



# ENSURING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ETHIOPIAN POLITICAL PROCESSES



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Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 pandemic and Internal Conflict have disrupted women to participate in political processes in Ethiopia. The rapid, unprecedented spread of COVID 19 and internal conflict, impacted people's lives in general and women's life in particular. COVID-19 and internal conflict have upended livelihoods in Ethiopia, with significant implications for Women's Mobility, Safety and Ability to Participate in Political Processes. This policy brief shows gaps and suggests solutions on the impacts of COVID-19 and conflict on women's political participation in Ethiopia with special emphasis on conflict-affected areas; Amhara (Dessie and Woldia), Afar (Abala and Berhalle) and Oromia (West Guji and West Wollega) regional states. It also suggests policy responses required to augment recovery to ensure women's participation. The findings highlighted in this brief are drawn from different international studies. The methodology that was used during the Assessment reports was as follows;

- **Assessment Approach:** This assessment employed a qualitative method for all data collection, transcription and analysis.
- **Sources of Data:** Primary and secondary data sources were used to collect data for the assessment.
- **Methods of data collection:** KIIs, FGDs and document review.
- **Desk Review:** corroborate primary data and gather information that could not be gathered using primary data collection instruments.

## INTRODUCTION

Women's political participation is a prerequisite for democracy and sustainable development. It could be as constituency members, contestants, designated officials or electoral administrators. Despite all the efforts, women have been forced to play outside the political arena in Africa as they experience numerous obstacles (Courage and Forget, 2019). Particularly during natural and human made disasters, women are more vulnerable. For instance, SIDA (2015) and George (2021) have confirmed that the conflict and post-conflict scenarios as well as global pandemics expose women to gender-based violence, loss of livelihoods and women's marginalization from decision-making.

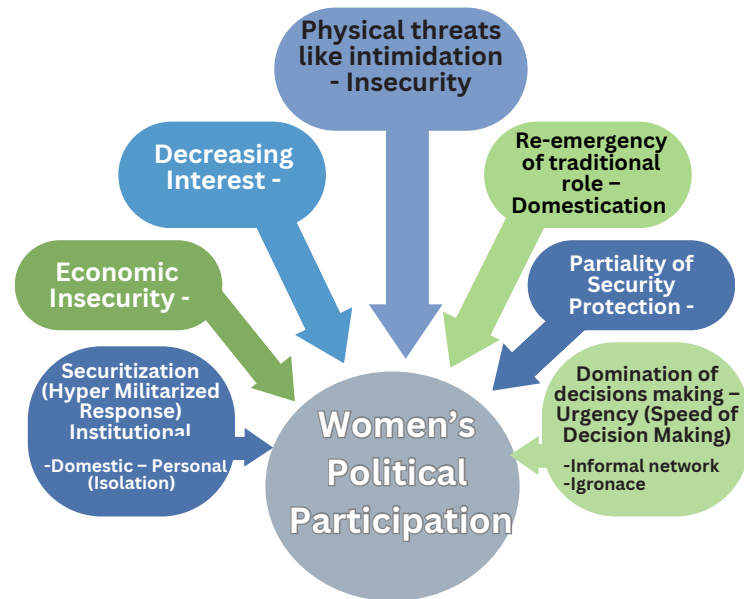
Apart from the traditional impact of conflict and global pandemic on the social, economic and psychosocial aspects of women, there are emerging trends of these disasters' impact on women's political participation. In both developing and developed countries, women are disproportionately affected by disasters. They are particularly susceptible and powerless to defend themselves during disasters and to lessen their risk of future catastrophes due to social injustice and gender inequality (SIDA, 2009). For instance, armed conflict is not gender neutral; in fact, it is extremely prejudiced. (Plumber and Eric, 2020; George, 2021). Conflict and COVID19 are also examples of shocks that are gendered with women's political participation being found to be more severely impacted by these shocks than men.

The pandemic and internal conflict exposed women for further challenges like gender-based violence, exploitation and abuse, reduced health care like pregnancy checkups, reduced access to sexual and reproductive health services, minimal political participation, and other psycho-social problems (UN Women, 2020; Gebrewahd et al, 2020: Ajayi et al 2020: Wood et al 2021: Christian et al, 2020: Alessandra, 2020).

Similarly, since November 20, 2020, Ethiopia has engaged into deadly conflict between the Federal Government of Ethiopia (GoE) and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The conflict has resulted in various humanitarian crises including high levels of death tolls and displacements across conflict prone areas and further exacerbated the crisis of death and displacements across Oromia regional state.

Though the conflict affected all sections of the community, women were highly vulnerable to gender-based violence. Despite many studies conducted on the impact of COVID-19 and conflict on the socioeconomic and psychosocial aspects of women in the conflict prone areas, there is dearth of findings on the impact of COVID-19 and conflict on women's political participation in general, and in Ethiopia in particular.

## Conceptual Framework



Conceptually, one can imagine how covid-19 and internal conflicts affected Women's Mobility, Safety and Ability to Participate in Political Processes.

## Major Findings of the study

### 1. "Securitization" as a barrier to Women's Political Participation

A "securitizing actor" who has social and institutional ability to elevate the issue "beyond politics" deems issues; mostly political issues as "dangerous," "menacing," "threatening," "alarming," and so on (Stephen, 2017). The securitizing actors have the choice of taking the matter seriously and giving it "urgency" or underestimating and ignoring it.

#### 1.1. Institutional Securitization as a barrier to Women's Political Participation

Political parties, government agencies and social organizations are some of the social and institutional power holders who have the

ability to frame and identify a problem as "dangerous," "urgent" Since men predominates these organizations; they define security in terms of their own worldviews. One of the KII informants from Western Wollo Zone of Amhara Regional State said:

***"Our authorities never seek our advice as cabinet members during crisis situations and restrict our roles to either providing support or returning home. We are unsure of their motives and feel left out of crisis management activities."***

It suggests that male leaders took advantage of the chance to secure the crisis-like COVID-19 and Conflict control in all decision-making areas. One of the informants from Oromia said:

***"Leaders encouraged us to go home during the pandemic, citing its greater impact on women. While sympathetic, this allowed male counterparts to dominate institutional affairs, including finance and knowledge"***

As a result, it has been found that the person who frames crisis-using words like conflict and COVID-19 controls the choices made and the outcomes produced.

## **1.2. Domestic Securitization as a barrier to Women's Political Participation**

In this situation, a similar approach to the above scenario, men particularly, the husbands, do not want their respective spouses to lead a public life such as political activity,

especially amid shocks like COVID-19 and local conflicts. One of the FGDs from West Wollega said:

***"Being a member of the cabinet or holding any other position of leadership in this area will require you to travel to dangerous rural areas where armed organizations are active. It could be for a work-related job or to organize the neighborhood against armed organizations. The husbands in this situation are uneasy because they worry that the armed groups may attack their spouses. As a result, there are rising trends of people quitting their jobs since working at home is getting harder."***

One of the participants from Afar said;

***"Since COVID-19 broke out, our husbands have begun to restrict our participation in public life, including attending meetings, events, and political involvement. They think that wives would be more likely to contract the epidemic than men and would also spread it to husbands and kids. They contend that they would take over all aspects of public life and compel us to stay at home, which would have a negative impact on our participation, especially during elections."***

## **1.3. Personal Securitization as a barrier to Women's Political Participation**

Women tend to stay out of politics because they want to feel protected and secured,

especially during shocks like conflict and COVID-19. One of the informants from Western Guji Zone of Oromia Regional state said:

***"Your level of engagement with and confrontation of the armed groups heavily influences your appointment and career progression. You must travel to the far-flung regions where the armed organizations are active. We fear to travel to the area as we avoid engaging in conflict. The men take advantage of the situation and control every position as a result."***

One of the informants from Western Guji Zone of Oromia Regional state has said:

***"In most cases, an armed group will send a message to warn the leaders—usually women. Many of the female employees quit their jobs right away. Some individuals even relocate to a different location. For instance, I am the fifth woman to be appointed to the post I currently hold. I don't think I'll stay in the position if the intimidation continues"***

## **2. Institutional Securitization as a barrier to Women's Political Participations**

Political parties, government agencies and social organizations are some of the social and institutional power holders who have the ability to frame and identify a problem as "dangerous and menacing"

Because men predominate these organizations, they define security in terms of their own world views. One of the KII informants from Western Wollo Zone of Amhara Regional State said;

***"We are always advised to either return to our homes during times of crisis or to take on facilitation roles and logistical oriented duties. Despite the fact that we are cabinet members, they never ask us for advice on what to do or how to accomplish it. Therefore, our roles are to either provide supportive services or return home for protection"***

It suggests that the male leaders took advantage of the chance to secure the crisis-like COVID-19 and Conflict control all decision-making areas. One of the informants from Oromia has said;

***All of our leaders were really enthusiastic to send us home as soon as the pandemic reached Ethiopia. "They showed sympathy for us, which made us happy, and we went back home. We saw it as a chance and chose to stay in. However, the male counterpart took advantage of the situation to dominate/abuse situations related to finance, knowledge, and other institutional affairs."***

## **3. Re-emergency of traditional role as barrier to Women's Political Participation**

Through the investigation process, it was discovered that shocks like conflict and

COVID-19 sustain the renaissance of conventional roles. In times of crisis, men take over the duty of safeguarding the family and adopt a strong manly attitude. They believe that women are particularly susceptible to certain physical dangers, such as gender-based violence. Furthermore, they consider themselves to be accountable and guardians of their family and country.

#### 4. Urgency-pretext as a Barrier to Women's Political Participation

Shocks like Conflict and COVID-19 usually present an emergency requiring quick action. Due to the urgency, leaders, who are primarily men, are more likely to make decisions without full input from their colleagues, who are primarily women in cabinets. One of the informants from Western Wollo Zone of Amhara regional stated said;

*“In normal situations, decisions are seen from different angles including gender. Be it resource allocation or any other strategic decisions, they require inculcating the concern of all. But, conflicts and COVID-19, have brought a new scenario where things are decided without consulting women, and our concerns during these situations are left behind.”*

#### 5. Informal Networks as Barrier to Women's Political Participations

According to NDI (2020), shocks promote isolation of women from public life and limits women's participation in politics and other aspects of public life.

Male leaders are more likely to take informal networks and decisions when shocks present. It has been found from FGDs and KIIs that conflict and COVID-19 have created an informal network that excludes women who did not take part in the crisis management. This affected Women's political participation mainly in the post crisis period.

#### 6. Overlooking the role of Women as a Barrier to Women's Political Participation

According to the data gathered from FGDs and KIIs, there have been persistent trends of ignoring the contribution of women to pre, during and post-shocks such conflict and COVID-19. One of the informants from opposing political party leader, stated;

*“When there is conflict, men make all the decisions. For instance, I participated in the Gashena Front with other colleagues. If you are a woman, no one will care about you. Despite the fact that conflict primarily affects women, men dominate discussions and choices. Even women in higher-ranking positions have had little impact on conflict-related decisions; they are merely used as symbols. Beyond this, women-based civil society organizations in Ethiopia have very little influence over how conflicts are resolved. Women were psychologically threatened during the pre-war period, while they were physically threatened during the conflict, and there has been no improvement in the post-conflict situation because they continue to face both psychological and physical threats.”*

This is because men have ingrained informal networks, especially during times of crisis. One of the informants from Borena said:

***“The communication channel is private and one-sided. For security reasons, only men actively discuss information with one another; this is handled at the top management level. Due to the nature of the tasks and obligations, women cannot possibly participate in these activities. Most of the time, meetings and other activities, which sometimes happen at all hours, have no set schedule. As a result, both the system and women themselves exclude women from such types of participation.”***

Likewise, during pandemics like COVID-19, there had been domination followed by a disregard for the position of women. The men took advantage of the COVID situation, when the women went back to their homes, the men took over all the decision-making, ignoring the influence of the women.

### **7. Partiality of Security Protection as a Barrier to Women’s Political Participation**

Conflict affects both men and women, even though women are more susceptible to crisis brought on by conflict and need specialized safety and protection

One of the informants from Afar said:

***“Men in the cabinets travel with their security guards during times of crisis, particularly when there is***

***a conflict between armed groups and the government force, or they at least have their own small arms like Shigut. However, female cabinets do not have their own small guns or security personnel. Therefore, this limits our freedom of movement and political engagement, particularly during times of crisis.”***

### **8. Economic Insecurity as a Barrier to Women’s Political Participation**

Conflict and COVID-19 are two common shocks that destabilize and have an impact on economic activity. One of the informants from opposing political parties, said:

***“Our members, particularly those who have been contributing financially and volunteering for our party, have vanished after COVID-19. The majority of our visitors over the previous two years have already left. Their motivation, involvement and contribution have all been impacted. Although COVID 19 had an impact on our entire organization, women's aspect was obvious.”***

### **9. Decreasing Political Interests, a Barrier to Women’s Political Participation:**

The more unstable the world becomes owing to psychological threats; the more women think about survival rather than taking part in politics.

## RECOMMENDATION

### Action needed to be taken:

Based on the findings from the assessment on 'The Impact of COVID-19 and Internal Conflict on Women's Mobility, Safety and Ability to Participate in Political Processes, the following policy recommendations were suggested to ensure women's political participation.

#### Capacity Development:

In order to change the future, building the capacity of female legislators and experts in various fields has a paramount significance, through creating awareness, educating women and sharing experience.

#### Research and Development:

Facts and data are needed to advocate for and influence policy makers to increase women's political participation, particularly amid shocks like conflict and COVID-19.

#### Emphasis to Women's Safety and Security:

Women are less likely to participate in politics when there is lack of adequate security protection, especially during times of unrest and instability. Considering the fact that women are more poned to be attacked and faced different harassments, there should be ways to provide a safe and secure environment.

#### Crisis based Gender mainstreaming Program:

A special gender mainstreaming program is required in response to shocks like conflict and COVID-19 in addition to the programs already in place for the regular course of events.

#### Strengthening Women Networks and Women Based Organizations:

Close ties between women-based groups promote women's political engagement and deepen mitigation mechanisms in enhancing women's agency and their ability to influence conflict resolution and peace building.

#### Inclusive Crisis Management:

A few examples of how to do this include mandating more women in leadership and decision-making positions during crises.

#### Community Awareness:

Investment in raising community awareness mitigates the peace building process.

#### Developing Quota System:

Lack of definite policy, legislation, and rules on the ratio of men to women hinders women's political participation in regular and emergency situations. Implementing practical rules on gender quota at work and in the society is essential to boost women's political participation.

#### Localization of Women's Political engagement:

The study finds that although there are initiatives to reduce gender inequality at the federal level, women's political participation has not yet been localized.

## ABOUT ETHIOPIAN WOMEN LAWYERS ASSOCIATION (EWLA)

Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association was established at the federal level in 1995 by Women lawyers and re-registered as a Local Organization in accordance with the Civil Society Organization. It has been working for more than 25 years to promote women's social, economic, political and legal rights to help women exercise their constitutional and other rights.

The aim of the association is to promote equal participation of women in all sectors and to prevent sexual violence against women and create a safe environment for women through its three programs: Legal Research and Advocacy, Public Education and Capacity Building, and Free Legal Aid service.

The association is headquartered in Addis Ababa and has opened its regional offices in seven regions and one city administration namely Adama, Hawassa, Bahir Dar, Gambella, Asosa, Jigjiiga, Semera regions and city administration of Dire Dawa. In order to make the service accessible to all, the association is working to continue its service in the zones and woredas under its regional and city administration branches and has so far established 55 volunteer committee centers across the country. Besides, it has established a hotline service (7711) which operates in 3 local languages: Amharic, Afan Oromo and Tigrigna.

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