

Review

Liberal feminism: Assessing its compatibility and applicability in Ethiopia context

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As of the feminist theory varieties, liberal feminism is a type of gender reform feminism that emanates from the liberal thought. This paper critically reviews the appropriateness and applicability of liberal feminist theory and strategies in the context of Ethiopia in attempting to achieve gender equality and to reduce women oppression and subordination. The paper looks at the laws, policies and strategies of Ethiopia pertinent to women rights and gender equality via the notions and strategies of liberal feminism. It is known that feminist theory has a profound interest in the social context and structure of power to study the real experiences of women living within these structures. They suggest a method of theorizing, that moves even beyond the forms of individualism and concepts that are important within liberalism. Although gender inequality is prevailing in the private and public sphere, Ethiopia Government has to take further assignments with a down to earth approach to bring the desired outcome with plausible options.

Key words: Feminist theory, liberal feminism, equality, strategy, Ethiopia.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a diverse, competing and often opposing collection of social theories, political movements and moral philosophies largely motivated by or concerning the experience of women especially in terms of their social, political and economic inequalities (Adawo et al., 2011). It is women's movement and liberation that is at stake. It is women that are harmed, oppressed and subordinated; women's consciousness changed to see oppression for what it was, and to see, too, that it was not inescapable or natural and that it could be challenged (Thompson, 2001).

Feminist theories attempt to describe women's oppression, explain its causes and consequences, and

prescribe strategies for women's liberation (Tong, 2009). These theories, by paying close attention to structures of power and social context and by examining the real experiences of women living within these structures, suggest a method of theorizing that moves beyond the forms of individualism and abstraction that are prominent within liberalism (Schwartzman, 2006). On the basis of the root causes of women's oppression and subordination, different feminist groups have emerged in different times. Although their assumptions and interests vary, the main goal is to eschew women's oppression so as to achieve gender equality. Of the varieties of feminism, liberal feminism is the most dominant and the

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groundwork for other feminist groups.

Giddens (2001) defines liberal theory as a “feminist theory that believes gender inequality is created by lowering access for women and girls to civil rights and allocation of social resources such as education and employment”. This situation is mainly centered on the socially constructed ideology of patriarchy that perpetuates inequality between the two sexes. Liberal feminism is derived from the liberal political philosophy in the enlightenment period, and centers on the core ideas of autonomy, universal rights, equal citizenship, and democracy (Tong, 2009). It is characterized by an individualistic emphasis on equality (Khattak, 2011). It is depicted as focusing on individual rights and on the concepts of equality, justice and equal opportunities, where legal and social policy changes are seen as tools for engineering women’s equality with men (Maynard, 1995). Some aspects of feminist politics are shifting from autonomous forms of organization to increased engagement with the state. Women are just beginning to enter an era of liberal democracy (Walby, 2002).

In its central assumption, liberal feminism maintains that differences between women and men are not based on biology, which basically represents reproduction differences. Hence, women should have the same rights as men, including the same educational as well as employment opportunities. Unfortunately, liberal feminism cannot overcome the prevailing belief that women and men are intrinsically different; but to a degree, it succeeds in showing that, although women are different from men, they are not inferior (Nienaber and Moraka, 2016).

According to liberal feminists, female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that block women’s entrance to success in the public sphere. Lack of opportunities in life chances and outcomes of women inspired liberal feminists to overcome the problem through education and law (Tong, 2009). It is also true in Ethiopia, laws and educational policies are the prominent strategies to mitigate women’s marginalization and oppression.

Ethiopia has enacted and adopted various national, regional and international human right instruments which clearly recognized mechanisms to mitigate women’s marginalization and oppression. Ethiopia has also adopted different policies to overcome gender discrimination in different sectors. For instance, Ethiopia has education and training policy which promote gender equality and overall aim to bring social changes by using education as the main machinery. In addition to the domestic laws, Ethiopia has also ratified various international conventions which are intended to promote, protect and fulfill human rights of individual and people. In this regard, Ethiopia has ratified International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1993, International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1993, International Convention on Elimination of Discrimination against

Women (CEDAW) in 1981 and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 (UN, 2006).

Article 35(3) of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution put that the historical legacy of inequality and discrimination suffered by women in Ethiopia, taken into account women, in order to remedy this legacy, are entitled *affirmative measures*. The purpose of such measures shall be to provide special attention to women so as to enable them to compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in political, social and economic life as well as in public and private institutions (FDRE, 1995). Concurrent to this idea, welfare liberal feminists that are supported by several contemporary feminists also asserted that the state should interfere to do adjustments in order to make the playground equal for everyone and provide basic requirements (Tong, 2009).

Consequently, we can infer that in the present time, among other types of feminism in most parts of the world including Ethiopia, liberal feminism perspective policies and strategies have been practically implemented. Despite its widespread implementation in most parts of the world, liberal feminism perspectives and thoughts have their own strengths and weaknesses though it differs from country to country in different contexts. In this analysis, we focused on the applicabilities of liberal feminism in the context of Ethiopia. At this juncture, we mainly focused on how Ethiopian laws, policies and strategies pertaining to gender equality are going together well with liberal feminist theory and strategies.

WOMEN STATUS IN ETHIOPIA

Women in Ethiopia occupy low positions in the society. In spite of their contributions to the well-being of their families and community affairs, women occupy lower socio-economic positions generally and therefore not allowed to make decisions at all levels. Women’s low decision making power in Ethiopia is more pronounced at household level. Women face multiple sorts of deprivation. Gender based discrimination, lack of protection of basic human rights, violence, lack of access to productive resources, education and training, basic health services, and employment are widespread (National Committee for Traditional Practices Eradication (NCTPE), 2003).

Women’s status is low as they are by and large poorer than men. This is because they procure less, are less taught, hardly become heads of family units, have no assets to help their wards, loath due affirmation for their work commitment, especially in agribusiness, and lack basic leadership control (Haregewoin and Emebet, 2003).

Ethiopia is a male centric culture that keeps women at a subordinate position, using religion and culture as excuses. These reasons have for a long time been bolstered by laws and enactment that maintain man centric society and women’s subordination. This has

Table 1. Some key players in protecting women's rights and empowering women status at all spheres.

Associations/Organizations	Year of foundation	Focus/Interests	Website /source
Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA)	1995	Economic, political, social and legal rights of women	www.comminit.com/global/
Network of Ethiopian Women's Association (NEWA)	2003	Women rights Women empowerment Gender equality	http://www.newaethiopia.org
National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia (NCTPE)	1987	Harmful traditional practices that affect the health of women and children	https://www.odwace.org
<i>Setaweet</i> - A feminist movement	2014	Assertiveness Women's leadership at the workplace Sexual harassment Gender-based violence, etc.	http://setaweet.com
Ministry of women and children affaires (MWCA)	2005	Women participation Mainstreaming gender Reducing harmful traditional practices Child treatment and protection	http://www.mowcya.gov.et/

realized and kept up incongruities amongst people, in division of work, offer of advantages, in law and state, in how family units are composed, and how these are interrelated (Haregewoin and Emebet, 2003). Around half of the Ethiopian population includes women, and they are effectively engaged with all parts of their public life. In spite of the fact that women's offer of division of work contrasts from place to place and from culture to culture, their normal working day is accepted to shift somewhere from 13 and 17 h every day (MoLSA, 2012).

In Ethiopia, there are many governmental and non-governmental organizations that are working on women's rights and empowerment in particular and gender equality at large. Efforts were made to ease such problems at local, national and international levels. Some key players in protecting women's rights and empowering women status at all spheres are shown in Table 1

with their objectives and interests basically influenced by the liberal feminist ideologies and strategies.

Although both governmental and non-governmental organizations have made tremendous efforts with the framework of liberal feminism, the achievement is not sufficient. Women are still victims of various economic, political and socio-cultural problems. The existing social norms, traditions and customs are very challenging to overcome the problem of women so as to achieve gender equality. In addition, the government and other concerned bodies are not committed fully to this work.

METHODOLOGY

Available documents addressing liberal feminism in Ethiopian context were identified and document review was undertaken. The main sources considered in the document

search were books, journals, policy documents, conventions and laws. Exhaustive reviews of the identified documents were arranged following an initial assessment of their titles and abstracts or summary. Obtained qualitative data were comparatively analyzed using document analysis.

COMPATIBILITY AND APPLICABILITY OF LIBERAL FEMINISM THOUGHTS AND STRATEGIES IN ETHIOPIA CONTEXT

As we discussed in the introduction part of this paper, liberal feminist thoughts and strategies have been implemented in Ethiopia with various laws, policies, programs and projects in the public and private spheres.

To achieve gender equality in general and avoid women's oppression in particular, Ethiopian Government has been working with specific measures like affirmative action. Likewise, as it is

stated in the work of Tong (2009), liberal feminism has two competing major ideologies. These are classical liberals and welfare liberals. The former liberals assert that the state's role should be protecting civil rights, providing everyone equal opportunity and freedom to enter into the free market; while the latter welfare liberals assert that the state should interfere to do adjustments to make the playing field equal for everyone and should provide basic requirements including legal services, school loans, food stamps, low cost housing for its needy citizens.

Among these two major competing ideologies of liberal feminism, Ethiopia also adopts policies that require different treatments of women and men under different circumstances. To avert the past injustices based on sex discrimination by the society and the state, the government of Ethiopia is providing affirmative action for women. For example, when the state functions as an employer in different formal and paid sectors like education, public accommodations, or associations, affirmative action is applying. Currently, the special treatment to women by the government of Ethiopia is derived from liberal feminist philosophy. Therefore, Ethiopian Government supports the welfare liberalists who claim that affirmative action is the bridge to narrow the gender gap. To make this real, affirmative action has got legal ground and clearly stated under FDRE constitution of Article 35 (3). Such specific measure is improving females' participation in accessing education and employment. Here we are not calming that affirmative action is the only and lifelong measures action to achieve gender equality.

The other major solution proposed by liberal feminist to address gender inequality is legal reform. Legal systems are the basic machinery to govern our relationship among individuals and governments. In the world, historical evidence showed that there were discriminatory laws which favor one sex, which is men and discriminate women. Women experienced *de jure* discrimination, meaning legal based discrimination which was very serious in human rights violation. Such discriminatory law was observed in Ethiopia. To bring some evidences of *de jure* discrimination against women in Ethiopian history, the civil code (1960) recognizes that (1) the domicile and residence of the spouse should be decided by the husband, (2) the husband can beat his wife if necessary, (3) if the spouse has no housemaid, the wife should serve as a house servant for her husband. Ethiopia has many revised domestic laws which are enacted to protect and promote citizens' rights such as FDRE constitutions (1995), the criminal code (2004), civil code (1960) and family code (1999). Under such mentioned laws, women's rights are sated independently. For example, under FDRE constitution (1995), women's rights are clearly recognized and given special attention. Article 35 (women's rights), article 25 (right to equality), article 34 (equality in marriage), article 42/1 d (Women workers

have the right to equal pay for equal work).

Ethiopian Government is promoting equality between men and women in different aspects, such as equal education, voting, reproductive rights, avoiding discrimination based on sex, and equal opportunities in the work place. Hence, the issue of providing women with access to power becomes the issue of providing them with equal access to the public sphere. Social, economic, and political equality are the goals of Ethiopia because it conceives the problem of women's confinement to the private sphere as central to their low socio-political status. Therefore, giving equal opportunity is the best possible solution to eliminate discrimination based on gender and that enhances women's capacities in different aspects; then strategies are encouraged by Ethiopia Government to flourish equal opportunity between women and men.

In the move to promote and achieve gender equality, Ethiopia has ratified different international human right instruments to protect, promote and fulfill human rights. Specifically, Ethiopia has ratified international convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly Resolution 34/180 of 18 December 1979 and entered into force on 3 September 1981. This substantive law is enacted to avoid discrimination against women globally. It was ratified by Ethiopia by recalling discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity, is an obstacle to the participation of women on equal terms with men in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries, hampers the growth of the prosperity of society and the family and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women service of their countries and of humanity (United Nations, 2006).

Apart from being a signatory of major conventions that protect women from discrimination and others, the Ethiopian Government has also expressed its commitment to gender equity and equality by issuing a National Policy on Ethiopian Women. The policy, which was issued in 1993, has three major objectives, such as (1) facilitating conditions conducive to the speeding of equality between men and women, so that women can participate in the political, social and economic life of their country on equal terms with men and ensuring that their right to own property as well as their other human rights are respected and that they are not excluded from the enjoying the fruits of their labor or from performing in public functions and being decision makers, (2) facilitating the necessary conditions whereby rural women can have access to basic social services and means of lightening their work load, and (3) Eliminating step by step prejudices as well as customary and other practices that are based on the idea of male supremacy and enabling women to hold public office and participate in the decision making process at all levels (National Policy on

Ethiopian Women, 1993).

Based on the aforementioned, we can understand that the solution which is recommended by liberal feminist in securing gender equality is gradually reducing stereotypes, prejudices as well as customary and other practices that perpetuate gender discriminations. In doing so, the government of Ethiopia is working to establish the conditions that women and men are capable of acquiring property rights. As such women and men, equally, will have the right to freedom from coercive interference with their person and property. This right to freedom from coercive interference consists in, at least, rights to freedom of conscience and expression, freedom to control what happens to one's body, freedom of association, freedom to acquire, control and transfer property, freedom of contract, as well as the right to compensation when rights are violated. The state's role should be protecting citizens from coercive interference by protecting their rights (FDRE Constitution, 1995). Likewise, the liberal feminists hold that the right to freedom from coercive interference has powerful implications for women's lives. However, as some assumptions and strategies of liberal feminism are compatible and applicable in the context of Ethiopia laws and policies to achieve gender equality, there are some conjectures and approaches that are incompatible and difficult to apply in Ethiopia primarily due to differences in political ideology and country's development situation. How liberal feminism is difficult to apply in Ethiopian context is analyzed in detail in the following section.

LIBERAL FEMINISM IN ETHIOPIA CONTEXT: INCOMPATIBILITY AND INAPPLICABILITY

Although liberal feminist theory assumptions and strategies are most likely working in the Ethiopian context, there are also incompatibilities and inapplicability that can be observed practically and the unfeasibility of some of the premises of liberal feminism. This section critically reviews the drawbacks of liberal feminists corresponding to Ethiopia's context of attempting to achieve gender equality and to reduce women's oppression and subordination.

Firstly, the philosophy of liberal political thought does not match with the government system of Ethiopia, that is, Developmental Democratic State. The notion of developmental state refers to the existence of state-led macro-economic planning where the state has independent political as well as a clear power to control the economy. This shows the big role the state plays in regulating, shaping and controlling the economy of a nation with the intention of enhancing economic development (Fesseha and Abteuold, 2017). Therefore, the liberal ideology in general and liberal feminism in particular is not largely compatible with the ideology and strategies of developmental state. For instance, when

some strategies are seen that are designed to eschew women's subordination and oppression as well as problems not related to liberal feminists, rather they are related with Marxist feminist strategy that is strengthening women in terms of economy. In doing so, the government of Ethiopia has been working on women's empowerment through various ways. Among the multi-dimensional efforts of the government, economic empowerment is getting attention through women's specific projects.

Contrary to developing nations including Ethiopia, the ideas of liberal feminists are more attached to developed nations, specifically white middle class women. Individualism at the heart of liberalism does not consider the interests and differences of women in various ways. In Ethiopian context, some difficulties can be observed to exercise individual rights of women because group rights prevail over individual rights. To some extent, it is also difficult to execute each and every one's interest and rights because of lack of capital, knowledge and other resources.

Secondly, liberal feminism does not consider the concepts of multiplicity, plurality and diversity of individuals and groups (Tong, 2009), whereas Ethiopian political system advocates the diversity of individuals because the country is the anthology of several nations, nationalities and peoples.

Thirdly, the inappropriateness and inapplicability of liberal feminist thoughts and strategies in Ethiopian context on reproductive health have been looked at. Liberal feminist theory encourages the practice of abortion and the use of contraceptives. In principle abortion is illegal in Ethiopia. However, there are some exceptional cases in which abortion is allowed. According to the criminal code of Ethiopia (2004), abortion is permitted when the pregnancy is a result of incest, rape, if a pregnancy is not physically and psychologically mature and extreme poverty.

On the contrary, there is a difficulty in Ethiopia to execute abortion and slightly contraceptives (although the government allowed to practice) because of the prevalence of strict religious beliefs and practices, customs and traditions. Furthermore, in Ethiopia, due to lack of health care centers, it is somewhat difficult to apply liberal feminist frameworks related to reproductive issues, such as abortion, contraceptives, maternal care, etc.

Fourthly, the incompatibility of liberal feminist in their essentialist position towards women in the context of Ethiopia was also looked at. Since they focus at macro level and tend to pose uniform laws and legal frameworks to end women's oppression, it is less applicable to avoid the problem of all women, especially women in Ethiopia where there is complex and diversified experiences due to differences in culture, ethnicity, language, religion and different ways of life styles and chances (rural /urban).

Fifthly, it is difficult to come up with gender sensitive laws in male dominated world where most of the policy

makers and executors are males. So, how effective will it be to take legal measures by oppressors to benefit the oppressed? Thus, to get gender sensitive and neutral person is not an easy task and takes a lot of time, making their effort slow to overcome the existing problems of women. For instance, when Ethiopian experience is considered, some men tend to develop prejudice towards special rights and affirmative actions and oppose such actions. Therefore, it is not difficult to guess what would be their position in enacting rules and regulations if they get the position of policy making and executing.

Lastly, liberal feminists' emphasis on rationality and public sphere is not well defined because women's oppression is not at the domestic level; rather it is the denial of values accrued to domestic roles. In Ethiopia, women play important and valuable domestic roles; they should not be deprived to play public role since they can specialize in such activities and should be given due respect. Therefore, liberal feminists' conjecture that urges women to be involved in public sphere equally as men is not essential. This is because women can be equal with men by contributing their best to the economic development of the country domestically too if given due value and respect.

CONCLUSION

Although governments and many stakeholders were involved to achieve gender equality, efforts in most parts of the world to alleviate women's oppression and subordination are ineffective. Actions have been taken by governmental and non-governmental organizations, women activists, associations and feminist movements. However, the focus is mainly on the public spheres rather than the private spheres. Legislations, laws, reforms, education and training are principally given or taken in the work place. The emphasis given to the public sphere to provide men and women or boys and girls equal opportunities and enjoyment of rights is not given to the domestic sphere to accompany it with rewards and benefits. The strategies, such as education and training designed by liberal feminists could not bring instantaneous and long lasting change which is largely criticized by radical and other feminists. In Ethiopia, there have been deep rooted and inflexible beliefs and traditions that demand a huge assignment to challenge gender inequality. In these situations, it is challenging to apply liberal feminist thoughts as a preeminent strategy in Ethiopia. It also takes much time to alter the existing social norms, values, traditions, beliefs and customs connected to Ethiopian culture. Therefore, the government of Ethiopia shall strive to adopt other feminist approaches combined with liberal feminist strategies to come up with a high-speed and remarkable change in attitudes and perceptions so that gender equality can be attained.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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