Sexual violence with special emphasis on sexual aggression in Oromia Regional State in Ethiopia (by Dr. Baro Keno)

Love and Honour for our living and fallen heroes who resisted any barbarian act against Oromo nation

Addee Asli Oromo: The first woman in the history of Ethiopian Empire that sentenced to death because of her political vision about Oromo people but released after 18 years in prison as a result of international communities campaign.

Addee Urjii Dhaabaa: Is one out of many Oromo Women that survived sexual aggression of Ethiopian government military force, police and security agents.
Thank you Mr, Chairman

Your excellences member of the European parliament, Dear participants, Ladies and Gentlemen, my most heartfelt thanks are extended to the Organising Committee of this seminar. I am particularly grateful to my informants Asli Oromo, Urji Dhaabaa, Ilfinesh Qano and Dinkinesh Dhereessaa whom I am able to speak to about the agony they endured and who also morally supported of the Oromo women survivors of sexual violence who able to speak to them while their stay in Ethiopian Prison.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ethiopia is the tenth largest country in Africa and it is the second most populated country in Africa with projected population of 100 million by 2020. It has a number of nations/ nationalities with distinct culture. Ethiopia consists of peoples speaking more than 80 different languages (CSA, 2006)\(^1\). Currently, Ethiopia is classified into nine regional states. Oromia is the largest regional state in land mass and population. Ecologically and agriculturally Oromia region is the richest region in the Horn of Africa. Oromos are accounted for more than 45% of the population of the Ethiopian empire. The population size of the Oromo people and their resources makes Oromia the heart of Ethiopia. Failure

and progress in Oromia regional state is grossly contribute to the failure and progress to Ethiopia.

Oromo people are egalitarian society. Historically their democratic system of government known as “Gadaa” governed the social, economic political affairs of the Oromo people. Under Gadaa, Oromo women developed their own unique institution known as “Siiqee”. Oromo women used Siiqee institution to defend their rights, promote their interests and challenge male domination. After the Oromo people are colonized in 1880s all Oromo institutions are either totally banned or incapacitated. Since then the Oromo people are denied the right to determine on their social, economic, political and cultural affairs. For example, banning or incapacitating Siiqee hindered the Oromo women defending their rights. The colonial power not only banned and incapacitated Oromo institutions but also introduced and/or widened gender hierarchy and discriminatory social practices. This conditioned Oromo women to bear double burdens (i.e. colonial and male domination) and exposed them to sexual violence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The definition and the scope of sexual violence is a major problem in communications as it can be defined either narrowly or broadly. Here are four selected exemplary definitions of the term for the purpose of this presentation. The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (UN, DEVAW, 1993)\(^2\), defines violence against women as: ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

The second definition of violence which is worthy to consider is one that is found in the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, better known as the Maputo Protocol, which was adopted by the African Union in 2003 in Maputo, Mozambique and entered into force in 2005 (AU, Maputo Protocol, 2003)\(^3\). As per this protocol, violence against women means: “all acts perpetrated against women which cause or could cause them physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm, including the threat to take such acts; or to undertake the imposition of arbitrary restrictions on or deprivation of fundamental freedoms in private or public life in peace time and during situations of armed conflicts or of war” (AU, Maputo Protocol, 2003: article 1.b. paragraph. 8)

The third one is expertise definition of DeGue and DiLillo (2005)\(^4\). They classified these unwanted sexual behaviours into four categories: sexual offense, sexual coercion, sexual assault, and sexual aggression. According to their definition sexual aggression is referred to as perpetrating unwanted sexual intercourse through the use of physical force (DeGue & DiLillo, 2005).

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\(^1\) UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women General Assembly Resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993


The fourth one is the Security Council resolutions (1325, 1820, 1888, and 1960) that fundamentally changed the concept of considering sexual violence not as a second class crime but as a tactic of war.

In 2008, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1820 affirmed that sexual violence can constitute a war crime, a crime against humanity. In several ongoing conflicts in Africa, notably those in DRC, Darfur, and Ethiopia's Oromia and Ogaden region, sexual violence has reportedly been used by one or more conflict parties as a tool of war.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite a wide spectrum of sexual violence, there is strong limitation to get enough information in Oromia, Ethiopia. This because of the fear of social exclusion or fear of being marginalized by society, which will bring serious consequences. Occasionally survivors are silent because they felt they would never achieve any redress. Indeed, no individual perpetrators such as soldier or security officer appears to have been, or is ever likely to be, held to account. In World Health Organizations (WHO) multi-country study on domestic violence and women’s health conducted in ten countries including Ethiopia\(^5\), indicated in rural Ethiopia, nearly half of the women had tolerated and didn’t talk the incident to anybody. Very few (6\%) had fought back to defend themselves, and other 30\% had left home on one or more occasions to escape from violent husbands/partners. In addition, the WHO study confirmed that between 19\% and 51\% of victims had ever left home for at least one night and between 8\% and 21\% reported leaving 2–5 times\(^6\).

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The practices of sexual aggression or perpetrating unwanted sexual intercourse through the use of physical force in Oromia, Ethiopia is mainly politically motivated rape to destabilize the Oromo social system, ill-treatment or torture, as a reward for soldiers, for extracting of information and social humiliation.

**Torture or ill-treatment**

Torture and ill-treatment have been used by Ethiopia's police, military, and other members of the security forces to punish a spectrum of perceived dissenters, including university students, members of the political opposition, and alleged supporters of insurgent groups. Human Rights advocates have documented incidents of torture and ill-treatment by the Ethiopian security forces in a range of settings. Gang rape against women is one of the frequent patterns of abuse by the security agents, soldiers and police officers of the federal and state governments involving commanding officers. In several cases information from rape survivors reveals the involvement of military commanders.

**Rape in the area of insurgent zones**

Rape committed during war is often intended to terrorize the population, break up families, destroy communities, and, in some instances to change the ethnic make-up of the next

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\(^5\) WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women

\(^6\) WHO Multi-country Study on Women’s Health and Domestic Violence against Women summary report 005
generation. It is rumoured that the Ethiopian government security forces use rape to deliberately infect women with HIV or render women from the targeted community incapable of bearing children. In rural areas where OLF armed forces are operating after any combat unlawful killings, gang rape, torture, beating, and abuse and mistreatment of the nearby villagers by security forces is quite common. The soldiers have collected young Oromo girls and women into their camps or base and gang raped them in front of their relatives, fathers, brothers, and husbands. This is done to humiliate and demoralize the women and the Oromo people.

**Pre-trial rape or in detention centres, Military camps and unofficial prisons**

Amnesty International (AI) reported in almost all its annual reports on Ethiopia’s human rights status reveals that women’s rape is an act of torture used as a form of coercion or punishment. Rape also occurs as a result of security services exploiting situations where women are held arbitrarily, incommunicado and sometimes in unofficial places of detention – in all places where women are beyond the protection of the law and at heightened vulnerability to sexual violence. For example, in its October, 2014 report described rape including gang rape is one of the most frequently reported methods of torture.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To be a specific I will mention the experience of few out of the many women reported their experiences and observations.

**Women reporting rape against themselves and others:**

Ladies and Gentlemen, I communicated with one of the victim of sexual aggression committed to her by members of Ethiopian defence force. Aaddee Urjii Dhaabaa.

**Urjii** is currently residing in Colorado, USA. Since 1993 until 2005 she was consistently arrested, detained without Court warranty. On our personal communication she reported during her detention in High School of Dire Dawa, Hurso, Mana Iyasuu of Gara Mul’ata and other detaining centres she said: ‘I was raped at every place of detentions now and then by six to ten armed forces every day.

The barbarity of Ethiopian troops was beyond imagination they repeatedly gang-raped her every night until she could no longer walk. She told they inserted broken beer bottle in to her genital body. They were burning a candle on her vagina. Urji told she was bleeding following the rape. Making her long story short, she subsequently developed a fistula and has urinary incontinence currently using diapers for her daily life. A woman named Haadha Oromo who currently residing in Canada faced the same problem like that of Urji because of her sympathetic expression for Urji.

Oromia Support Group (OSG), 2012 reported about some Oromo women victims of sexual aggressions. For instance:-

**Biftu**: she was detained in Dire Dawa police station, together with her sister-in-law, just after the May 2005 elections. She was raped by five policemen every night for 20 days. Her sister-in-law was also raped. She was told ‘We will do this every day until you bring your brother.’ She is now infertile because of a gynaecological infection.
**Amina**: estimated to be only 11 or 12 when, in 1993, soldiers took away her parents and three siblings from their home in Masala, near Chiro in West Hararge. Two soldiers took her into the forest and raped her. She was abandoned there and found by strangers from a nearby village next day.

**Kadija**: was only about 14 years old when three soldiers took away her mother in Kemise, Wollo, in 1991. Another soldier remained behind, threatened her with a pistol and raped her in her house.

**Abiba Ali** Was born in Wachile, Arero, Borana Region and she was a housewife and street vendor (clothes, matches, sugar, small items). Her husband was a supporter of the OLF but not a member. He was arrested in 2004 and taken to Harero and then disappeared. She has looked for him 'in every jail'.

Seven days after her arrest, eight uniformed soldiers came to her house demanding to see OLF documents. They took her to the bush with her one year old twin boys. From 8.00 p.m. to 12.00 midnight, the eight soldiers raped her in front of her sons and left her there. She was unable to walk and was found by neighbours 9.00 a.m. next morning. Since that time she has frequency of urination - about every 10 minutes. (OSG Press release nr.46, 2010)

**Reports extracted from AI October 2014:**

AI report 28 Oct 2014 reported about a woman who was released from prison. Subsequently arrested again and spent nearly three months detained without charge in Dalo Mana, in Bale Zone. She was subjected to torture, including rape, in an attempt to force her to reveal her husband’s whereabouts. At the end of this period, she told AI, she signed a condition of release that she would report her husband’s whereabouts within one month or she would be shot. She fled the country after release. In the same report AI mentioned that it interviewed over 15 people who reported one or more incidents of rape. Interviewees also reported to AI incidents of rape taking place in people’s homes, and in detention centres and perpetrated by the members of the military or police forces and by the members of the security services who came to threaten or intimidate them, search for evidence or demand information. Rape is used as a form of torture against the victim to threaten them or their relatives, as punishment for the alleged activities of her relatives or to coerce her into giving information. In a number of these cases, women were raped by two or more perpetrators and it occurred on repeated occasions. Several of them have reported that they had had children as a result of rape and two women who were visibly pregnant during interviews told Amnesty International their pregnancies resulted from rape by security services in detention or in their homes:

One woman arbitrarily detained without charge for nine months in a military camp in Shinile told Amnesty International: “During the interrogation, I was thoroughly beaten. I cried for help saying that I was not guilty and should not be killed. One night three men came to my cell and said that I was being taken for interrogating but they just took me to a room and all raped me. After that, they just threw me back into the cell. I was not the only one – they would do the same to the other women there.”
“I was raped by three men – one after the other. I remember them very clearly and can identify them. Rape happened several times over the nine months. This was not unique to me; the other women in the cell had the same experience. There were so many soldiers in the camp and they were all taking advantage of the situation. They had no shame.”

Women reported incidents of rape against others:

Asli Oromo:

Asli was in prison for more than 18 years (from 1992 to 2010). After 13 years in prison, Ethiopian government gave her death penalty. She was the first Oromo woman or the first woman in Ethiopian Empire to be sentenced to death penalty for her political and national vision. She was released with the influence of international community and fled the country and currently residing in Texas, USA. From my communication it is completely difficult to provide the information I received about her sufferings and the conciliation she did to her fellow Oromos with this little time and words. She was detained in Dire Dawa, Hurso, Sarkam, Zuway and Qaliti. For most part she was kept in confined solitary room or toilets. She was interrogated and tortured by higher military and police Officials such as General Samora, Hasan Shifaa and Military judge Liul. She was severely tortured with all miserable torture systems reported.

She is now infertile because of these sever torture mainly poking on her abdomen with barrel. She witnessed that in her stay in Hurso and Qaliti many Oromo women told her that before their arrival to the place they were gang raped. An Oromo women whom she did not want to give her name are currently residing in USA is infected by HIV as a result of gang rape.

Ilfnesh Qannoo

Ilfnesh is a beloved professional singer of popular songs. She has been detained several times by EPRDF regime. She is currently residing in Bergen, Norway. In our communication she witnessed the case of Mrs Aberash Dabala.

Mrs. Aberash Dabala was born and lived in Chancho town about 40kms north of Finfinnee until her death on 14 December 1993 at the age of 22. Before her death she was in detention centre and raped by military officers and she was pregnant from this rape by the time of her death.

Dinkinesh Dhereessaa:

Currently residing in Washington D.C USA who was a long time prisoner in Karchale and known to many human rights advocators in which the court ruling was reversed by officials of the government told me that in prison she met some Oromo women who shared the misery they faced in Hurso sometimes before by being raped every night by the members of government armed force as a punishment.

Sexual aggressions in Refugee camps
Ethiopia has bordering neighbours: Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya and Eritrea. Thousands of Oromos have subsequently fled from Oromia, Ethiopia, to these neighbouring countries either to escape the economic hardship that is the result of government discrimination and marginalization or following threats to their lives or their families for their political, media, or civil society work. Thus, this people without their intention are forced to flee their beloved Oromia to save their lives by leaving their families and possessions. As a result of lobbying and intergovernmental relation of Ethiopia’s government with neighbouring countries, in countries of asylum, the Oromo are faced with similar prejudices and discrimination in all refugee camps by security agents of Ethiopian government and/or hosting country.

For instance on 16 February 1997 the Kenyan Human Rights Commission released a report, titled “The Forgotten People”: Human Rights Violations in Moyle and Marsabit Districts, which includes accounts and testimonies of detention, torture, murder, disappearance and rape by Kenyan police on Oromo in Kenya.

**Sexual aggression in human trafficking**

An anonymous woman revealed that she became the victim of sex slavery after she attempted to find work as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. Alem Dechasa committed suicide in April 2012 in Lebanon, where she apparently sexually abused.

**Infection by HIV/AIDS Virus**

In Ethiopia, women account for a larger share of those directly affected by HIV/AIDS. In 2006, the national HIV prevalence was estimated to have been 3% among males and 4% among females. In the same year, 55% of the estimated 1.32 million People Living with HIV/AIDS were women. They accounted for 54.5% of AIDS related deaths and 53.2% of new infections.

The ‘Single Point HIV Prevalence Estimate issued by MOH and HAPCO(2007) vividly shows the gender dimension of HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia in relation to prevalence rate of the virus, the number of HIV positive, new infections with the virus and annual HIV deaths. The 2008, 2009 and 2010 estimates also show that the gap in HIV prevalence rate, rate of new infections with the virus and HIV death between men and women would continue. What these estimates suggest is that HIV/AIDS has become more and more a disease of the women in Ethiopia as in most countries in the Sub-Saharan region (UNFPA). War and instability are major contributing factors in the spread of the HIV/AIDS in Africa, and most military personnel are known to be HIV positive (Harker, 2001).

Benga F. Dugassa (2009) analysing HIV/AIDS from the framework of human rights revealed that social, economic, political marginalization of women are social ills, which

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13 Women’s Rights and Women’s Health During HIV/AIDS Epidemics: The Experience of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa Begna F. Dugassa
create conditions that can exacerbate biological process to the disease. On his research on Oromo women he concluded that the HIV/AIDS epidemic disproportionately affects more women than men. The fact is that, as with many other diseases, HIV/AIDS has its own social pathways. The higher number of HIV/AIDS patients among women reflects their subordination, illiteracy, and poverty level. Whether or not the resources of the country are vast or limited, they should be fairly distributed. Women should be empowered and have equal say in the social, economic, and political affairs of the country.

Impact on Victims and Communities:

Survivors of sexual violence often suffer from short-term and long-term consequences with regard to their health, psychological well-being, and social integration. In addition to physical injuries, potential health consequences include:

- Sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS), miscarriages, forced pregnancy, and traumatic fistula—debilitating tears in the tissue of the vagina, bladder, and rectum.\(^\text{14}\)
- Access to treatment and follow-up care is insufficient, location is limited, and victims were intimidated by military/security forces.
- Psychologically depressed
- Socially isolated.\(^\text{15}\)

Ladies and Gentlemen,
The legal provisions regarding gender based violence are specified in the gender based violence section.

Legal Framework:

The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia ratified in 1995, made all the international conventions part of the domestic law, requires the interpretation of the human rights provisions of the Constitution to be in conformity with international conventions. The Constitution under Article 25 provides for the right to equality before the law without discrimination and under Article 35 proclaims the equal rights of women, including in marriage, and the right to be free from harmful traditional practices. Moreover, Ethiopia is a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which in Article 16 requires states parties to take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage.

Articles 558 and 599 of the 1957 Ethiopian Penal Code allowing abductors and rapists to escape punishment through marriage contravene both the Constitution of Ethiopia and the international conventions to which Ethiopia is a party.

Article 35 of the FDRE constitution, though never specific about GBV, outlaws any custom and tradition that results in mental or bodily harm to women. Under the same article, the


\(^{15}\) See, for example, LaShawn R. Jefferson, “In War as in Peace: Sexual Violence and Women’s Status,” in HRW, World Report 2004; MSF March 2009; and others
state also assume obligation to enforce the right of women to eliminate the influences of harmful customs.

There are also basic supportive legal grounds conducive for combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic and other related infectious diseases, among which, the following are the major ones. Article 34 (4) and article 35 (9) of the Constitution provide the right to health care and the right to protection from harmful customs and practices. Moreover, Article 35 (7) of the Constitution provides equal rights for women with regard to inheritance and property rights. On the other hand, article 514 of the Penal Code makes any deliberate or negligent act to transmit any kind of disease to a person punishable by law.

However, Ethiopian government always failed to comply with its constitution and covenants which it decorated on paper for the purpose of foreign aid. While arresting and intimidating Oromo women and other nationals.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Sexual violence has serious consequences for women's physical and mental health. It affects their reproductive health i.e. unwanted pregnancy, increased HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases as well as complications linked to pregnancy and post-maternal. It hinders their self-steam cause depression or loss of self-confidence. It also causes injuries disability and even death.

Sexual violence is a violation of human right to liberty and freedom from fear, and torture. Human rights violation affects the physical and social wellbeing and it is now recognized as a priority public health issue. Sexual coercion exists along a continuum from forcible rape to nonphysical forms of pressure that compel girls and women to engage in sex against their will.

Culturally limited access to family planning services, high fertility, low reproductive health and emergency obstetric services, and poor nutritional status and infections all contributed to elevate maternal mortality. Although changing international and national laws are major steps towards finding lasting remedies and ending sexual violence are important, they cannot be successful without a fundamental change in the Ethiopian human rights records and in the attitudes of people towards the sexual abuse of women. On its turn this cannot be achieved until the Ethiopian government abides its own constitution and implement the principles set in ethno/national federalism and resolve the deep rooted political conflicts. Hence I recommend:

1. Regarding the social, economic, political and cultural rights of the Oromo people is essential to find the lasting remedy to sexual violence in Oromia.
2. If the political/cultural rights of Oromo people are respected, Oromo woman would freely re-institutionalize Siiqee. At the same time, the Oromo people would develop their indigenous democratic governance Gadaa and allow the voice of women to be heard. This will reduce gender hierarchy and delegitimize harmful cultural practices.

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17 Penal Code of the Empire of Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 158 of 1957, Negarit Gazeta
3. Genital mutilation and gender hierarchy are introduced and/or widened following the colonial cultural impositions. If the cultural rights of Oromo people are respected they will be in a better position to critically evaluate the harmful practices imposed upon them and change. For example, to enhance people’s knowledge about human rights i.e. sexual violence, it is necessary to develop free media. Through free media i.e. radio, newspaper, TV and social media we can effectively educate regard for human rights and raise awareness the impacts of sexual violence.

4. If economic rights of the Oromo people are respected they will more effectively use their resources in raising awareness about sexual violence, support the victim and enhance recovery and rehabilitation in Oromia and in all neighbouring countries.

5. We need to encourage and assist Oromo women organisation in Oromia and Diaspora to make a fruitful contribution in societal change at home and abolish all forms of discrimination in Ethiopia in general and Oromia in particular.

6. Exert a diplomatic pressure on Ethiopian government to end impunity for perpetrators of sexual violence and seek justice for victims;

7. Protecting and empowering civilians who face sexual violence in conflict areas, in particular women and girls who are targeted disproportionately;

8. Strengthening coordination and ensuring a more coherent response from the UN system on its member states;

9. Increasing recognition of rape as a tactic of war as a crime against humanity; and;

10. Finally the ultimate remedy for politically motivated sexual aggression is to exert a pressure on Ethiopian government to solve the deep rooted political conflict of the empire by respecting the right of people to self-determination that paves way to build a broad based peace through the initiative and ownership of the people themselves.

(M.L.King: True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice).

Thank you,