

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **A comparative analysis on the perspectives of African Feminism Vs Western Feminism: philosophical debate with their criticism and its implication for women's rights in Ethiopia context**

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**Feminism internationally aims to realizing the liberation of women from all types of oppression and providing solidarity among women of all countries. However, the remarkable difference is growing gap between North and South. Women from the North are harvesting the fruits of capitalism and global economy, whereas women from the South are all too often confronted with poverty and terrible labor conditions. The aim of this review is to analyze the African and Western feminism philosophical debate and its implication for women's rights in Ethiopia context. All available materials were reviewed. The analysis revealed that the difference between Western and Third world feminism is found in their conceptualization of women as the subject of struggles. Third World feminism considers gender discrimination neither the sole nor perhaps the primary locus of oppression of Third World women. According to them, other types of oppression like racism and economic exploitation also to be defeated. In their view, feminism is more widely defined as a struggle against all forms of injustice to attain advancements in women's rights. Despite of this, women's movements worldwide seem to concern themselves with the same grand themes on women's rights like women's legal and political rights, and reproductive rights in Third world countries including Ethiopia. The review concludes that Western feminism has negative implication for women's rights in Third World countries, including Ethiopia. While, African feminism is positive implication for Third World countries to women's rights since it considers both reproductive and productive roles of women. Therefore, the federal government of Ethiopia should follow African feminism and revise the laws, regulations and policies to protect women's rights especially on the issues of harmful traditional practices (HTP), reproductive rights and public spheres participation by considering women's in the world.**

**Key words:** Feminism, comparative analysis, philosophical debate, African feminism, Western feminism, women's rights, Ethiopia.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Little studies has been conducted and reviewed about the philosophical debates of feminism theories. Notably, Tong (2009) defined feminism as a worldwide movement that seeks to raise women's political, economic and social status and fight for gender equality in all aspects of

life in all societies. Similarly, feminism is aims at the liberation of women from all types of oppression and providing solidarity among women of all countries (Beasley, 1999). Feminism as a socio-political movement has taken various forms and is theorized from different

perspectives. In order to address the unequal power relationship between men and women, diverse theories have been developed by feminists. Feminist theorists present several diverse perspectives on how best to increase and protect women's rights. A variety of feminists have used different approaches, perspectives and frameworks to shape both their explanations for women's oppression and their proposed solutions for its elimination (Tong, 2009).

Principally, the existence of gap between North and South is growing. Women from the North are harvesting the fruits of capitalism and global economy, whereas the women from the South are all too often confronted with poverty, terrible labor conditions, faulty education and health care. A criticism that is often made of Western forms of feminism is that its basic tenets and conclusions only apply to women in developed industrialized countries and universalization of women's experiences, notably radical and liberal feminists, and believe their discourses represent women globally (Oyewumi, 2003).

Consequently, one of the central ideas in postcolonial feminism is by using the term 'woman' as a universal group; women are then only defined by their gender and not by social classes and ethnic identities. They also said that mainstream Western feminists ignored the voices of non-white, non-western women for many years, thus creating disagreement between the freed nations and the international feminist movement. Non-Western feminist have been looking for an authentic activism, without adopting the values of Western middle class feminism (ibid). Moreover, African women have a different starting point and their roles grew from a long tradition of female integration in collective structures. Women's activists may take quite varying stances towards sexuality. Women worldwide, past and present may take wholly different stands on abortion, genital mutilation, infanticide, women's seclusion, polygamy and homosexuality.

All available and relevant studies were addressed in related with African feminism and Western feminism and their criticism were identified and document review was undertaken. The main sources considered in the document search were books and journals. Exhaustive reviews of the identified documents were arranged following an initial assessment of their titles and abstracts or summary. Obtained qualitative data were analyzed. The reviewer highly recognized the sources which are applied in all contents of the analysis and paraphrase all the literatures used in the systematic review.

### **Comparative analysis on the perspectives of African feminism Vs Western feminism**

It is imperative to look into different texts of varied

personalities as it helps us to pick up a number of critics both on African and Western feminists. Here, the author tried to present some of the distinctive features of African and Western feminism that were used as the base of their respective movements. It can be informed that, women movements worldwide seem to concern themselves with the same grand themes like women's legal and political rights; Gender Based Violence (GBV), reproductive rights, employment and discrimination. However, we see great differences in the focus and implication of these themes.

According to Mikell (1997), the perspective of feminism in Africa grew from a very different dynamic than in the West. In the first place it has been shaped by the resistance of African women against western rule. As the African states arranged themselves with that organization came a gender prejudiced social pact gradually growing at the power of female leaders. An important difference between Western and Third World feminism is found in their conceptualization of women as the subject of struggles. First, Western feminists make equality between men and women the center of their struggles. While, Third World feminism considers gender discrimination neither the sole nor perhaps the primary focus of the oppression of Third World women. It is one of the issues they have to face one problem among others, certainly not the only one. According to them, other types of oppression like racism and economic exploitation also have to be defeated.

The perspective in which this type act and fight is thus wider than the context of Western feminism. In their view, feminism is more widely defined as a struggle against all forms of injustice and also requiring changes across the different fronts in order to attain advancements in women's rights. This makes non-Western feminisms facing problems and pursuing aims of great importance concerning not only women but also the entire societies in which they live. Third world and African women's demands have been explicitly political with work, education and health as a major issue per se and not so linked to their specific demand on women (Jayawardena, 1986). In addition, they perceive imperialism as the main enemy of their continents and especially of women. Western feminist assumes that in Africa men and women enter social relations as per constituted powerful (men) or powerless (female) subjects. This substitute for the sociological for the biological in order to create a false unity of women. By portraying African women as victim of culture without it were, outside of history. Thus, deprived of their capacity for social cultural production and historical agency, these subject exist solely as oppressed women in the eyes of western feminist asserts the incompatibility between African femininity (defined in

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terms of operation) and women liberation (Oyewumi, 2003).

The only obligatory characteristics that makes for an African feminist context is the criticism of African gender relations and point out that this essential component is often combined with optional characteristics that acknowledge that African women- and – men suffer not only from sexism and patriarchal social structure, but are also victims of racism, neo-colonialism, cultural imperialism, religion, fundamentalist, socio economic mechanisms of operation and dictatorial and/or corrupt systems.

### **Philosophical debate with their criticism (African Vs Western feminism)**

#### ***Criticisms of African feminism on western feminism***

Before directly proceeding to the critics of African feminism on western feminism and vice versa, it is important to put the following important points as preliminary. As educated African women are few in number, educated male Africa feminists did most literary critics on western feminism. Latin feminists like Molyneux considered themselves as the third world feminism and tried to criticize western feminism up with their own ideologies.

It is clear that most African feminists emerged following decolonization of Africa. According to Oyewumi (2003), African feminists who consider them different from that of western feminists claim as they have unique experiences in addition to the shared sources of oppressions. Principally, African feminists blame the westerners for their focus on secondary needs such as burden of domestic works ignoring fulfillment of basic needs, which is the primary problem of African, Latin and Asian women.

Secondly, African feminists condemn western feminists for their anti- male stands. They strongly believe males should not be detached from the struggle of women for presence of just society. The main reason for such kind of stand of African feminist is their belief of getting wide acceptance among the men if they make their feminism movement engendered.

Thirdly, North African feminist's belief the procedure of feminism movement should not be uniform from grass root as the westerners claim. For this, they put particular example of Tunisian feminism movement. Here in Tunisia educated men were the pioneers to fan the struggle of women for their rights and took the initiative to draft, amend and ratify law on women reproductive, economic and political rights in the parliament.

Fourthly, Asian feminists like Aguilar blame western feminists for their deep interest to impose western politics especially through their feminism looking theories. According to her western feminists did not consider the importance of existing cultural variations for the

implementation of theories. African feminists try to curve the condemnation of the western feminists especially on African's lack of political empowerment by memorizing their traditional role as leaders of clans that existed before the coming of European colonizers Therefore; Africans blame the westerners for their relentless effort to assert their own ideology on Africans. The other most important the most significant criticism of western feminism is lack of understanding and addressing African women's problem and issues. World's Women are not one group of people with the same backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. Their oppression is also different from one woman to another depending on their culture, religion, race, economic status and educational status (Mikell, 1997; Oyewumi, 2003).

Generally, Western feminists disagree with the view that men are equally oppressed under patriarchy, while African feminists agree that men are similarly oppressed and that gender equality means oppression of neither gender. The Western feminist movements have certainly affected the nature of heterosexual relationships that is traditionally accepted natural behavior of human being in Western and other societies which is homosexuality. Western feminism, a feminism that is entangled with the history and practice of European and North American imperialism and the World wide European colonization of Africa and Asia. There is no question that in order to investigate the construction of gender in any Third World society, the role and impact of the West must be examined.

#### ***Criticism of Western feminism on African feminism***

On the other hand, African feminists can be criticized for a number of reasons. One of these is for their failure to adapt at least comfortable approaches like sisterhood. Western feminists are afraid of Africans preference to focus on satisfaction of basic needs that cannot bring sustainable solution for the women's problem. They are also criticized for their inadequate awareness about the deep-rooted nature of patriarchy as the result of their low consciousness; African feminists included "motherhood" as one of feminism elements though it imposes lions share responsibility of taking care of children on mothers (Oyewumi, 2003).

According to this group of feminists, African females are not ready to bring radical change in the deep-rooted patriarchic life style. Members of this group strongly believe that African feminists oppose different feminism theories not having ground reason, but just for the sake of opposing. The western feminists have different theories that can be comfortable contextually for different group of women who have different experience. They have at least social feminism theory, which uses "sisterhood" as its approach to serve the interest of each group of women according to their needs and abilities. In

addition to this sisterhood is devoted to serve even women who are unaware of their rights alike most African women are. The strategy in western feminist discourse of singling out women without corresponding attention to men is used to create an impression that third world societies are male-dominated and anti-women. Westerners criticize African feminism for believing the difference between men and women, for that women are biologically different from men. Western feminists also believe the sameness and similarity of women's experience, which is universality. Therefore, they blame African feminism focuses on the divisions and conflicts rather than similarities. The domestic and private sphere, where gender inequality is constituted is not touched because of the abusive culture, which leads the continuation of oppression of women (Maerten, 2004; Oyewumi, 2003).

African feminists have criticized the idea of Westerners by saying the solutions to our problems should not be sourced from the West. Western feminism has influential powers in the global discourse on women's issues. It is exactly this influence that remains to be questioned as Western feminists commit similar aspects of silencing and remain blind to the lives of women who work from the margin (Maerten, 2004).

There is a lot of criticism about feminism due to radical feminism theory. In the second wave feminism, radical feminism viewing women's oppression as a fundamental issue in human society and tries to change the situation by promoting lesbians and gays right, however this issue brought different debates and very difficult to implement in third world countries due to heavy cultural bondage of the society. It seems that dynamic change of and indigenous culture of the society. The right of gays and lesbians are not accepted in many African's religions. The other critic of African feminism to Western feminist is the West itself is not perfect. It has some unique social problems. Nobody should deceive you to abandon your culture. Many of us might have to visit or live in the West before we appreciate our African cultures, languages, spirituality, etc. Western feminism dominant as it is should not be regarded as universal. Westerners also condemn Africans for their inability even to exercise their human rights such as genital mutilation. By so doing, Africans are deprived of their sexual equality.

### ***Feminism on the Third World and in the West and its effect***

The Western feminism is entangled with the history and practice of European and North American imperialism and the world wide European colonization of Africa and Asia (Oyewumi, 2003). Many people object to the feminist movement as trying to destroy traditional gender roles. They say that men and women have many natural differences and that everyone benefits from recognizing those differences (Jayawardena, 1986).

Criticism has been made that social change and legal reform have gone too far and now negatively affect men and families with children. Over the past five centuries, these developments have made Africa political, economically, and culturally dependent on Western Europe and North America. As a result, Africa has become the recipient of ideas and goods of dubious and often harmful value. Feminism has influenced culture, resulting in greater coverage of women's interests and concerns, particularly by the mass media. Feminist thinking has adapted and diversified to tackle new issues, including AIDS, homophobia (prejudice against homosexuals), technology, and warfare. Some feminists have combined feminist ideas with pacifist and environmental ideologies to condemn nuclear weapons and criticize new technologies. These include reproductive technologies and surrogate motherhood, which are regarded as means by which men exert control over women's bodies.

To sum up, the countries of the Third World vary tremendously in culture and social structure and thus, in the position that women hold, they resemble one another in that they all are less economically developed than the western countries. And the oppression of those women is more or less similar. At the same time, feminism has effected many changes in Western society including women's suffrage; broad employment for women at more equitable wages (equal pay for equal work); the right to initiate divorce proceedings and "no fault" divorce; the right of women to control their own bodies and medical decisions. Feminists are often proponents of using non-sexist language, using "Ms" to refer to both married and unmarried women (Lewis and Mills, 2003).

### **Implication of African and western feminism theory on women's rights in Ethiopian context**

Another source of criticism to Western feminism has come from feminist scholars in different part of the world that sees its normative prescription as an imposition to local cultural and religious traditions in the name of women rights. As it has been the case in many parts of the world, the expansion of women's rights may face resistance from various sources, some of which can emanate from cultural and religious norms. As it has occurred in the case of Middle East and North African countries, these resistance forces may appear in the format of human rights and entitlements, as they expressed the rights of a given cultural, ethnic or religious community to enforce its norms and values within its members. Thus, the problem is featured as a right's confrontation between achieving gender equality on the one hand, and respecting cultural and religious traditions on the other.

Principally, Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action 1993 stated that "the human rights of women and

of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights" (Para. 18) and placed particularly heavy emphasis on eliminating all forms of GBV. Importantly, the Programme of Action also called for "the eradication of any conflicts which may arise between the rights of women and the harmful effects of certain traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudices and religious extremism" (Para. 38) (UN, 2014). Recognizing that changes in the social and economic structure of societies, even though they are among the prerequisites, cannot of themselves ensure an immediate improvement in the status of a group which has long been disadvantaged, and that urgent consideration must therefore be given to the full, immediate and early integration of women into national and international life (UN, 1976).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be understood that theory is not perfect in terms of getting full acceptance and giving solution for realized problems by researchers and even by victims of the problem themselves. So, we become able to extract a number of critics on both feminism categories. African feminists are afraid of accepting and even adopting western feminism theories claiming it to be imposition of western ideologies that may destroy their identities. It is possible to assure this from the visible neocolonialism we are experiencing in our day-to-day life. However, members of this group strongly believe adaptation with critical selection is better than rejection. We are saying so as we understood the importance of approaches like "sisterhood."

On the other hand, Westerners seem to be careless to assert the importance of different theories to Africans. Rather they tend to be quite while African feminists become confused with new ideologies. Western feminists are also weak in terms of merging all non-western females as the third world females that exercise the same thing forgetting their unique experiences. Western feminist frequently view female genital cutting against the backdrop of patriarchy and female oppression, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) becomes men's way of controlling female sexuality. In western feminist discourses women from Africa and other parts of the so-called third world are often represented as objective against which some writers affirm their own supposedly liberated status as Western feminists. One of the key features of colonial discourses has been its misrepresentation and denial of diversity of non-western people. Thus, stereotypical ideas of African subjectivity come to dominate Western discourses on Africa in general.

To sum up, the diversity of contexts in which different types of feminism emerge requires that when we look at the rest of the world, our eyes be free from colonialist heritages, and third world feminism can be explicitly anti-imperialist, and fight against structural elements of First World which cause the oppression of women in Third World. Western feminists are also weak in terms of merging all non-western females as the third world females that exercise the same thing forgetting their unique experiences. Therefore, Western feminism should make the effort of widening its horizons to deal also with issues of class, imperialism and exploitation to cooperate with other feminisms in lightening the burden carried by the women of the world. Having this rationale, considering each feminism theory in context which is essential to stand alone for women's rights and alleviate the subordination of women in both Third World countries and Western countries at all in every spheres of life.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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