

BOOK REVIEW

by Solomon Gebreselassie

Name of Book: Struggle From Afar: Ethiopian Women Peace and Human Rights Activists in the Diaspora

Author: The late Dr. Maigenet Shifferraw

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It is wonderful that Dr. Maigenet Shifferraw was able to complete this work before her untimely death about a year ago (February 2016). As her husband Dr. Getachew Metaferia tells us in the forward to the book, the author was an educator, and a long time peace and human rights activist.

With a deliberative and mild voice, Maigenet narrates the contributions, challenges and hopes of Diaspora activist Ethiopian women who mostly reside in the US. Her intentional addition of the word "Afar" in her book's title is obviously to indicate and emphasize the limitations of Diaspora women struggling from a considerable distance away from the homeland. And yet, as the book shows, these women were not limited to only Diaspora activities of advocacy, but also directly contributed to the well-being of women and children through helping various charities such as, Abebech Gobena's Orphanage, and distributing blankets to plastic hut street dwellers.

Their advocacy work included the trail blazing and the first in Ethiopian protest history of using candlelight vigils. Maigenet humorously tells us the women's naive handling of lit candles that nearly burnt their fingers before a woman peace activist, Conception Picciotto, thankfully intervened and suggested they use paper cups to hold the candles (p.10).

These women were peace and human rights activists since 1990. Although Maigenet does not claim credit for this position, it appears that it was the first Ethiopian organized peaceful protest in the nation's long and arduous violent history. And the fact that this shift emanated from a women's group is so befitting given women's tremendous responsibility in society to care for children, their homes, the sick and the elderly.

Maigenet chronicles the formation, permutation and transformation of the first group in 1991, Ethiopian Women for Peace, Development and Humanitarian Aid (EWPDA), which later changed its name to Ethiopian Women for Peace and Development (EWPDA), and after 21 years by forming a merger with another Ethiopian women's group, its current name, Center

for the Rights of Ethiopian Women (CREW). It is particularly gratifying to see the resolve of the women in 2003 after they "closed down" EWPDHA due to frustration and overwork, only to be re-energized a year later and form EPWD (P.54-55).

It was not all roses for the activist women in their 21+ years work. There were incidents that nearly sank their ship and tore them asunder. The main one was their opposition to the Ethio-Eritrean war in 2000. Most wanted to oppose the war and protest against both countries, while a few accused Eritrea as the aggressor and wanted the protest to focus just on Eritrea. It is a credit for EPWD to survive this ideological chasm and one wonders whether a political organization dominated by men would have survived such a calamity short of a factional split. Not to paint all women's groups as saintly, however, the book also documents the sad split into two of another women's group, the International Ethiopian Women Organization(p.70). EPWD had successfully reached out to Eritrean women peace activists and formed the International Coalition of Ethiopian and Eritrean Women for Peace and Reconciliation. While Maigenet and Mary Tadesse were mentioned from the Ethiopian side, no Eritrean names are mentioned.(p.17).

For the women's group (EPWD), struggling for peace was not merely working for the absence of war. They defined peace broadly as the 1) absence of war; 2) the rule of law; and 3) respect for human rights (p.155). In addition, the women's group professed non-partisanship and practiced it.

On a philosophical level, non-partisanship is a lofty goal for such a group that is against war, and human rights abuses, whether the source is the government or any of the opposition. However, the struggles of EWPD did sometimes overlap or went in hand with the goals and aspirations of the opposition. This is like two travelers taking different routes but coming unplanned the same way. When EPWD demanded that there be an all-inclusive multi-party conference as in 1991 (London Conference) or 1993 (Addis Abeba Ghion Conference), the opposition parties too demanded the same fairness. What impelled EPWD to do so was its faithfulness to its charter that stipulated that they will struggle for the rule of law and respect for human rights. Exclusionary politics tramples the rule of law and human rights of the excluded.

Unfortunately, as Maigenet tells us the ruling party and its supporters would find it convenient to allege that EPWD is in league with the opposition. At one forum organized by the office of Rep. Michael M. Honda, Maigenet recalls an encounter with an Ethiopian Embassy official after her speech outlining her organization's work, where the official accuses her of partisanship (p.146).

In what made her book readable and pleasant, Maigenet dedicated over a third of the book to profiling about a dozen women activists. After paying tribute to the late Dr. Konjit Fekade who passed away in 2010, women activists are interviewed discussing their background, life experiences and their vision for Ethiopia (p.62-120).

We read about Alemtsehay Wodajo's Tayitu Cultural Center that trains and gives forum to poets, dramatists and comedians. We read about Brhane Raswork's pioneering work in fighting female genital mutilation (FGM) in Ethiopia and Africa through the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children. We see how early experience of witnessing rural poverty, and lack of health facilities shaped in later years the progressive minds of activists like Fekrete Gebremariam. On the way, we meet Dr. Patricia Ottman who runs an NGO called Girls Gotta Run (that trains girls in distance running) and who made Bertukan Mideksa's portrait showing hands clenched and resting on her cheek. The making of the portrait is akin to what the famous Chinese artist Ai Wei did using legos to make the faces of worldwide political prisoners, including Ethiopian and Eritrean political prisoners, and in display at a museum in Washington DC.

Bertukan, for whose release from jail EWPDP fought so hard, narrates her background and her political life. EWPDP particularly participated in Amnesty International's Write for Rights project where over 2,000 letters and post cards were written for Bertukan's release and presented to her. Most of these women expressed their concern about the ethnic division of the country and their fear about the future of the country.

In the latter parts of the book, Maigenet records the results of her interviews of members of the young generation. All of them did not want their names published. They freely told her about their fear to participate in politics. Almost all did not know well enough about the struggles of the prior generations for social justice. They are not taught in school and the media does not narrate it well, if at all. All they hear and learn about is how the mighty EPRDF overthrew the Dergue. There were divergent views regarding the question of the current generation's commitment to fighting for human rights and social justice. Some said the generation is largely not engaged, and others said it is engaged in its own ways, and gave the example of the Zone 9 bloggers (p.147).

In addition to what are described above, it is fair to ask at this juncture what the concrete accomplishments of EWPDP/CREW are in their 21 year history. Other African women, especially those that passed through horrible civil wars, such as Sierra Leon and Liberia, have found ways to shame their men warriors to accept peace by either wearing white and

protesting, or by going completely naked. Our Ethiopian sisters from afar have done the following:

1. In terms of humanitarian goals, they helped and coordinated with the Ethiopian Human Rights Council;
2. They helped the DC Ethiopian Community members with workshops on stress management, parenting, and honoring Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopia;
3. They had cultural clothing display and introduction events;
4. They networked with other activists outside of Ethiopia, such as Dr. Sarah Gotbaum of the Fund for Peace, and at their first ever event in 1991, the keynote speaker was Chris Prouty Rosenfield, the one who authored "Empress Taytu and Menelike II", and they held a symposium on violence against women with the National Council of Negro Women;
5. They held several workshops and conferences to promote peace and reconciliation;
6. They undertook a research project with the AdHoc Peace Committee in Ethiopia, and planned a conference in Ethiopia in 1992 with a pre-conference held at Howard;
7. They published a newsletter called VOICE articulating women's issues;
8. They tried to help and raise awareness about the sad condition of Ethiopian maids in the Middle East and Arab countries.

The women were also exemplary in "forgiving and forgetting" when a spat occurred in 2008 with the Ethiopian Soccer Federation in N.A. (ESFNA). EWPD planned to hold a candlelight vigil to raise awareness about hunger in Ethiopia at ESFNA'S event, but ESFNA and the crowd were disinterested and the vigil did not go well. To its credit, the ESFNA leadership apologized when EPWD wrote them a letter of disappointment, and in 2013 ESFNA's 30th anniversary theme was "Celebrating Ethiopian Women", and they subsequently sponsored a CREW conference (p.32).

Civic organizations are the bedrock of any democracy. Women's organizations in Ethiopia, such as the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association, had played a significant role until they were incapacitated by the 2009 notorious regime Charities and Societies Proclamation. Some of their leaders migrated to the US and became leading members of CREW. Thanks to the work of women's group inside and outside Ethiopia, Ethiopian women (and men) are protesting violence against women employing the methods of their counterparts in the West. Recently, after a woman named Aberash was blinded by a knife attack by her husband, a movement called "Ahun Bayne Metah" emerged with a purple and white ribbon. The purple represented raising awareness, and the white symbolized a pledge not to commit crimes against women (p.151).

As attested by the current #MeToo, women have been emboldened to expose any and all sorts of verbal and physical violence against them. Thanks to the far-sightedness of TIME Magazine, active women in the #MeToo movement have been dubbed the "Silence Breakers", and recognized as TIME's Person of the Year. The sad side of this is the fact that men on the progressive camp are also being implicated in the crime. As Hegel said, tragedy is not the conflict between right and wrong, but between right and right. It is a shame men on the Left are committing the same crime as men on the Right. They should know better.

On a related note, the Rohingya Moslems of Burma have been in the news as targets of the Buddhist majority society there, with no one in the society defending them, not even the Nobel Peace Prize female winner who leads the country. While they are killed, raped, and forcibly evicted, one small group that stood with them and raised its voice in the Rohingya;s defense is a small women's group.

We have trust in our Ethiopian sisters in CREW to continue their advocacy work for women and children, peace and human rights, and any progressive organization, Ethiopian or otherwise, should be on their side.

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