] used the recording as evidence and more charges were brought against her colleague. However, the university disciplinary committee repeatedly refused to act on the case through consistent delays. “After four months of waiting for a disciplinary decision, I went to the minister of education and begged for help. “In the four months, my reputation was ruined on campus. People said that I was making it up because I was looking for a promotion or that I was begging for it by the way I dressed. Typical victim blaming. I was terrified that my career was over.” The minister of education acted upon hearing the story and forced Addis Abeba University to discipline the man in question. “The university said that because he was a good citizen they couldn’t fire him but they moved him down a rank in the university. He now has a smaller office and a smaller on-site house. That is all the discipline he got,” [she] said.

Hard evidence, witnesses, and even her positionality as a highly educated Ethiopian woman didn’t protect her from the predatory actions she faced at the hands of a male colleague who was her senior. Masculinist and patriarchal interpretations of women’s experiences shaped the lack of reaction that the institution showed. Despite all this overwhelming evidence, the only method that worked in giving my participant a sense of justice was in the public shaming of the colleague and the institution. Again, I quote directly from the article that brought this incident to public debate:

A top university official told me that they didn’t want to act as such but that the ministerial level shaming called for an immediate action. He said that the university didn’t want to make a ruling because I was not married and therefore not trustworthy. He also said that he thinks that my colleague suffered more than I did and that if they knew I was going to make it so public, they would have made my colleague apologise in the first place – a route preferred by God and elders of the university community” (Devine. Abeba.independent.ie).

For my participant, she said “the whole experience was “terrifying” and “exhausting.” In the published article, she also speaks about the organization she co-founded, The Yellow Movement, as well as Setawet when she says, “women face this kind of harassment every day and no class group is exempt. It’s because of these experiences that we have movements like the Yellow Movement and Setawet to help empower women here in Ethiopia” (Devine. Abeba.independent.ie).



I pose this particular incident in this chapter because I want to situate this type of experience as something that is not only prevalent in the “harmful” hyper-masculinist Ethiopian patriarchy. Further, I problematize generalized notions of the “backward African man” (as being the reason for this type of experience in Ethiopia) and situate this type of experience in the macro, historicized realities of Third World or Global South nations as well as in the nations in the Global North. I do this in agreement with Al-Ali when she writes on gender-based violence in the context of Iraq. She writes,

I have spent lots of time and energy as an academic and as an activist to argue against the ‘culturalization’ of gender-related issues—particularly with reference to gender-based violence in the Iraqi context. For years, I have felt compelled to say and write: It is not about ‘their culture’, but it is about political economies. It is about authoritarian dictatorships and conservative patriarchal interpretations and practices. It is about foreign interventions and invasions and their gendered politics. I have made a case for the significance of intersectionality, i.e. that the struggle for women’s rights intersects with the struggle against other inequalities, which, in Iraq translates into the struggles against imperialism, neoliberal economics, authoritarianism, and, crucially as well, sectarianism (Al-Ali, 4).

Al-Ali’s articulation directly translates to the necessity of recognizing our activism and resistance as a global struggle that is rooted in nuanced and complex forms of oppression and rule. Different forms of oppressions at the hands of a masculinist patriarchy are not specific to nations in the Global South as we have seen recently in the #MeToo Movement, an online movement that brought the experiences of sexual violence of women in the U.S. and other Global North nations.

Circling back to my participant’s story, on Facebook, the identity of the perpetrator was quickly found out and a great show of support for my participant was visible. The Minister of Education heard about her story through the very visible dialogue happening on Facebook, and it was only because of his “shamming” of the university that the administration even took the small punitive step they did against the predator. This public shamming was the first and only win that

my participant enjoyed. Her case was then very loosely “tried,” and the perpetrator got a 3-month suspension from his duties at the university, however, he was still getting paid. When I followed up with her after my return to the States, my participant told me that the perpetrator didn’t even serve the full 3-month suspension and has since been reinstated back to his position. To add more fuel to the fire, his salary was increased.

Despite the backlash he received, my participant still got the worst of the ascribed negative perceptions that the greater community had about her abuse. She was mislabeled as a trouble maker and “home-wrecker” and her status as a young, single, woman was often brought into question. This caused her great psychological trauma, self-doubt, and she even left her position at the institution. Amidst such controlling images, it becomes important to self-define, reclaim and form alliances not only based on sameness but also across difference. Within this reclaiming of the body/mind/soul and redefinitions of Ethiopian womanhood, we can, for the future cultivate what Mohanty describes as, “Coalitional identity [that] would be premised on a shared commitment to decolonization that preserves difference rather than seeking to assimilate and undermine relations of domination” (Mohanty, 2005). The dialogue that occurred on Facebook allowed the formation of alliances amongst men and women of different backgrounds who understood her abuse as being a human rights issue. She expressed that this community helped her healing tremendously.

While the Facebook platform provides the space for people to enact the same oppressions online, it also has made these reactions visible and public. The unintended consequences of the negative comments that people had on Facebook was that since it is a global, social platform, it showed and amplified how overtly oppressive and patriarchal the society and ideology in Ethiopia is. This visibility makes it difficult (albeit not impossible) for those who reject the

notion that Ethiopian women are oppressed. While I acknowledge that women are oppressed globally, I argue that this new-found space has provisional attributes for a less-oppressive future for us all. Facebook provides the tools to illuminate and contest sites of oppression, and allows it to play-out on a non-physical location.

Three of my other participants also spoke about the function of social media, specifically Facebook, in the utility it has in their everyday lives as feminists. One participant said,

Social media is a powerful tool and I been sharing my reflections on different gender issues and campaigns especially for two women, one was abducted and another was attacked by acid and I have been involved [in galvanizing support] through social media. Also, as a photographer, I have been doing photo stories on menstruation experiences like tackling taboo and creating hygiene, and also photo exhibits online of natural hair, as there is a world standard [read Western] for women's hair, so it was wonderful to be a part of portraying women with different hair... I am glad to have the online platform to speak about issues that I think are important.

This quote from my participant shows how these platforms can be a place for young Ethiopian women (and non-Ethiopian women alike) to speak about their concerns and passions, and articulate the things they care about most. Another participant mentions Facebook and social media as it was how she was able to get in contact with Setaweet and begin her activism within the organization. She said,

I have this very woke friend on Facebook and she always shares stuff about feminism in Ethiopia and then she shared an article about Sehin, about how she founded Setaweet and what she does and what she is currently doing.... And I feel in love. [In response to my question if her friend lived in Addis] No, she doesn't live here... but I read all the articles she wrote, her blogs, and twitter, then I contacted her [Sehin] on Facebook to say that I would love to be involved and asked what I could do... it turns out I go to the same school as her daughter so she loved that and we just met up... A lot... and she took me to my first meeting and I fell in love.

As my participant expressed, she got in touch with Setaweet and the director through the online Facebook page. It is also important to note that one other participant as well as myself, found the organization through this platform as well. This is a promising positive outcome for the online

presence of the group. As I have kept up with the page even after my return to the States, engagement is still high and constantly growing in number. While we had around 500 “likes” at the time I returned from Addis in August of 2017, it is currently at 2,000 “likes” but thousands more of engagement. This is a very promising progression and has great benefits for Ethiopian women and Setaweet, currently and for the future.

Uses for social media pose young people as active, resistant forces who utilize their resources in order to speak up and out against practices they do not believe in. The ways that young people have used these platforms legitimizes them as knowledge makers and capable activists in articulating and attending to their own needs. Using the Tunisian and Egyptian protests as an example, Hounshell articulates how these spaces are freeing up age-old boundaries that were otherwise not possible.

More recently, the effective uses of Twitter, Facebook, electronic messaging, and mobile phones during the Tunisian and Egyptian protests is believed to have played a critical role in bringing about the downfall of long-entrenched regimes, not only because such media outlets provided credible news where the government-controlled media failed, but more importantly, because they provided like-minded individuals and groups with the means to cooperate, coordinate, and communicate various courses of action (Olsson 2008). In other words, access to social media has made the public more autonomous and less dependent on the nation-state and its functionaries (Hounshell, 2011).

I find this articulation by Hounshell to be useful for the analysis I present in this chapter as it shows how Facebook has been instrumental in recent years in documenting, mobilizing, and getting more eyes on what is happening all over the world. Due to this live exposure of current events, political actors and oppressors can be held accountable with visible evidence that document what they do, how they move and speak.

It goes without saying that of course there are negative consequences to using social media as a form of activism. There are angry, oppressive, and abusive people who find comfort in tormenting others due to the protection in anonymity that the

screen/computer provides. However, the reality is there are horrific tragedies happening daily in women's lives and we can't risk keeping quiet any longer. While the words online can hurt, and scar our souls, there are abusers on the ground raping and killing, mutilating and oppressing women all over the world. So, we must continue to agitate using any platform available and making/forming space when where they are not available. Being vocal and sharing unpopular opinions can implicate you as a problem-maker for the officials of the nation-state and have dire consequences, yet, that is why solidarity and coalition building with other feminists in similar struggles can be effective.<sup>16</sup> Those who won't have direct implications in their own nation-states, can show up on-line and at times, on the ground, in an act of solidarity. One such example during my fieldwork was a Facebook promoted/circulated funding page for an acid victim in rural Ethiopia whose male partner had thrown acid on her face and body and severely burned her because she tried to leave him. The campaign was for her to be able to go to Europe to seek treatment as her wounds were too severe to be treated with the facilities available in Ethiopia. The online group-funding was successful and she was able to get the help she needed to recover. There are many more stories such as these that again show the utility of social media in transnational feminist solidarity formation and community building across the globe.

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<sup>16</sup> A blogging group in Ethiopia named "Zone 9 Bloggers" has recently been in the press for a few years as these young journalists were imprisoned and charged with conspiracy and terrorism for posing critiques of the ruling party in Ethiopia. Many of the bloggers are in and out of prison, if not held for years on end and subjected to torture and inhumane treatment. However, the recent visibility of their story online has garnered great support for them that has helped tremendously in restraining the administration of the nation-state from severely or violently harming these journalists. They are still constantly heavily surveilled and some remain in prison/jail.

During the entire duration of my fieldwork, I observed Facebook being a site for challenging yet engaging dialogue, raising money, spreading awareness of any event however big or small, and in attracting more membership and participation in and with Setaweet. I was amazed at how many women and some men wrote to our inbox and direct messages to assert their desire to join in the struggle towards empowerment and emancipation from all racist, heterosexist, patriarchal oppressions.

Beyond bringing members to the Setaweet page and engaging in critical gender dialogue across many cultures and countries, Facebook has been useful in that Setaweet has hosted a plethora of campaigns that have garnered much traction in getting funding, and increasing membership for the organization. I discuss a few of these campaigns here. First is the “16 Days of Activism: Talking about Sexual Harassment,” campaign which followed the #MeToo movement here in the U.S. Ethiopian feminists and activists joined together in telling the stories of sexual harassment openly on the public platform for 16 days to show how prevalent and universal this violence has been experienced by Ethiopian women at the hands of Ethiopian men. The “I am my mother’s daughter,” campaign highlighted and problematized Ethiopian language and common jargon that positioned women and mothers as weak, unfavorable, and unnecessary actors in Ethiopian society. Since the conservative patriarchy is patrilineal, evoking Ethiopian mothers, their names, and success stories in navigating life as single mothers countered the narrative that a child’s identity was only that of his or her Father. Last but not slightly in the least of the plethora of campaigns found on Facebook through the efforts of Setaweet and The Yellow Movement was one that also exemplified strategic maneuvering on the part of feminist activists in response to Ethiopian men’s objections

and resistance to feminist mobilizing. The campaign titled, “Distinguished Father Nominations and Appreciation,” called on Ethiopian citizens to nominate, congratulate, thank, and uplift Ethiopian Fathers who have been supportive and showed ally-ship for their wives, daughters, and even their mothers. This was an intentional positive reinforcement tactic to show Ethiopian men what to do instead of pointing out practices they should refrain from. The campaign was highly successful and alleviated some tensions that Setaweet was getting from claims that the organization was anti-Ethiopian men.

All these campaigns challenge normative Ethiopian ideologies of the inherent inferiority of Ethiopian women. Watching it play across a site that can be far more reaching than any newspaper or book, is exciting and full of possibilities for the future. The strategic maneuvering is also very commendable on the part of Setaweet and its members and again highlights the intelligence and resistant forces that young Ethiopian women are.

## **Conclusion**



I describe my thesis as explorative because I intentionally refrain from re-inscribing notions of the “studied other” on the population I chose to center in this thesis. However, it is not merely just explorative. Through a mixed-methods approach of both my full participant immersion and observations in/of Setawet, along with the voices of the Ethiopian women I have incorporated from my semi-structured interviews, I have written a thesis that articulates what feminism means for young Ethiopian women and what they believe their own feminism entails. I articulate in this thesis what issues and interventions make the struggle worth fighting for. As contemporary Ethiopian woman is a category that I also use to self-identify, I give voice and document the opinions, feelings, and understanding of feminism and its utility in Ethiopia through incorporating the women who are most impacted. By using feminist methodology, I am self-reflexive in my own understanding of Ethiopia and my experiences prior to immigrating to the United States and during the time of my fieldwork. Self-locating myself in the practice of transparency and mapping the genealogy of how I come to this work is a direct decolonizing tool to reject notions of white, male, hegemonic objectivity that tells women, especially women of color, that they must not be in their work. Through the understanding that feminist consciousness is inspired through personal experience, I use my story and experiences to inform why I wanted to embark on this journey and why I am committed to the struggle for the long-haul.

I began by providing a literature review that engages with African feminist theorizers that pose controversial critiques to Western trained feminist epistemologies. These African theorizers contest notions of feminism as un-African and contribute to the new anticolonial methodology of no longer writing back to Western theories but also formulating contextual theorizations of feminism on the continent. In incorporating a gendered, historicized snapshot of

prominent African feminists and activists, it helps elongate the trajectory of feminist action and activism in Africa as a pre-colonial reality. These realities then shape and inform African women's struggles against masculinist, authoritarian nation-states as well as highlight how African women mobilized and resisted against imperialist and colonial rule.

Situating Ethiopia within the continent and in the trajectory of such resistance and agency allowed me the means to present the qualitative data I garnered through my feminist ethnography fieldwork in Addis Abeba in the summer of 2017. Providing the direct voices and experiences of young, contemporary Ethiopian women is important work that has not received a lot of attention in discourse. Utilizing my participant's own voices in the articulation informed and validated my feminist mythology that is grounded in providing material knowledge that aims at reaching beyond the discursive level. I incorporated experiences of exclusion, sexual harassment and violence, dismissal, and challenges faced within the familial home. Further, I highlighted how most of these concerns posed by my participants is situated in the greater struggle for women's equality all over the world. The similarities in oppressions we face, make possible, new arenas for transnational solidarity formation. Once localized, contextual experiences are expressed, then a more macro and complex method of looking at oppressions can emerge in how they are rooted in the global struggle against imperialism, colonialism, and masculinist rule, makes it possible to see patterns of commonality in how our struggles are connected. I highlight how new arenas for community-building and solidarity formation are being negotiated in the on-line communities of Facebook and other social media sites. As these new locations are driven mostly by young people across the globe, it is evidence of the inherent agency and vigor that young people have. This strategic move on the part of young people, especially young women, lessens the hegemony of the nation-state and again, validates them as resistant forces.

## **Limitations**

It is important to speak for a few moments on the limitations I was posed with in doing both my feminist ethnography and in the process of writing this thesis. First, I was only with Setaweet for a 3-month period. However intense and extensive the time I spent with members and staff was, I admit I can be biased in interpreting the reach, goals, and intentions of the organization in a positivist manner. Due to the fact that this organization was in stark contrast to the realities I thought I would come to face once back in my native country, I was extremely proud and very overtly active in my involvement with Setaweet. It may be necessary to say that prolonged exposure and side-by-side activism can illuminate areas of limitations and contradictions that were not apparent to me on the ground, and still are not apparent to me now. However, through the interviews and participatory observation I conducted, I found the claims I make in this thesis to be true of Setaweet.

Next, I experienced limitations in translating and transcribing my interviews. As a native speaker of Amharic, I allowed my participants to use both Amharic and English in describing their thoughts and experiences. While this enriched my own personal relationships with my participants, I found great difficulty in translating un-translatable sentiments and words. I have done the translations to the best of my ability but am aware that I may have lost the voice of my participants in some instances. However, for the purposes of this articulation, I find my translations to be adequate and useful and assert that some words and expressions are just untranslatable. In places where I found this tension, I have chosen to omit that from this thesis. This omission is in line with my feminist praxis of refusal as I believe that academe doesn't deserve everything that I learned during this ethnography.

The next limitation is in my positionality as a Western trained, Ethiopian woman in the diaspora. I moved about in spaces and in ways that were not common for Ethiopian women and while this caused “looks” from other people, I was often exempt from overt expressions of oppression at the hands of both men and women. Being relegated as a Western “other” allows for my identity to not be fixed as an Ethiopian woman and opens up the possibility for my actions, opinions, and behavior. Further, I found this positionality as evoking romanticized notions in both Ethiopian men and women that I encountered who believed that the West is somehow more “free” for Ethiopian women as many people expressed my hard-earned expression of autonomy as being due to my experiences and education in the States. I openly expressed that my personality was due to many more complex and hard experiences as both an Ethiopian as well as a Black woman in the United States.

Lastly, while I was self-reflexive in not re-inscribing oppressive hierarchies in the ways in which I present this work, I must include that sexuality, disability, and other marked-as-marginalized identities were not discussions that often came up during my involvement with Setaweet. Since sexuality is still seen as a private matter in Ethiopia and homosexuality is illegal, outward discussions were not encouraged. However, amongst ourselves in Setaweet, there were individuals like myself who identified as homosexual and/or gender non-conforming and no heteronormative ideology was promoted in Setaweet.

### **The Future and Implications of this work**

I understand that the feat of articulating feminism in Ethiopia is a vast challenge. Ethiopian women are neither homogenous nor a single-identity group. Being one of a few articulations that incorporates and evokes the material experiences of Ethiopian women themselves, it is my hope that this scholarship inspires future articulations that are contextual and

specific. Future work that builds and advances this dialogue will articulate the nuances between the interventions necessary for activism in women's rights for Ethiopian women in rural *and* urban communities. This is work that I hope to continue to do in Setaweet as I will be moving back to Ethiopia after the completion of this program at Syracuse University to re-join Setaweet as permanent staff and scholar-activist. Also, questions of religion, sexual identity, ability, and other factors will be even more unpacked and harmful ideologies will be problematized in my and other future work that has similar goals as I had in the writing of this thesis. I find that the more specific and contextual the material experience can be, the more wide-spread reach it can have for feminist solidarity formation.

It is my hope to translate this thesis into the Amharic language and present it to Setaweet as the beginning of the articulation we seek to document. Further, it is my hope that sections that are useful can find their way into publications in Africa and abroad so that it can reach audiences beyond the classroom or the academic sphere. Due to the knowledge and methodologies that are available (or lack thereof) for Ethiopian people as a whole, this kind of work couldn't be done a few generations ago and thus has great, positive implications for the future. This work dismisses notions that women of the Global South can only be knowledge consumers and contributes to knowledge production and asserts Ethiopian women as theorizers in our own right!

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## Vitae

Samrawit Alemayehu-who prefers to be called Samrawit Bekele Genet-to honor her mother as an act of resistance against the practice in Ethiopia of taking on the first name of the father as the child's last name- was born on March 18<sup>th</sup> in the town of Addis Ketema, located in the capital city of Ethiopia, Addis Abeba. After completing grade 2 in public school in Ethiopia, she immigrated to the United States to Denver, Colorado in November of 1995. In Denver, surrounded by family and vibrant Ethiopian community, she held on to her desire to ultimately go back to Ethiopia one day to be of use to the community of her birth. Samrawit attended Metropolitan State University of Denver where she received her Bachelor's degree with a major in Africana Studies and a minor in Anthropology. As a fellow in the Pan-African Studies Department at Syracuse University she realized her dream of going back to Ethiopia through the externship program. In the summer of 2017, she returned to Ethiopia and conducted the feminist ethnography articulated in this thesis. While there, she met and made alliances with other Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian women alike who were joined in the struggle to bring change to Ethiopian society. Here, she has found her passion in utilizing her privilege of education to better bring the voices of Ethiopian women and our lived realities into the global conversation for women's equality. This thesis, is a step into that direction.