



Members of EWLA & women rights organizations giving a press statement at EWLA's compound, November 30, 2023.

THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Keeping The Wheels From Turning Back On Maternity Leave Rights

In 2023, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education proposed a new directive that sparked widespread concern and distress among female students in the country. The directive stated that if a female student missed more than 15 days of school due to childbirth, she would be prohibited from continuing in her academic year.

In response to this concerning development, the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association (EWLA) swiftly mobilized under its "We Cannot Wait" project. Recognizing the serious implications of this policy on women's rights and well-being, the Association organized a press statement to push back against the proposed directive. It argued that maternity leave is a fundamental right for female students, crucial not only for their health and welfare but also for their educational progress.

Practically, there are many obstacles that hinder girls from accessing education, including financial hardships, child marriage, inadequate menstrual health management, household chores, gender-based violence, abduction and rape, conflict, and trafficking. The Ministry of Education did not adequately consider these barriers to female education when it drafted this new directive that created yet another challenge to girls education. This directive does not take into account the unique challenges faced by girls and women, especially those related to menstruation. Literacy rate for females is already lower than their male counterparts, with 44.4% of females being literate compared to 59.2% of males, according to a 2021 data by UNESCO.

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WE CANNOT WAIT!





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The process of organizing the press statement faced challenges, including the cancellation of a hotel reservation due to a last-minute requirement for formal permission from the Addis Ababa Police Commission. The Ministry of Education also demanded the cancellation of the press statement. Yet EWLA pushed ahead, recognizing the serious implications that this new law would have on women's rights.

The Association collaborated with other women's rights groups, engaged with media outlets for broader coverage, and finalized a joint press statement with inputs from various organizations. Facing venue challenges, it improvised by renting furniture and a tent, and hosting the event at its building.

The press statement, which was shared with key stakeholders, urged the government to reconsider the directive and attracted media attention and supporters. Some opposing groups argued that granting maternity leave might lead to negative outcomes like teenage pregnancies and early marriages.

The press statement underscored the importance of maternity leave for female students and called for the withdrawal and revision of the directive. EWLA's persistent advocacy efforts yielded results as the Ministry of Education decided against implementing

the directive in its original form, influenced by public pressure and the Association's compelling arguments. Subsequent advocacy workshops generated valuable feedback on supporting female students' maternity leave right, resulting in constructive suggestions like make-up classes and online tutorials to ensure educational continuity during leave.

Through EWLA's unwavering commitment to women's rights and gender equality, the draft directive is now on process of being revised to incorporate these crucial inputs. This exemplifies the impact of collective action and the transformative influence organizations like EWLA can have in effecting positive change, particularly in advocating for women's rights and equal opportunities in education.



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