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Empowering the Future: Women's Political Leadership in Ethiopia – Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract

This study examines the historical trajectory, current status, and future prospects of women's participation in Ethiopia's political leadership. Drawing on historical analysis, parliamentary data, secondary sources, and key-informant interviews, the paper traces women's involvement from traditional highland narratives through the Imperial (1930–1974) and Derg (1974–1991) regimes to the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia under the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, 1991–2018).

Despite a rich tradition of influential female figures most prominently Empress Taytu Betul and Empress Zewditu women's formal political participation remained severely limited under successive patriarchal systems. The post-1991 period marked a significant shift. The 1995 Constitution, the National Policy on Women (1993), and affirmative-action measures produced a steady rise in descriptive representation: women's seats in the House of Peoples' Representatives increased from 2.01 per cent in 1995 to 38.8 per cent in 2015, while representation in the House of Federation rose to 32.7 per cent. Executive representation, however, lagged at approximately 13.3 per cent of ministerial and ministerial-rank positions in 2017, with women frequently confined to portfolios aligned with traditional gender roles.

The study argues that numerical gains, while commendable, have not translated into commensurate substantive representation. Strong party discipline, a persistent patriarchal political culture, and limited agenda-setting power continue to constrain women parliamentarians. The analysis is necessarily shaped by the available documentary record, which privileges highland and Solomonic traditions; women's leadership in southern Ethiopia remains under-documented in mainstream sources and constitutes an acknowledged limitation. Looking forward, the paper outlines concrete pathways capacity-building, gender-neutral appointments, party reform and continuous gender mainstreaming required converting descriptive presence into genuine political influence and thereby empowering the future of women's leadership in Ethiopia.

Keywords: Women's political leadership, Ethiopia, gender representation, substantive representation, affirmative action, patriarchal culture

Introduction

Across the world, women have achieved notable gains in political participation compared with earlier eras dominated by patriarchal norms. Although legislative and executive offices remain male-dominated in most countries, recent trends are encouraging [1]. Ethiopian women share this broader trajectory. For centuries they experienced systematic discrimination rooted in cultural practices that privileged men in social, economic, and political domains. Ethiopia's unique status as a never colonised African state has often been celebrated as a symbol of freedom, yet its political institutions long remained closed to women.

Ethiopia has participated actively in international gender-equality frameworks. As a member of the former League of Nations and the United Nations, it joined the Fourth World Conference on Women and endorsed the Beijing Platform for Action. It is a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution incorporates these instruments into domestic law and affirms that constitutional principles shall be interpreted in light of them. Ethiopia has also subscribed to the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals and has issued successive national action plans for gender equality [2].

Despite these formal commitments, Ethiopian women have historically been marginalized from political leadership. At the same

time, individual women have played decisive roles in state-building, military defense, and social mobilization roles that remain incompletely recognized in both popular memory and scholarly literature [3]. This study therefore seeks to map the long arc of women's political leadership in Ethiopia, assess the quality of contemporary representation, and identify the structural and cultural reforms necessary to empower future generations of women leaders.

Theoretical Framework

Political analysis draws on competing theoretical traditions. Realist approaches emphasize a single dominant actor typically the state or a patriarchal elite while pluralist theory highlights the multiplicity of actors and interests that shape political outcomes. Pluralists expand the agenda of politics beyond "high politics" (war and security) to include "low politics" such as economic welfare, social policy, and gender equity [4]. From a pluralist standpoint, women, as half of the citizenry, must be able to organize, articulate their interests, and exercise influence within political institutions.

For much of Ethiopian history, however, a patriarchal political culture has functioned as the dominant actor, monopolizing legislative, executive, judicial, and party offices. Socially constructed gender hierarchies have reserved formal politics as a male domain. Yet democratic legitimacy and effective governance require the inclusion of women's experiences and perspectives. Both descriptive representation (the numerical presence of women) and substantive representation (the capacity of women office-holders to advance gender-equitable policies) are therefore indispensable to national development.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design. Qualitative inquiry prioritizes the interpretive analysis of meanings, behaviors, and institutional practices [5]. Data sources comprise secondary literature (historical chronicles, constitutional texts, parliamentary records, and peer-reviewed studies) and primary material generated through key-informant interviews with current and former parliamentarians, executive officials, and civil-society actors.

Discourse analysis was applied to secondary sources in order to trace shifts in the framing of women's political roles across regimes. Interview data were analyzed thematically, with particular attention to participants' perceptions of numerical versus substantive representation and to the constraints imposed by party discipline and patriarchal norms.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures taken to protect confidentiality. Verbal informed consent was obtained; names and identifying details have been anonymised. No formal institutional ethics-review board was required under the university guidelines applicable at the time of data collection for this category of elite-interview research; nevertheless, standard ethical safeguards for research involving politically sensitive topics were applied.

Two limitations warrant explicit acknowledgement. First, the available documentary record is heavily weighted toward highland and Solomonic traditions; women's leadership in southern Ethiopia and among non-highland ethnic groups remains under-represented in the sources consulted. Second, the primary quantitative data end in 2015–2017, coinciding with the final years of EPRDF rule. Post-2018 political realignments lie largely outside the empirical scope of the original fieldwork, although they are noted where relevant to future prospects.

Women and Ethiopian Political Leadership before 1991

Women constitute more than half of Ethiopia's population, yet for centuries they were systematically under-represented in formal political decision-making. The patriarchal political culture and associated socialization processes reserved public authority for men. Nevertheless, a number of individual women exercised significant political and military influence. Their contributions, however, have often been rendered invisible in mainstream historiography.

Traditional Narratives and Documented Historical Figures

Any discussion of early Ethiopian political leadership must confront the figure of Queen Makeda, identified in Ethiopian tradition with the biblical Queen of Sheba. According to the Kebra Nagast (The Glory of Kings), a fourteenth-century compilation that became a foundational text of Ethiopian national ideology, Makeda travelled to the court of King Solomon, bore him a son (Menelik I), and thereby established the Solomonic dynasty that claimed divine legitimacy until 1974 [6, 7]. The narrative has exercised profound influence on Ethiopian political culture and identity.

Scholarly opinion on the historicity of the Queen of Sheba remains sharply divided. Adamu [8] observes that "the Queen of Sheba is mired in a serious identity crisis dots The legend has continued to be puzzling and tantalizing, yet no sufficient evidence has been found regarding so many of the questions that have been raised." Ullendorff [9] similarly concludes that "many features and details of the Sheba legend remain elusive, and her provenance, person, and character will be shrouded in the twilight of mystery." Contemporary historians note the absence of archaeological corroboration and the competing claims of South Arabian (Sabaean) and Ethiopian traditions [10, 11]. In this study the Makeda/Sheba narrative is therefore treated as a powerful traditional and ideological resource rather than as verified political history.

More securely documented are later female rulers and influencers. Queen Yodit (Gudit), associated with the tenth-century transition to the Zagwe dynasty, is remembered as a formidable military and political leader, albeit one whose campaigns against Christian centres remain controversial [12]. Empress Eleni exercised notable political judgement in the fifteenth century, mediating between Christian and Muslim polities. In the sixteenth century, Elleni (Helen) and Seblewongel participated actively in the management of state affairs [4, 13]. During the Era of the Princes (Zemene Mesafint), Empress Menen, mother of Ras Ali II, and the eighteenth-century Empress Mentewab wielded substantial influence from the Gondar court [14].

The most extensively documented pre-twentieth-century female leader is Empress Taytu Betul, wife of Emperor Menelik II (r. 1889–1913). Taytu played a decisive role in foreign policy, exposed the colonial implications of Article 17 of the Treaty of Wuchale, and coordinated military and logistical support during the Battle of Adwa (1896), which preserved Ethiopian independence [15, 16]. She also founded the modern capital, Addis Ababa, and exercised effective regency during Menelik's later illness. Her successor, Empress Zewditu (r. 1916–1930), was the first woman to serve as head of an African state in the twentieth century, although her authority was constrained by the regency of Ras Tafari (later Emperor Haile Selassie) [15].

These figures demonstrate that Ethiopian women possessed and exercised political and military capacity long before the modern era. Yet their exceptional status also underscores the structural barriers that excluded the great majority of women from formal power. Moreover, the documentary sources that preserve their memory are themselves products of highland court culture; parallel traditions of women's leadership among southern Ethiopian societies remain far less visible in the published record—a limitation this study acknowledges but cannot fully remedy.

Women, Politics, and Political Leadership under Emperor Haile Selassie (1930–1974)

Emperor Haile Selassie ruled from 1930 to 1974. His regime codified gender hierarchy in law. The 1931 Constitution established a

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bicameral parliament but contained no provisions affirming women's political rights; Article 51 reserved judicial office for men. The revised 1955 Constitution explicitly limited succession to the imperial throne to male descendants "born in lawful wedlock" (Article 5). The 1960 Civil Code further entrenched patriarchal family law: the husband was designated head of the household, authorized to guide his wife's conduct and control her mobility (Articles 644[1]–[2]) [17].

Women were excluded from the first parliamentary elections. Only in 1957 did Senedu Gebru become the first woman elected to parliament; she used her position to challenge gender-biased language in the Civil Code and to advocate for women's rights, though many of her interventions were rejected by male colleagues [18]. A handful of other women followed, and Yodit Imru became Ethiopia's first woman minister [12]. These pioneers operated, however, within a political system in which real power remained concentrated in the monarchy and the male nobility [19].

Elite women's organizations the Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association (1935) and the Armed Forces' Wives Association were established, yet they lacked autonomy and mass mobilisation capacity [14, 20].

Ethiopian Women in Social Movements and Armed Struggles

Despite formal exclusion, women participated actively in armed resistance and social movements. During the Italian occupation (1935–1941), women such as Shewareged Gedle organised propaganda, intelligence, medical aid, and logistical support; Gedle also helped found the Ethiopian Red Cross [21]. Woizero Senedu Gebru's wartime service later facilitated her entry into parliament. Women likewise played visible roles in the student movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, which demanded land reform, civil liberties, and, increasingly, gender equality. Their contributions to the 1974 revolution that overthrew the monarchy have been insufficiently documented in conventional historiography [22-24].

Women's Political Leadership during the Derg Regime (1974–1991)

The military government that seized power in 1974 established a unicameral National Shengo and, in 1980, the Revolutionary Ethiopia Women's Association (REWA). Although REWA mobilised large numbers of women, it functioned primarily as a transmission belt for party directives rather than as an autonomous advocate for women's interests [14, 25]. The 1960 Civil Code remained in force, and human-rights discourse was suppressed under the regime's authoritarian rule.

The 1987 Constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia formally proclaimed equality before the law regardless of sex (Article 35) and called for special support for women in education and employment (Article 36). In practice, however, senior ministerial and military posts remained almost exclusively male. The Workers' Party of Ethiopia created a Women's Affairs Division, yet its purpose was mobilization for state objectives rather than genuine empowerment [23, 26]. The period has been characterized as one of "empowerment without power."

Women's Political Leadership under the EPRDF Regime (1991–2018)

The transitional government that assumed power in 1991 and the subsequent Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia introduced a new constitutional and policy framework for gender equality. The National Policy on Women (1993) sought to institutionalize women's political, economic, and social rights and to establish gender-sensitive structures at federal, regional, and woreda levels. Women's Affairs Bureaus were created accordingly. The National Action Plan for Gender Equality provided an operational instrument for mainstreaming [27].

The 1995 Constitution and Legal Framework

The FDRE Constitution of 1995 constitutes the most important legal milestone. Article 25 guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex. Article 35 explicitly recognizes the historical discrimination suffered by women and authorizes affirmative-action measures. Article 38 affirms the right of every Ethiopian to participate in public affairs, to vote, and to stand for election without discrimination. Women parliamentarians and civil-society activists played an active role in ensuring that the final text contained robust equality provisions [22]. Subsequent reforms included a revised Family Code (2000), pension-rights adjustments, and affirmative-action quotas in higher education and public employment.

Descriptive Representation in the Legislature

Parliamentary data illustrate a marked increase in women's descriptive representation under the EPRDF (Table 1).

No.	Election year	Total candidates	Male seats	Female seats	% women
1	1995	2,871	526	11	2.01%
2	2000	—	505	42	7.7%
3	2005	1,594	410	116	21.2%
4	2010	2,188	395	152	27.8%
5	2015	1,828	335	212	38.8%

Table 1. Women's Representation in the House of Peoples' Representatives, 1995–2015

Source: House of Peoples' Representatives of Ethiopia [28].

A parallel, if somewhat slower, increase occurred in the House of Federation (Table 2).

No.	Tenure	Total members	Women members	% women
1	1995–2000	108	7	6.5%
2	2001–2005	112	8	7.1%
3	2006–2010	121	12	9.9%
4	2011–2015	135	24	17.8%
5	2016–2020	153	50	32.7%

Table 2. Women's Representation in the House of Federation, 1995–2020

Source: House of Federation [29].

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These numerical gains were facilitated by constitutional equality provisions, the ruling party's informal 30 per cent candidate target, and electoral-commission support for women candidates. Regional, zonal, and local councils recorded comparable improvements.

The Impact of Numerical Increases

Research on gender and politics consistently finds that a critical mass of women in legislatures can alter the tone of debate, place previously neglected issues on the agenda, and produce more gender-sensitive legislation [30, 31]. Ethiopian interviewees reported that the growing presence of women increased their confidence to challenge gender-biased proposals and contributed to the revision of the Family Code in 2000. Women parliamentarians successfully pressed for a higher (50 per cent) target for women's empowerment in the Second Growth and Transformation Plan.

Nevertheless, opposition parliamentarians and some independent observers argued that strong party discipline under the EPRDF limited the autonomous voice of women MPs. Agendas were often pre-determined in closed party caucuses, reducing the space for independent advocacy. Numerical presence, in short, did not automatically yield substantive influence [4, 32].

The Quest for Substantive Representation

Substantive representation requires more than physical presence; it requires the capacity and autonomy to articulate and advance gender-equitable policies. In the Ethiopian parliament of the EPRDF period, women MPs frequently lacked both. Party loyalty often took precedence over feminist agenda-setting. Collaboration with autonomous civil-society organizations an important pathway to substantive representation elsewhere [33]—was constrained by the political environment. As Meseret [4] concluded, "Ethiopian women's descriptive representation is improving even though their substantial participation is not as such evident in the parliament."

Representation in Standing Committees

Parliamentary committees are central to oversight and policy scrutiny. Table 3 presents the gender composition of standing committees in the House of Peoples' Representatives after the 2015 election.

Standing Committee	Total	Female	Male	Head	Vice-Head
Higher Education Affairs	23	18	5	Male	Male
Agricultural Affairs	25	14	11	Female	Male
Budget and Finance Affairs	19	10	9	Female	Male
Legal, Justice & Administrative Affairs	20	13	7	Male	Male
Foreign, Defence & Security Affairs	14	9	5	Male	Male
Women Affairs	23	8	15	Female	Female
Social Affairs	25	11	14	Female	Male
Human Resource Dev. & Good Governance	25	18	7	Female	Female

Table 3. Gender Composition of Selected Standing Committees (2015 onwards)

Source: FDRE Parliament (2017). Note: Women headed six of eighteen standing committees, predominantly those associated with social welfare, agriculture, natural resources, and gender affairs.

The pattern is clear: women were more likely to head committees linked to traditional "feminine" domains, while "hard" portfolios—foreign affairs, defence, security, and industry—remained under male leadership. This distribution reproduces rather than challenges gendered divisions of labour.

Motives for Women's Entry into Politics

Survey and interview data indicate that the principal motivation for women entering parliament was government affirmative-action policy (approximately 85 per cent of female respondents). A smaller proportion cited the desire to challenge patriarchal norms or to apply professional knowledge. Role models both women and progressive men also exercised influence, particularly among younger entrants. These findings underscore the continued importance of deliberate policy intervention while highlighting the limited autonomy that characterizes many women's political careers.

Women in the Executive Branch

Despite legislative gains, executive representation remained low. In 2017, women occupied only four of thirty ministerial and ministerial-rank positions (13.3 per cent). The posts held by women Women and Children Affairs, Culture and Tourism, Construction, and an urban-sector coordination role—again reflected traditional gender stereotypes. Defense, foreign affairs, finance, and other high-prestige portfolios remained male preserves. This pattern is consistent with broader African and global trends in which women are disproportionately assigned "soft" ministries [34, 35].

Category	Total	Men	Women
Cabinet ministerial positions	21	18 (85.7%)	3 (14.3%)
Other ministerial-rank positions	9	8 (88.9%)	1 (11.1%)
Grand total	30	26 (86.7%)	4 (13.3%)

Table 4. Women in Ministerial and Ministerial-Rank Positions, 2017

Source: Compiled by the author from official listings (2017). Note: Percentages distinguish cabinet ministers from officials of equivalent rank.

Gender Sensitivity and Gender Neutrality in Ethiopian Political Leadership

Genuine gender equality in political leadership requires that both the assignment of portfolios and the conduct of decision-making be gender-neutral and gender-sensitive. In the Ethiopian case under the EPRDF, neither condition was fully met. Committee chair ships and ministerial appointments systematically mapped onto traditional gender roles. Parliamentary debate and executive deliberation continued to privilege male perspectives, even as the numerical presence of women increased. Transforming this pattern demands deliberate institutional redesign and cultural change.

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Empowering the Future: Pathways beyond Descriptive Representation

The title of this study foregrounds the imperative of "empowering the future." Numerical gains achieved between 1995 and 2015 constitute a necessary but insufficient foundation. Converting presence into power requires coordinated action on several fronts.

First, targeted capacity-building programmes for women leaders covering legislative drafting, budget analysis, negotiation, and media engagement can enhance the skills required for effective substantive representation. Second, political parties and the executive must adopt transparent, gender-neutral criteria for the allocation of high-influence portfolios and committee chair ships. Third, internal party rules that currently enforce rigid discipline should be reformed to allow greater autonomy for women (and men) parliamentarians to raise independent gender-equality agendas. Fourth, continuous gender mainstreaming across all policy sectors, supported by sex-disaggregated data and gender-responsive budgeting, must become routine rather than residual.

Post-2018 political developments including the formation of the Prosperity Party, the appointment of the first woman president (Sahle-Work Zewde), and subsequent fluctuations in ministerial gender balance—illustrate both the possibilities and the fragility of progress. Sustained empowerment will depend less on individual appointments than on the institutionalization of the reforms outlined above. Future research should examine the effectiveness of women's caucuses, the trajectories of young women leaders, and the still under-explored histories of women's political agency in southern Ethiopia and among pastoralist communities.

Conclusion and Implications

Ethiopia has made remarkable progress in advancing women's descriptive representation in political leadership, particularly in the legislative branch, since the adoption of the 1995 Constitution and accompanying affirmative-action policies. From near-exclusion under the Imperial and Derg regimes to 38.8 per cent in the House of Peoples' Representatives and 32.7 per cent in the House of Federation by the mid-2010s, the numerical gains are real and policy-relevant. Yet these gains remain largely symbolic. Women continue to be under-represented in powerful executive positions and are disproportionately assigned to traditionally "feminine" portfolios and committees. Strong party discipline and a resilient patriarchal political culture have limited the translation of presence into substantive influence.

Historical evidence—from documented figures such as Empress Taytu Betul and Empress Zewditu to the broader participation of women in armed resistance and social movements—demonstrates that Ethiopian women have long possessed leadership capacity. What has been lacking is an institutional and cultural environment that systematically converts that capacity into enduring political power. Empowering the future of women's political leadership therefore requires structural reforms that secure autonomy, expand access to high-influence offices, and embed gender sensitivity in everyday political practice. Only then will descriptive representation mature into the substantive representation necessary for genuine democratic deepening and equitable national development.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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