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Girls' educational strategies and visual practice: a gendered case from Tigray, Ethiopia

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Terhas (14) was best in her class and received both one 1st prize for her achievements in grade 7, and one 1st prize in the Girls' Club at her village school (2009).

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*Mama be happy mama be happy
 Mama be happy papa is happy
 I am clever in school and stood first
 All the students clapped for me
 Mama be happy and ululate for me*
 Song by Mahlet (girl aged 9)^[1]

There seems to be a prevailing assumption among many stakeholders in the field of education that cultural factors are decisive in hindering girls' access to, enrolment in and achievements through education. The emphasis in this paper is on the need for extensive empirical data to nuance our understanding as to how education, culture and gender intersect within contemporary processes of change. My argument is that we have to utilise a more dynamic understanding of culture that sees beyond traditional practices like early marriage and gendered work burden at home. In this paper I am concerned with how specific understandings of femaleness influence girls' educational pursuit. By utilising photography as part of the research methodology, I will draw attention to how Tigrayan girls choose to stage their self-presentations in front of my camera. These self-representations are seen as one intake to how rural girls in Asgede Tsimbla wereda (district) in Tigray, Ethiopia negotiate their educational strategies within a culturally informed understanding of femaleness.^[2]

^[1] Taped song 17th September 2008: ማማ ተሓጎሲ, ማማ ተሓጎሲ, / ማማ ተሓጎሲ, ባባ ተሓጎሲ / ትምህርተይ ነፍሠ ቀዳማይ ወጊእ / ኩሎም ተምህሮ እጣቺያምለይ / ማማ ተሓጎሲ ዕሌሌ በሌሌለይ

^[2] This social anthropological research project on women and education in Tigray, Ethiopia, carried out in 2008 and 2009, compile 25 in-depth interviews with women, aged 18-70 conducted in 2008 in two communities, one small market town and one rural area in Asgede Tsimbla wereda (district). 15 experts (men and women) working as teachers/school directors, leaders in the Asgede Tsimbla Wereda Educational Bureau, as well as in the Women's Bureau, in the Women's Association in Tigray (NGO), and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church have been interviewed. Two surveys relating to education and containing both quantitative and qualitative parameters were conducted in both communities : 1) in school, and 2) in households in 2009. The education survey was carried out among randomly selected school classes in 8th grade in both communities and 9th 10th and 11th grade in the market town. Altogether 200 students, both boys and girls, answered questions about reasons for dropout, repetition and their marital status, why they think education is important and their wishes for the future. The household survey focused on women in 170 households in the same two communities; about their and the other household members' educational background, means of subsistence, reasons for being/not being educated and for educating/not educating their children. An extensive material of photographs on boys/men's and girls/women's self-representations are included in the study. A study on Tigrayan women's agency was carried out in 2002 (see Mjaaland 2004). I have known the area since 1993 when I first came there as a photographer.



Akhberet (15) moved from her village to the small market town Endabaguna in Asgede Tsimbla wereda to continue her education after 4th grade. She lived with two female students from the same village in a rented room (2002).



As Elaine Unterhalter (2010) notes in her Situation Analysis prepared for this years UNGEI E4 conference, Ethiopia shows enormous achievements in gender parity concerning both enrolment and attendance in primary education (grade 1-8).[3] While regional differences within Ethiopia are still significant, the capital city Addis Ababa and the Tigray Region are on top of the statistics concerning enrolment and gender parity with numbers over the national average – and in both cases with more girls in primary school than boys.[4] Schools have popped up everywhere, also in remote rural areas in Asgede Tsimbla wereda after the Tigrayan revolutionary liberation struggle (1975-91).[5] While changing political power structures in Ethiopia was of vital importance, the struggle was also directed at social reform, addressing as well women's concern.[6]

Alongside an armed strategy, political awareness-raising and education was seen by Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to be essential for the outcome of the struggle. Thus, political education was not separated from non-political education (cf. Young 1997). The strategy was two-fold: firstly to be able to mobilise the people for the struggle, and secondly, to enable social change in the society. This perspective could be seen as in line with Paulo Freire's (1972 [1970]) thoughts on education as a politically transformative strategy. Around 30% of the fighters in TPLF were women (cf. Hammond 1999). When the struggle was nearing its end there were heated discussions among the women fighters about the path to pursue in their quest for gender equity: to demand to be part of a national defence force, or to go the educational way and develop other skills necessary for the society. It was education that was opted for.[7]

[3] In 1994 a new Education and Training Policy was launched in Ethiopia. The Education Sector Development Program (ESDP I, II, III and number IV is due from 2011), as part of a 20-year program relating to the Millennium Development Goal 2 of achieving universal primary education by the year 2015, followed from 1997 onwards. Abolition of school-fees was implemented from the school year 1995/96 securing free schooling grade 1-10. Above 10th grade the principle of cost-sharing has later been adapted.

[4] NER primary school (1-8) in Tigray 2007/08: male 92.03, female 95.14 (Tigray Region Education Bureau 2008). See also the *Report on Progress in Implementing the World Fit for Children Plan of Action in Ethiopia* (2007).

[5] Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) abolished the feudal system, and as the largest constituency and driving force behind the coalition EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front), overthrew the military Derg regime and seized power in the whole of Ethiopia in 1991. The Derg regime had been chased out of Tigray already in 1989 (cf. Young 1997, see also Aregawi 2009).

[6] This was based on a leftist rhetoric of women as doubly oppressed by class and patriarchal structures. The new society that was envisioned was gender equal and the issues addresses included among other things; heighten marriage age, property rights/access to land, access to education and participation in political processes. In 1993 the *National Policy on Ethiopian Women* was adopted. Another *National Action Plan for Gender Equality* was launched in 2005, and the Women's Affairs Office which had been under the prime ministers office since the downfall of the military regime, became a Ministry of Women's Affairs. In place is a gender sensitive Constitution (1995) as well as a Revised Family Code (2000); achievements that Women's Association of Tigray (WAT), whose roots stretch back to the fighter women's participation during the struggle, take much credit for. Women in political positions in Tigray is around 50% (Tigray Women's Affairs Bureau, 2007).

[7] Personal conversation with the former fighter Roman Gebreselassie, now leader of the Tigray Women's Affairs Bureau, 21st August 2008.

The farmer woman (67) cited below – head of household, twice married and twice divorced, having given birth to 11 children (whereof 3 have died) with her second husband – confirms that education was indeed an issue during the struggle. When I ask her if there had been access to education when she grew up, she says:

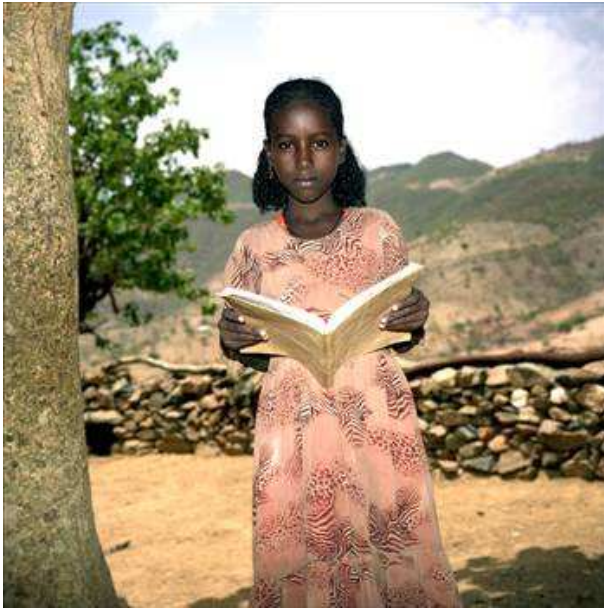
There was none. Education started when the Weyane [TPLF] came; when the Weyane came they told us to come and learn. Why are they bothering us, why don't they leave us alone, we used to say; what is the use of education. The husbands also would tell their wives not to go [to school]; so they didn't go. I – you would do your chores and keep quiet in your work, some [women] however, went there then to learn and today they can write. We however, we don't know the alphabet [*hehuuu*; Geez alphabet] since we were under pressure in our married lives we asked ourselves, "what good is education for us?" Now, I used to tell my daughters, forget it, what is education good for, when they told me, "we want to go to school". Then, when they lit the kerosene lamp to study at night, "sleep", I said if I woke up, I would tell them, "go to bed" (laughs) since I didn't know better, since I didn't know, that's what I said. Today however, those ones who are still here, the youngest ones who are staying [with me] I tell them to study, even when there are problems, I would tell them to study, and do the work [like herding] myself. That is what I'm saying today. Otherwise, before the Weyane came we didn't know. Then when the Weyane came, everybody understood that education opened up for improvement. Yes, there are some now too, there are some, who are suppressed, whose suppression has hindered their minds to open, who, like in the past, doesn't know the outside [of their village]. Otherwise, everybody has become conscious today. This is what the government has done. Yes, today it's fine. Now, well, me too I'm fine, yes (...).^[8]

Meaza (14) is in grade 6). Her sister Tidjan failed her exam and dropped out of school in 4th grade and got married at age 15. Her sisters Hiwot (12) and Megebey (10) is grade 5 and grade 2 respectively. Their little sister (7) is herding cattle with their eldest brother (20), who dropped out in grade 7. Another brother (18) is grade 2 (2009).



The above quote points to the enormous changes that have taken place in access to education, also in the rural areas in Tigray over one generation. It also suggests that parents are in fact changing their attitude towards education hoping for their children to have a less strenuous and potentially better life than they had. With the current ecological degradation and pressure on land in Tigray, it is also obvious that the agricultural sector cannot accommodate all the children growing up in the rural areas. This fact implicitly pushes parents to send both their sons and daughters to school. To be able to understand the contemporary situation however, it is important to see how it is informed by the specific historical circumstance of struggle in Tigray. It is likewise important to see how girls and women negotiate their position in between new possibilities opened up by the state and secured by law in general, and education in particular, *and* cultural norms in a context that is hard pressed both economically and ecologically.

^[8] Taped interview 23rd November 2008.



Hiwot (12) grade 5 above and Megebey (10) grade 2 (2009).



Like girls and women ran away to join the struggle in the late 70's and 80's to avoid early marriage and risked their lives for a new political and social order promising new possibilities also for women, education is now seen as *the* option enabling change and development. And, girls do in fact use education as a means to negotiate early marriage that continues to be culturally significant. This is especially so in the rural areas where girls tend to get married at the age of 15 even with the Revised Family Code^[9] – which sets the legal marriage age for both girls and boys to 18 – in place.

However, when I ask married girls what came first – marriage or not passing exams – many answer the latter. As summed up by an elderly woman (80), herself having married at the age of 13, there is considered to be only two options for the girls: “If she doesn't go to school, she has to marry”^[10]. A local female health extension worker in the rural area answered when she was asked how she avoided early marriage: “I was very clear about wanting education”, she says. “So your parents didn't force you?” I ask. “No, they didn't. You know some of those girls who marry early don't like school, and they don't get good enough results either [to be able to continue].” “So there are no other alternatives [for girls] in this place, than education or early marriage?” I ask. “No there's not”, she says.^[11] One young girl (17), having dropped out of school to marry at the age of 15 (for economical reasons she had explained earlier), says about the fact that so few girls received prizes at the annual celebration in the village school:

“It's their own fault”, she says. “But they [girls] have to do a lot of work at home”, I say. “When I went to school I did a lot of work at home too, but I was best in class of the girls, and 4th or 5th of all of them. When I had finished work at home I studied. My mother asked me to leave it since she thought I used too much kerosene for the lamp in the evening. My [younger] sister just does her work tasks; then she sleeps. It's possible to do both if you are determined”; she says. (...) I will start a shop. Even I'm thinking of going back to school. It's possible if we are in town, and if I get somebody to look after the child when I'm at school.”^[12]

One week later she shows me her photo album. In two of the photographs she is sitting outside in the field smiling with her schoolbooks spread all around her on the ground.^[13]

^[9] A Federal Revised Family Code came into force in 2000. In 1998 Tigray Region effectuated its own Family Code, which served as a model for the federal code; the Tigray Region Family Code was revised in 2007.

^[10] Field notes 27th May 2009.

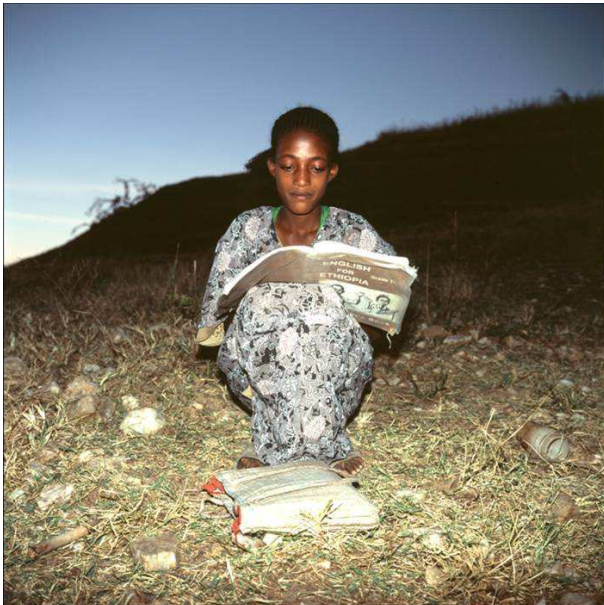
^[11] Field notes 25th November 2008.

^[12] Field notes 14th June 2009.

^[13] Field notes 21st June 2009.



Lettaselassie (15) grade 3. While her oldest brother is in university, one older and one younger brother (12) are not in school. Two older sisters are married, one of them dropped out after grade 2, one has no education (2008).



While the pressure on girls to marry at an early age is often stronger in the rural areas than in towns, boys are also dropping out at much the same rate – but for different reasons. The director at one primary school in the area emphasises that economical circumstances are the number one reason for both girls and boys dropout. For the boys this often amounts to partaking in herding activities and the panning of gold. And, even though boys are exempt from many of the work tasks that girls are tending to at home, it does not follow that they do more homework. There is also a new tendency in this area of Tigray that if girls are married early, and since they most often continue to stay in their parental home till they are 18 – they can in fact be allowed to continue school. Further, as with the young married girl above, dropping out of school is commonly understood as a temporary arrangement adjusting to specific circumstances of living a life in this particular context. It might therefore be more productive to see the pressured economic situation as continuing to make early marriage a more *viable* alternative for the girls, since employment possibilities are uncertain for both boys and girls in this area. The point is that it is important to see how economical and other contemporary circumstances reinforce cultural norms, rather than assuming ‘culture’ as a separate (and somehow stable) factor that hinders girls’ education *per se*.

It might also seem from the quotes above that girls’ own determination does play a role in their educational pursuit. As Emebet Mulugeta notes in her work on girl’s education in Ethiopia: “Her [the girl’s] aspiration and faith determines how much work she puts into her education. The more a girl aspire the more she works hard, and the more chance she will have to succeed” (Emebet 2004:94). In this perspective the extent to which a girl is able to take on education as an individualistic project might seem to make a difference. Whereas average dropout, repetition and success rates in Tigray are quite similar for boys and girls in primary education, the most disturbing numbers in the statistics are the percentage of students passing the 10th grade exam. On an average in Tigray Region 24,5% of the girls (33,5% boys) passed in 2008, in Asgede Tsimbla wereda 13,2% of the girls (27,8% boys) passed the same year.^[14] However, if we are to look for answers beyond economical reasons, early marriage or the gendered work burden at home, it might be relevant – in this particular context informed by a revolutionary liberation struggle where women took active part – to incorporate more subtle cultural perceptions of what being a respectable girl, or woman, is.

Seeing the female fighters’ contribution during the revolution as an innovative leap, as acquiring new knowledges as women, defining new premises for being a woman, they challenged the cultural category ‘woman’ that emphasise motherhood and female modesty. By doing so the women fighters risked being classified as “men” (cf. Mjaaland 2004). According to Bilen Gisaw (2002), forthrightness in the Ethiopian context is commonly viewed as unfeminine.

^[14] Statistics provided by Tigray Region Education Bureau (2007).

Likewise, Bilen asserts that the idea of women's submissiveness seems to be so embedded in the Ethiopian society that energy and creativity have become synonymous with masculinity in spite of the important contributions made by women (Bilen 2002:36). No wonder then that the former fighter women are downplaying their fighter identity in their present self-presentations. What is likewise significant in the contemporary situation is that girls, who are considered "too" active, are seen either as 'boys', or as girls with low morals. Both girls and boys are considered "hot" at the age of 15, but if girls are left roaming on their own, they are thought to be sexually active outside their parents' control. If girls lose their virginity they destroy the possibility for being married in a traditional manner. Like an old woman (70), herself having no education said, when asked about the importance of education:

It's not good. How can it be good? Can't you see those girls who used to be nice are hoying in the night? The number of them roaming around has increased, there are a lot of diseases, there's a lot of Aids; you can see people are dying. It's obvious! Well, education, education is good, but you can see how [girls] go astray. It's in every place, it's not only here; you can see even young girls being allowed to roam around. You can see it for yourself, where is it [education] then (...)?^[15]

Nichi (13), grade 6. While a younger brother and sister are too young for school yet and herd the household's cattle, all her other sisters and brothers are in school. One sister is admitted to university and one wants to continue to nursing school after 10th grade. One younger sister (11) is grade 5, one brother (17) is grade 3, and one brother (15) is grade 7 (2009).



While pass rates are low for both girls and boys in 10th grade in the Tigrayan context, trying to understand why relatively more girls do not pass, a way forward might be to see girls' and women's agency in relation to culturally sanctioned femaleness. When women fighters were classified as 'men', and especially school girls who leave home to continue their education elsewhere risk being classified as boys, or as sexually promiscuous and with low morals, girls and women's educational pursuit would involve negotiating the boundaries of a socially sanctioned gender identity. Girls' educational strategies in this perspective is dependent on the extent to which she risks challenging cultural perceptions of femaleness by being active and speaking up in class; in short, by being *visible* (or audible) as a clever student.

It is in this context that the rural girls' choice of being photographed with their schoolbooks is seen as significant.^[16] In my earlier work (Mjaaland 2006, 2009) I have argued that the photograph, because of the realistic representation involved, can be used as a discursive strategy to form and reaffirm identity. Marianne Hirsch (1997) asserts that this self-defining process is possible because the photographic image, "disguises the profound incongruities and disjunctions on which identity is necessarily based" (ibid.:101). Hence the photograph can be seen as a potential medium for the constitution of an ideal self-image; a 'technology of the self' (Foucault 1988).

^[15] Taped interview 2nd December 2008.

^[16] I have not encountered this phenomenon when it comes to boys their same age.



Kichen (14), grade 8 is the youngest of 8 sisters and brothers. Her oldest two brothers have grade 3 and grade 2, while her oldest sister has no education. One sister (31) is a teacher, one sister (23) is grade 9, two brothers (20) and (18) are grade 6 and grade 3 respectively. Kichen's wish is to continue her education after grade 8 in town (2008).

As a self imagining strategy then, being photographed with ones school books, these Tigrayan girls make their educational pursuit visible by constituting themselves as students. In doing so, they do not explicitly confront cultural norm. Rather, their visual strategy could be seen as negotiating their educational agency within the frames of a culturally sanctioned femaleness that requires modesty. Girls' educational pursuit might still be seen as enabling change though; not only because of the knowledge gained in school, but because practices pertaining to being a girl – and a woman – in the Tigrayan context, increasingly is subject to dislocations in space (girls' mobility) and time (marriage age) *by education*.

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