INTRODUCTION

As a young woman in her 20s, I am deeply concerned by the inhuman treatment of women worldwide. I try my best not to be very emotional about the mistreatment that women face, but I live it every day. Because of the dress with which I choose to express myself, I get stopped and harassed. Because of my principle to empower and educate myself before I am married, I get judged and reminded constantly that I should settle down; meanwhile, the same expectation and judgment don't apply to men of the same age. Because of my strong opinions against patriarchy, I am labelled as a man-hater or Westerner-wannabe. My Ethiopian identity is put on trial due to my understanding of womanhood and my take on feminism that is seen as an influence of Western culture. This is the reality for most, if not all, young women in Ethiopia—whether they are from the capital Addis Ababa or live in other parts of the country.

I was raised in Addis Ababa, surrounded by women who were tough, ambitious, dedicated and very much assertive. My mother, aunts, grandmother and great grandmother have always resisted traditional gender roles. These strong women remain my true inspiration when I challenge issues that affect me and other women. The women who raised me are neither Westerner-wannabes nor man-haters; they are just my family, my role models, who simply cannot tolerate any kind of mistreatment that disempowers them. Therefore, speaking up for my rights and fighting against sexism has always been part of my upbringing; it didn't happen overnight just because I read some feminist literature from the West. (Read more on this in an article I wrote previously here [2].)

Violence against women is a global epidemic, present in all corners of the world. Ethiopia is not a special case. The World Health Organization estimates that at least one woman in every three has been battered, assaulted, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime.

The 2013 global and regional findings [3] of violence against women show that 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical/sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence.

In addition, around 140 million girls [4] and women worldwide are currently living with consequences of female genital mutilation (FGM). As an Ethiopian woman, I believe it is my responsibility to raise awareness of violence against women within the context of Ethiopia.

I decided to write this article after I heard about the horrific news of a 16-year-old Ethiopian girl, named Hanna Lalango, who died after being kidnapped and gang-raped in Addis Ababa. On the afternoon of October 31, 2014, Hanna was going back home from school when her attackers kidnapped and gang-raped her. According to her father's interview on radio, they received a phone call on the 11th day after her disappearance. The unfortunate reality is that Hanna Lalango is now just a statistic, and her attackers have yet to be brought to justice. While researching to write this article, I was in constant pain reading about the horrible experiences that my fellow women have to go through.

What happened to Hanna is inhuman and it is the result of a deep-rooted societal problem within Ethiopia. I wrote this article to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on violence against women that
PART ONE: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ETHIOPIA

Violence against women is a fundamental violation of women’s human rights that affects all women worldwide. Violence against women manifests itself in different ways including physically, emotionally, sexually and economically. Domestic violence, sexual violence (including rape) and sexual harassment are the most common forms of violence against women. Other forms of violence against women around the world also include sexual exploitation, acid burning, female genital mutilation, abuse based on perceived sexuality, parental sex selection, economic abuse, and dowry-related violence. (See more on EndVAWnow.org [5])

In Ethiopia, violence against women didn’t start yesterday, or the year before. It has always been there because it is rooted in the male-dominated culture of discrimination against women, which legitimizes the appropriation of women’s objectification. According to the WHO Multi-country study [6], 59% of women in Ethiopia experience sexual abuse by their partners.

Violence against women is very common in Ethiopia, yet it frequently fails to get proper attention and outrage from the public. When sexual attacks, for example, occur on girls and women, the abuse victims are left helpless and humiliated (and sometimes dead, in Hanna’s case) while the perpetrators of the crime often walk free, unpunished. Lack of education and understanding of what constitutes criminal sexual assault is also one reason that rape victims fail to report the crime. Some victims wouldn’t even speak a word to police, thinking that no one would believe them, that the police wouldn’t take them seriously and wouldn’t investigate the rape case. Fear of retribution from the perpetrators and the culture of victim blaming also prevent rape victims from speaking up.

The culture of blaming and stigmatizing victims of rape starts with close family members, followed by the larger community, and is subtly endorsed by the media.

What is even more abhorrent is that men who commit rape continue to get away with it, which gives others the motivation and the reinforcement to commit more rape without fear. The lack of law enforcement that stands for the victims of rape, mishandling of sexual assault trials and lack of coherent evidence collection create loopholes for rapists to walk free and to prey on other victims.

CASES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ETHIOPIA

There are many cases of violence against women in Ethiopia (and in the diaspora). Perhaps due to social media, stories of abuses against women have been brought to the public’s attention more frequently than before, although the perpetrators of the crimes have rarely been prosecuted. But the question remains: is sexual violence against women on the rise? Is it concentrated in urban areas and if so, why? Or is it the social media that amplifies such stories? Whatever the case may be, there are stories we will never forget.

In October 2011 an Ethiopian airlines flight attendant named Aberash Hailay [7] lost her eyesight after her ex-husband, Fisseha, stabbed both her eyes with a sharp knife. In the same year, the horrifying story of Shweya Mulla [8] (who was the nanny of former Libyan Prime Minister Muammar Gaddafi’s grandson) was brutally abused after Gaddafi’s daughter-in-law poured boiled water on her body for allegedly failing to keep a crying child quiet.

Again in 2011, a Toronto-resident Ethiopian immigrant Amin Kassim [9], who fired four bullets into his wife’s head, was found guilty of murdering her because he believed she was having a lesbian affair with a neighbour.

And there was the story of Frehiwot Tadesse [10], a mother of two, who was shot several times by
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her ex-husband in broad daylight in the heart of Addis Ababa.

The cases of acid attacks [11] against women have also shown a disturbing increase since the first case involving Kamilat Mehdi and her ex-boyfriend.

We also have heard horrendous stories of violence against Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East. There are few women whose stories received attention from international media such as this one: Ethiopian migrant women face violence, rape in Saudi Arabia [12].

Less than a year ago, there was a case in which a Sudanese court convicted an Ethiopian woman over gang-rape [13] for her ‘indecent acts’.

In another incident, an Ethiopian maid was raped and murdered [14] and her family was refused blood money settlement.

More disturbing stories:

Ethiopian maid hangs herself to death [15]

Ethiopian women molested [15]

Women such as Alem Dechasa [16] who shouted for help while being dragged down the street in Lebanon [17] before her death but couldn’t get the proper assistance on time from the Ethiopian consulate.

Saron [18], who wrote her story as a raped refugee.

The stories are endless. And no doubt there are more stories out there that are unreported.

What is more saddening is the fact that these stories are forgotten most of the time, after a few days of cries on the Ethiopian cyberspace. Sooner or later, the online talks move on to the usual ‘anti-government vs pro government,’ or ‘Manchester United vs Arsenal’ quarrels. The challenge is how to make people constantly discuss and prioritize topics on violence against women as much as they prioritize political or sports issues.

IS ‘RAPE CULTURE’ REAL IN ETHIOPIA?

How is rape interpreted in the Ethiopian context? As a society, how do we define rape?

Countries such as India, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia have been described as ‘rape cultures’ (See more: Soundararajan, Thenmozhi, ‘India’s Caste Culture is a Rape Culture’; Bates, Laura ‘Sites like Uni Lad only act to support our everyday rape culture’; Mehta, Diana ‘Ottawa student leader blasts “rape culture” on Canadian campuses’; Eher, Reinhard (2011) International Perspectives on the Assessment and Treatment of Sexual Offenders: Theory, Practice and Research).

Rape is a violation of a woman’s dignity and sexual freedom as someone else takes control of her body and hurts her. And it happens every minute worldwide.

Society focuses on educating young girls about safety while boys aren’t taught about rape and why it’s wrong. Society blames the rape victim, why and how she plays role in the process, and justifies the rapist’s action.

But why do we impose a gender double standard?

How many of us know that we are part of rape culture when we encourage male sexual aggression? Do people really notice the consequences when they consider catcalling a compliment, abduction as a sacred tradition, or when they tolerate men who impose their dominance saying, ‘I will make you my bitch’, and treat that as sexy? Perhaps we don’t realize it but we are encouraging rape culture
when we tell a woman how to wear a dress or where she should walk. Rape culture is the norm that insults the victims of rape as trash, that focuses on victim blaming instead of prosecuting the criminal and that legitimates the sexual aggression of a rapist with such phrases as ‘she asked for it’.

Rape culture is very much real in Ethiopia as it is elsewhere. Rape victim blaming or shaming, catcalling, marriage by abduction, objectifying women, encouraging male sexual aggression, and other facets of rape culture have always existed in Ethiopia and continue to disempower girls and women. When I talk about ‘rape culture’, some people might consider it as bashing the Ethiopian culture, but they have to understand that I am not saying our culture, as a whole, is a ‘rape culture’. I am only pointing out a part of our culture that dehumanizes women and needs to be changed.

THE ROLE OF MEN

Rape culture in Ethiopia doesn’t mean that every man is a rapist or that men cannot stop rape. If we agree that rape culture is the root cause of violence, then men can be part of the solution because rape is not just a ‘women’s issue’ and men too have a say in it. Men are and should be capable of more than animalistic instincts.

In fact, the argument that treats men as incapable of controlling their urges and therefore women should be regulated in how to dress and act is problematic. Here is an important read [19] by Nate Pyle that discusses what a father has to tell his son:

‘A lot of people will try and tell you that a woman should watch how she dresses so she doesn’t tempt you to look at her wrongly. Here is what I will tell you. It is a woman’s responsibility to dress herself in the morning. It is your responsibility to look at her like a human being regardless of what she is wearing. You will feel the temptation to blame her for your wandering eyes because of what she is wearing — or not wearing. But don’t. Don’t play the victim. You are not a helpless victim when it comes to your eyes. You have full control over them. Exercise that control. Train them to look her in the eyes. Discipline yourself to see her, not her clothes or her body. The moment you play the victim you fall into the lie that you are simply embodied reaction to external stimuli unable to determine right from wrong, human from flesh.

‘Look right at me. That is a ridiculous lie.

‘You are more than that. And the woman you are looking at is more than her clothes. She is more than her body. There is a lot of talk about how men objectify women, and largely, it is true. Humans objectify the things they love in effort to control them. If you truly love a person, do not reduce them to an object. The moment you objectify another human — woman or man, you give up your humanity.’

This video [20] shows how children watch their parents’ actions. It is a good example for parents to evaluate their actions, behaviours and the languages they choose in front of their young ones.

Young boys, soon to be men, can contribute a lot to tackling the issue of violence against women. The silence and complicity of men is a big part of the problem by itself but there are cases of exception to this rule. For men to be part of this change-making, traditional gender roles and stereotypes have to be questioned. Men are responsible for starting conversations with other male counterparts about what sexism means. Men can play a part by not laughing at sexist jokes, by avoiding demeaning language referring to females and by standing up against misogynistic views.

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY, THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT AND ITS CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

In the wake of rape or domestic violence incidents, what naturally proceeds is the question of where to go and ask for help. This question is very important in addressing the challenges women face in obtaining justice in Ethiopia.

Unfortunately, the answer to this critical question is complicated, politically sensitive and exhausting for violence and rape victims to say the least. The reason is because the 2009 Ethiopian Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP) imposes excessive restrictions on the work of human rights non-
governmental organizations (NGOs) in Ethiopia. (See more here [21]). This law is applied to the organizations registered as Ethiopian charities or societies, Ethiopian resident charities or societies or foreign charities.

According to Amnesty International [22], as a result of the funding restrictions in the law, at least 17 organizations, including some of Ethiopia’s leading human rights organizations, have changed their mandate to no longer work on human rights.

The CSP explicitly forbids ‘Ethiopian Charities or Societies’ – who may work on human rights – from receiving more than ten per cent of their funding from foreign sources. Infringements of the law can lead to heavy fines or terms of imprisonment for NGO staff. In April 2014, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Mr. Maina Kiai, said ‘The enforcement of these provisions has a devastating impact on individuals’ ability to form and operate associations effectively, and has been the subject of serious alarm expressed by several United Nations treaty bodies’.

The impact of the CSP on human rights organizations is not only fear and uncertainty but also loss of institutional capacity. For example, two of the country’s prominent human rights organizations, Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), the only major NGO focusing on women’s rights advocacy at the national level, and the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (HRCO) have been impacted by the CSP greatly. EWLA conducted indispensable work in the field of women and justice, advancing draft legislation to improve protection of women’s rights, providing free legal aid for women and researching and publishing on issues of law and gender. For example, in 2008, EWLA provided free legal aid to 17,357 women. Since the CSP became law, EWLA has cut 70 per cent of its staff and in 2010-2011 it had effectively ceased to function, with the exception of volunteers providing a small amount of free legal aid to women. Before the CSP, the HRCo also carried out high quality monitoring and documentation of violations through twelve offices across the country. Since the law was passed HRCO has closed nine of its offices and has cut at least 75 per cent (more than 40 people) from its staff. Both EWLA and HRCO continued the same functions but in reduced capacity using locally-sourced budgets and local volunteers. (Read more on Ethiopia’s regulatory crackdown on foreign-funded NGOs here [23] and also Amnesty International’s report [22].)

The declining number of NGOs that focus on human rights leaves the Ministry of Women or the Ministry of Children and Ministry of Youth to perform advocacy for gender equality and gender education.

But the question remains: how efficient is one ministry while major CSOs are neither in the picture nor performing to their fullest potential?

Since 2009, UN agencies, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International have criticized the CSP law. However, the Ethiopian government defended its policies regularly. Here [24] is one of the posted messages on its Ministry of Foreign Affairs website:

‘These foreign charities and societies are not allowed to engage in political activities as of right. This is normal practice in most countries, as political activities, by their very nature, are reserved for citizens. It is a sovereign state’s right to limit the influence of foreigners through any financing of political activities. Aside from politics, foreign charities and societies are free to operate and assist in any much-needed development activities and humanitarian needs of the country.’

The Minister for Women, Youth and Children’s Affairs, Zenebu Tadesse, defended the CSP at the 49th session of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). She said it reserved the Government’s right to engage exclusively with ‘endogenous’ charities in the area of gender equality because foreign funding in that field ‘usually did more harm than good’, creating ‘worship’ of foreign dependence and potentially failing to pursue the domestic agenda. She said allegations that the CSO law negatively impacted NGOs from working on women’s rights issues were ‘unfounded’. (Read more here [25].)

One of the challenges I faced in writing this article was that I couldn’t find critical information — information on ongoing projects, their impacts and their coverage — from the website of the Ministry
of Women, Children and Youth Affairs (MOWCYA). The problem with this is that I couldn’t find critical information directly from the office—information on ongoing projects, their impacts and their coverage. With this difficult circumstance, I couldn’t say more on the office’s efficacy and engagement with the citizens of Ethiopia. As a result, I could only find limited numbers of reports [26] and conference speeches of the Ministry published by the EU, UN agencies or the African Union.

Such lack of information and direct access to the ministry limits concerned citizens from getting basic knowledge of where to go and how to reach the responsible government officials on important cases such as #JusticeForHanna.

In addition to the question of the efficacy of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs office, the lack of appropriate response from the criminal justice system leaves victims helpless. The Ethiopian Criminal Code of 2004 covers detailed information on sexual abuse, trafficking, and infanticide (See Criminal Code, 2004, Arts. 596-599, 626-628).

Hanna Lalango was a child according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), which defines a child someone below the age of eighteen years. This brings a huge gap in the law that may give excuses for perpetrators instead of advocating for the voiceless such as children. Getachew Assefa Woldemariam researched extensively on the victimization of children by the justice process. According to his findings, the legal and practical procedures of the justice system in Ethiopia don’t provide proper consultation to a child victim and her family; don’t encourage the child victim to testify without fear and tension. Most of the time, the judiciary grants bail to alleged offenders with a small promise. Getachew points out that there is a need for legal and administrative reforms and for the training of justice personnel in order to fill the gaps in the justice system. (See more on The Predicaments of Child Victims of Crime Seeking Justice in Ethiopia).

PART TWO: #JUSTICEFORHANNA

Who is Hanna? What is #JusticeForHanna? Why was it created?

The name Hanna Lalango was mentioned in the Ethiopian Reporter Amharic edition for the first time on 16 November 2014.

The title reads (its Amharic translation): A taxi passenger, a female student, who was kidnapped and raped lost her life. According to the Amharic newspaper Hanna was a 10th grade student. On the afternoon of 31 October 2014, Hanna was going back home from school when her attackers kidnapped and gang-raped her. According to her father’s interview on radio, they received a phone call on the 11th day after her disappearance. That’s when she was found abandoned. She was then taken to various hospitals in an effort to save her life. But after days of struggling, she was gone.

There are conflicting stories surfacing on social media about who was behind this horrible incident. But what remains constant is that Hanna died as a result of a gang rape.

The local media’s reporting on this case has only been disappointing. When a girl is kidnapped and gang-raped, one would expect the media to dig deeper and to inform the public through investigative reporting that would not only tell the truth but would also play a proactive role in raising awareness on the matter. It is beyond disappointing to see a half page post about Hanna’s case on a news media like the Reporter. That says a lot about their take on rape and violence against women. The media must be at the forefront of shaming rape and standing up for victims. However, besides not achieving that, they are not even accurately reporting about the incident.

SOCIAL MEDIA REACTION

#JusticeForHanna is a social media campaign that was inspired by Hanna’s death. The campaign demands justice for Hanna and opens space for dialogue on gender-based violence. #JusticeForHanna is also a statement that says young Ethiopian women can’t tolerate gender-based violence anymore.

These are the most active social media pages dedicated to #JusticeForHanna:
Violence against women: We must end this scourge
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#JusticeForHanna (Facebook)

#HannaisMySister (Facebook)

THE WAY FORWARD

Today the story of Hanna is happening to another girl elsewhere. Tomorrow the story of Hanna will be one of those rape stories. And soon we will continue our daily routine and get caught up in it until we hear about another heinous story. Some will blame the victims, others will blame the perpetrators but very few will understand the complexity of the problem and that the solution is within us.

In a society where gender equality and women’s empowerment is not a strong focus of political and socioeconomic policies, the cycle will continue. If the government and community leaders don’t make public spaces safe for women and girls, the cycle will continue. If we don’t invest our time to ensure women’s economic autonomy and decision-making powers (whether in the house, in relationships, public space), the cycle will continue. If government and communities don’t commit to raising awareness and educating young people across the country, we will face the same problem again. If government doesn’t allocate funds and resources to strengthen its capacity level so that it addresses gender-based violence, we will be in the same place as last year and the year before. If families and communities don’t stop defending perpetrators and silencing the victims’ voices, the cycle will continue. If schools and teachers don’t allocate time to teaching students and peers what gender-based violence means and what its consequences are, we will be back to square one again.

Every day as we commit to our daily activities, let’s think of those girls who are in need. As part of the solution, let’s remember to talk about gender-based violence at every life corner and let’s break the taboo. Let’s acknowledge that both perpetrators and victims come from within us. Young boys should be educated about respecting young girls. Parents should teach their sons about consent just as much as they teach their daughters about safety.

As a society, as a community, we need to address the root causes of violence against women and not just enforce temporary solutions to its symptoms. The most important thing to do is to raise awareness: educate boys, girls, men and women about gender equality, women’s rights, and gender-based violence. Unless there is a coordinated effort by school systems, the government, civil society, and the general public, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to prevent similar crime cases that endanger the lives of girls and women across the country. Looking at the way gender based violence is handled in Ethiopia at the moment, it doesn’t take a genius to predict that many more Hannas will be victims of perverts, pimps, and rapists who will walk free after committing appalling crimes.

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Categories: Features [30]
In Ethiopia, as in many other countries, violence against women is ingrained in the social fabric. Civil society, governments, and citizens must work together to raise awareness and eradicate sexism and rape culture.