GENDER AND DAILY LIFE IN ETHIOPIA

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School starts in Wereilu at 7.45 a.m. with the flag ceremony. The students are lined up in somewhat orderly rows by their class leaders while a few of the teachers oversee the process, swishing small switches recently torn from nearby eucalyptus trees. The switches are mostly to keep the assertive African flies on the move, but the overall effect during the ceremony vaguely evokes a shepherding demonstration. Once in order, the students sing the Ethiopian national anthem while one of their number raises the green, gold, and red tri-colour in front of the school’s administrative block. A teacher strikes a bell fashioned from some abandoned machinery after the morning announcements and the students head for their classrooms with varying degrees of eagerness to learn.

This was my morning routine five days a week for one and a half years while I served as a Peace Corps volunteer in this rural town in highland Ethiopia. I am still not sure who learned more there, my students or I? Certainly I continue to reflect on my experience five years after departing. Now studying African history, governance, politics and economic development in London, I constantly seek to relate my memories of Ethiopia to the academic literature I read, trying to make the abstract concepts concrete. What lasting effect, if any, have I had on those with whom I lived in Wereilu? As a development worker and a fellow human being, did my presence help?

In the developed world, Ethiopia is usually associated with images from the 1985 famine: starving children, gaunt faces, emaciated cattle, parched land and suffering on a biblical scale. This was not the Ethiopia in which I lived. While food security remained an important development issue during my service, it did not dominate the agenda in Wereilu nor in many other parts of Ethiopia. The librarian was interested in ways to fill his library with free books and the school administration was interested in providing the facility with electricity. I was interested in converting a little-used part of the buildings into a language-laboratory and we were all interested in improving the quality of education available at the secondary school.

Though I was the first Peace Corps volunteer (or foreign development worker of any type, to my knowledge) to be stationed in Wereilu, the school’s administration was already well versed in many of the development themes with which I had been indoctrinated during my thirteen weeks of training. Gender, a touchstone issue in development work worldwide, was particularly important in Ethiopia. The Peace Corps had an active Gender and Development (GAD) committee in the country and other gender-related goals as an organization which influenced my lesson-planning and day-to-day decision making. The Ethiopian Ministry of Education had their own stated goals of increasing female student enrolment and graduation rates. This article will consider some of the implications of gender and development in Wereilu.
Development as Change

In approaching development work, one will inevitably be confronted with the reality that at its core, development is often about changing culture. Even the most practical and altruistic of development projects would be implemented by workers and managers hoping that it would lead to a change in the attitudes of the served populations, opening their minds to the possibility that they can improve their lot in life. When considering gender and development, there can be no doubt that the goal is to achieve fundamental changes in the way that women and men understand their identities and relationship to each other. With respect to gender, development goals include decreasing the gap between male and female access to education, increasing women’s choices for work, increasing women’s role in government and generally moving towards a participation of women in different aspects of society that approaches their proportion of the population. Another huge set of goals centres on securing women’s access to what are considered to be universal human rights including food and personal security, legal rights and entitlements equal to their male counterparts’ in society as well as sexual and reproductive safety and freedom. For these goals to be accomplished, local understandings of gender roles and identities must be explored, understood, and changed. One cannot consider the alteration of individual identities and self-perceptions on such a profound level anything less than cultural change. Recognizing this does not invalidate such goals. However, it is worth bearing in mind when considering changes that development is nothing more than cultural imperialism. In some sense, this is true. This does not make the goals of protecting women from culturally sanctioned rape or relegation to a legal minority any less worthy or urgent. But empowering women does change the social dynamic of male-female interaction.

Additionally, it is important to consider both the perspective that one brings to the process of gender and development as well as the nature of one’s relationship to the discourse. Understanding one’s own prejudices and values, especially as an autonomous, ‘grass roots’ development worker, is essential when seeking to understand the roles and relations operating in the society with which one hopes to engage in a process of change. In addition, bearing in mind one’s inherent location within the dynamic of gender relations should inform the way in which one interacts with others, male and female.

The Gender Landscape in Ethiopia

Although Ethiopians will be the first to claim that Ethiopian culture is different from black Africa, many themes emerge common to the rest of the developing world and sub-Saharan Africa in particular when it comes to gender. While resisting oversimplification, it is possible to describe a few features of the gender dynamic in Ethiopia, particularly the impact on girls’ education in the highland areas where I spent nearly all of my time.

Particularly in rural areas, but also in urban settings, women are responsible for performing a higher amount of labour in the home than men. Women and girls
do the cooking and cleaning as well as fetching water, which usually entails carrying around twenty litres of water back to the home one or more times per day. If there is a water pipe nearby this could take a few minutes. If not, it could mean up to an hour’s walking to a nearby spring or river and back. Women are also responsible for collection of fuel for cooking fires. While men are usually responsible for ploughing, women and children of both genders are involved in most of the other aspects of agriculture including weeding, harvesting and selling produce in the market. Young girls and boys could be responsible for pasturing animals.

Access to education is limited in Ethiopia and girls, particularly in the rural area, get the least access of all. Female students are often prevented from enrolling because of a family’s inability to pay for uniforms, fees and materials. Boys are often given priority in these cases, both because of perceptions that they would be most likely to get a job using their education and because there is plenty for the girls to do in the home. According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, around 51 per cent of primary school age children were enrolled in the 1999/2000 school year. Broken down by gender, female enrolment was at 41 per cent, compared with 61 per cent for males. Even when enrolled, female students can find themselves at a disadvantage because of work they must do before and after school at home – often cooking and cleaning while their male siblings are studying or playing sport.

Ethiopian girls are also vulnerable to culturally sanctioned violence including abduction, particularly when fetching water or fuel wood. Girls are usually abducted in order to be forced to marry, often by being raped so that her family will be pressured to let her remain with her new husband rather than returning in disgrace. The practice of female circumcision, usually referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM) in the development community, also puts girls at risk in Ethiopia. This practice is perpetuated by women, but justified in gendered terms. It is commonly held that without having been circumcised, a woman will find it difficult to marry or will be difficult for her husband to control. It is also meant to reduce sexual urges, to keep women docile. In a discussion with my students, some expressed the belief that FGM prevents babies from being harmed during childbirth as an uncircumcised woman’s external genitalia were thought to become ‘stony’, impeding the delivery. The ceremony and implementation of FGM involve an operation which is frequently carried out in unsanitary conditions, putting girls at risk of infection. Even years later, women who have undergone the practice are at increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases and complications during childbirth.

Gender and Development in Wereilu

As a male and a foreigner in Wereilu, my legitimacy and ability to perform as an agitator for change was significantly compromised. As a foreigner, direct action on my part could easily be dismissed as not relevant in the local context. More importantly, my perceived and actual stake in the welfare of the community
and its social fabric was much lower than that of the rest of the population, although the fact of my living in such a remote and underprivileged area of Ethiopia increased my credibility somewhat. As a male, my opportunities for meaningful interactions with women were constrained by social convention. In addition, if part of the desired process of changing gender identities was meant to empower women, particularly female students, then it was essential that this agenda not be perceived as a male initiative. Many female Peace Corps volunteers started after-school girls' clubs, providing a space where female students could be comfortable expressing themselves. I did not feel this was a legitimate option for me as a male in Wereilu. As such, most of my efforts were woven into English lessons or demonstrated through my relationships and interactions.

The Peace Corps GAD committee initiated a Girls' Mentoring Project in coordination with the transnational organization FAWE (Forum for African Women Educationalists) in the spring of 1998. I was fortunate enough to be able to participate in the three-day conference in Addis Ababa and was responsible for chaperoning two of the female students back and forth from my region. In total 24 female high school students were brought to the capital to stay with prominent Ethiopian female role models and participate with them in the conference. The students shadowed their mentors for two nights and the intervening day. Most of the conference involved only the students, mentors and speakers brought in – providing a space for frank discussion. Many aspects of women's challenges in Ethiopia were addressed, including the sensitive issue of FGM. After the workshop, the students wrote essays about their experience in Addis which were read aloud to the assembled students in a special morning flag ceremony.

From my perspective, the student from Wereilu was visibly transformed by the event. The pride of sharing her experience was clearly empowering for her. In the following term, she joined a new current events club which I started in order to practice English by discussing the news stories. She was also an active participant in the conversational English curriculum which I also taught. Her confidence was high in a context where female students are often at a disadvantage next to male students. I was no longer in Wereilu when she took the national comprehensive examinations, but I like to think that she scored well enough to secure a place at Addis Ababa University.

We should also consider other experiences, perhaps more typical. For example, my two closest friends in Wereilu, both male teachers, married female students during my service. Aged sixteen and eighteen, the former had a child within a year of the marriage. Both were students in grade 9, though both had dropped out by the time I left Wereilu. The eighteen-year-old student's marriage was arranged. She had repeated the ninth grade twice previously and told me herself she was not interested in studying any longer. This highlights the presence of difficult obstacles facing even those who valued the goal of empowering women in Ethiopia. Both teachers acknowledged the paradox of being progressive educators pushing for gender equality while engaging in practices which clearly violated such goals.
Among my own more active endeavours was an attempt to hire a male serateynä (worker) to help with fetching water and doing laundry, both considered women’s work. My strategy back-fired and within a month I had engaged the services of a local woman. I was seeking to challenge gendered stereotypes about the nature of the work. However, my male serateynä had actually been interested in boosting his social capital by becoming associated with the foreigner. I had to shift tactics to focus instead on improving the lot of the female serateynä in what ways I could – providing her with electricity, a generous wage, a safe working environment, and in general treating her as an equal. But she herself brought beliefs about gendered relations that I was unable to affect. For example, I was never able to convince her to share a meal with me, though she cooked most of the food which we both ate in my home.

Reflections

Much development work has been centred on empowering women and especially on increasing their access to education. Women are the primary caregivers in most sub-Saharan African households and Wereilu is no exception. Though there is a large body of literature debating the effectiveness of female-centred development versus more traditional approaches, it is widely accepted that educated and empowered women are more likely to educate and encourage their own female children. In addition, they provide positive role models for male and female children. Empowerment has other positive effects, including increased sexual and reproductive security, without which women are often unable to protect themselves from exposure to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.

Since leaving Wereilu in February of 1999, I have considered many times the impact I may have had as a development worker in my community. In terms of my gender related development activity, my intention was to empower my female students with the belief that their rights as humans were equal to that of their male counterparts in the community, and that they should consider themselves as equally capable of succeeding academically. The reality of life in Wereilu and in Ethiopia is that few students are able to pass the comprehensive examinations with a high enough mark to continue with tertiary education. Most of those who do are male. Additionally, changing ideas about gender can take a long time. The process can foster tension and conflict, even violence, as new ideas clash with tightly held orthodoxies. I was not trying to bring about a revolution in Wereilu. I comfort myself with the notion that some of my students may have considered new ideas about their roles, both male and female. Perhaps in time, it will bear fruit. I look forward to returning to find out.