



Ethiopia's Pastoral Women Speak Out

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February 6, 2005, Addis Ababa,
Ethiopia**

Imagine yourself sitting on straw mats on a hot humid day in southern Ethiopia with thirty women from remote and isolated pastoral tribes. No men are at this meeting, because in one tribe women are not permitted to speak in meetings where men are present. Most of the women are dressed entirely in skins decorated with rows of cowry shells and colorful beads in red, white, black and yellow. Some are wearing only their leather skirts and an array of necklaces made from bones, shells, and beads, while others also don a small goat skin that hangs between the breasts, attached to a broad collar around the neck solid with cowry shells. Many have the same hair style – a bob and fringe of loose-hanging ringlets that reach just below the ears, shiny with butter and tinged red

with the generous addition of red ochre. This beautiful hairstyle, which takes hours to prepare and a great deal of touch-up between styling sessions, would wow the catwalks of Paris, London and New York. Their ears have multiple piercings embedded with earrings made of beads and metals. In fact no part of the body is left undecorated. First the entire body is glazed with red ochre to provide a reddish brown sheen over flawless ebony skin. Then on go the wide bands of aluminum, copper and beaded bracelets over arms and legs in various positions. Some women wear caps made from gourds which have been highly carved in geometric designs and further enhanced with colorful beads, while others wear headbands of red and black beads in triangular patterns. They have beautiful faces with broad smiles that show off their white straight teeth – except for the two to four lower incisors that have been extracted in childhood. A very few of the women are dressed in Western clothes and hairstyles. The women look strong and confident, but they have a different story to tell. These are women of the Hamar, Karo, Mursi and Tsemey tribes, pastoral groups numbering close to a hundred thousand who occupy a large geographic area of southern Ethiopia.

I sat in such a meeting on January 31 in Turmi, Ethiopia at the Global Pastoralist Gathering in January 29 to February 2, 2005. This global meeting of pastoralists was the first ever meeting of this type in the history of the world. It brought together 120 pastoralist leaders from 23 countries from both North and South, as well as 100 members of their governments, international organizations, and NGOs. I represented Catholic Relief Services, an American NGO that works in Africa with the most needy groups in society. Turmi is a very small town in the heart of Hamar country.

The purpose of this meeting was to discuss solutions to problems that pastoralist cultures are feeling all over the world. Pastoralism is being pushed aside as agricultural populations grow, as countries set aside pastoral lands for other uses, and as countries designate large tracks of land for preservation and parks. Pastoralists are often not allowed to cross national boundaries and find themselves increasingly squeezed into smaller and smaller areas. Modern states often find it inconvenient to provide mobile health services, veterinary services, or education to pastoralists, leaving them out of the benefits of mainstream development. As a result, pastoralists have become increasingly poorer, isolated and the least educated groups in many countries. Only some countries have created policies to support and nurture pastoralism. In southern Ethiopia there are about 16 different pastoral tribes and in Africa scores more. They are frequently in conflict with each other over pasture. Their customs and traditions often demand that a young man steal cattle or kill a man from another tribe before he can marry. This results in tribal wars and continual low-level conflict that often crosses borders. The objective of the global meeting was to exchange information among pastoralists to find solutions.



Women were clearly in the minority at this meeting, even though the organizers, the Pastoralist Communication Initiative

from the University of Sussex in England, tried their best to achieve some gender balance. Women represented pastoral tribes, UN agencies and NGOs. Pastoralist societies around the world are patriarchal. Men own the animals and the women, and men make most decisions. Women typically have little say over their own lives.

While the largely male participants were vocal in their sessions held under large shade trees and awnings of blue sheeting, speaking of developing markets for their products and water points for their animals, Ethiopian pastoralist women were not speaking. Yet on the side, with their female interpreters, they were saying that they too had their issues. They cited for instance that the men said that perhaps the tribes would stop fighting if they would intermarry. But did this mean marrying their daughters without consent to enemy tribes? Should the women have a say in this? They relayed an interest in having their own meeting, but the Mursi women said that no men could attend.

The “women-only meeting” took place under a big shade tree. Present were about 30 Hamar women, one Karo woman, with her small tuft of red ocred hair on the crown of her head, wearing her own tribal costume of skins and a long nail protruding from her lower lip, three Mursi women, with their shaved heads, dressed in their pale yellow leather body wraps decorated with gray stripes and wearing large ear and lip plates made from clay, and one Tsemey woman dressed in pants, T-shirt and a baseball cap. We foreign women and the “highlander” Ethiopian women, about 10 of us in all, dispersed ourselves among the pastoralist women and our meeting began. Discussions were led by a Ugandan facilitator. She invited the

pastoral women to talk about their lives and their issues.

The Karo woman rose to a standing position. She said that she was glad to know that the foreign women were in fact women, because she and other pastoralist women from southern Ethiopia were not sure whether we were men or women. “You wear pants and you speak like men. But we now know you are women, who are really men.” All of us laughed. “We say you are really men because we can see that you are the equal of the men and you speak in front of men, but we Karo and Hamar and Mursi women, we are not the equal of men – we are much lower – the men think we are *dirt*,” she exclaimed. “They say – ‘you women are dirt.’ We Karo women work the whole day from early morning to late at night. In the morning we prepare the fire, cook the breakfast and clean the house. Then we collect water and firewood, we grind corn which is hard work, and we look after our children. My husband leaves in the morning to take the livestock out for grazing. When he comes home in the evening, it is my job to serve him coffee and then to serve his meal, as if he has worked hard the whole day. I am supposed to be his servant. But he has only walked through pastures and sat on stones while the cattle grazed, and I have worked much harder the whole day. Yet I must treat him as if he has done all the work. My whole life revolves around serving my husband and he thinks I am nothing, I am dirt, only his servant. When I look at all of you foreign women in your clothes and you are clean, I feel like we tribal women are very backward. Look at our clothes. We wear the skins of animals. We don’t bathe or have any household hygiene. Look at us and look at you. But we have no opportunity to wear clothes – we are not educated and we don’t have money.”

Some men start to approach our group – a male photographer making a film of the pastoralist conference, a Hamar elder, and a Hamar boy. We shoo them away. “No men allowed here” we say, but the men don’t move. The photographer argues that he should be allowed to film this. “No,” we say, “it’s the rule.” The Hamar elder can’t believe his ears that he is not welcome and stubbornly holds his ground. One Ethiopian woman then rises and leads him away, trying to explain what we are doing. He is miffed but leaves. The Hamar boy goes with him and we resume.

Next to speak is an elderly Mursi woman wearing only a leather skirt and no jewelry. Her earplates are not in place and her open earlobes hang in large heavy loops. Her lower lip is missing and replaced by a band of swollen scar tissue. “We have no schools,” she explains, “but even if we did, girls would not be allowed to go to school. The men say our job is to clean the house, cook, collect water and firewood and have children. They say we should not have education. But I want change. I want education for our girls. I want our lives to improve by learning new things from other people, from foreigners like you. What can you do for us?” she asks. We ask the younger Mursi woman, in her late teens or early twenties and still single, if she would like to speak, but she says she will speak after the Hamar women have spoken. She has an amazing story to tell, but she needs time to raise her self-confidence to speak.

And so we move on to the Hamar, a large group, and first they have to decide who will speak for them. Should it be an elderly woman followed by a younger woman, we ask. More discussion. No, they say, “it should be someone who speaks well and who can speak for all of us.” They nominate the president of

their recently formed women's organization, a woman in her thirties wearing only a leather skirt and a multitude of lovely necklaces. She is slightly corpulent, her large breasts reaching her navel. She has a lovely warm face with a broad smile.



The Hamar woman begins by telling us that she has no formal education, but she wants change for Hamar women, so she and others worked hard to establish their women's organization about two years ago. They work together, selling items to tourists to raise money for their organization. The translation is slow and the threads of her discourse are broken by the pauses for translations. We are translating from Hamar to Amharic and then Amharic to English, and then English to Spanish for the pastoralist women from Chile and Argentina who are present, and from English to Mursi. She says their lives are exactly the same as for the Karo and Mursi women. But it is even worse than this, she says. "The miserable life of a girl begins at her birth." Her father is not happy and immediately tries to sell her to a husband. She might even be sold as an infant or as a small girl. Her father tries to get the best price for her in cattle. If she is sold as a child, she goes into her new husband's household where she is treated as a slave, she claims, having to work all the time and being beaten for the smallest mistakes. "We have no say over our lives or even who we can

marry. If a man says he wants us, even if he is old or sick, if he has enough cattle to pay for us, then our fathers sell us to him. We are only good for trading for cattle, nothing else. After marriage, even at a young age, all we do is work. Our lives are very hard. We are not allowed to go to school even if a school is available, as in Turmi. Our fathers beat us if we go to school. Our fathers can even marry us to a dead man. In our language we say we are married to a 'stone,' meaning the headstone on a grave. The man maybe has been dead for three or four years, and still, if his family pays for us, our fathers will marry us to him. Then after the wedding we are given to the dead man's brother, and any children produced take the name of the dead man – they are his children. We are just bought and sold like cattle and this is not right."

Next a Hamar woman in "highland clothes" (skirt and t-shirt) and hair done in typical Ethiopian plats, says she wants to speak. "There are three of us here who are dressed in highland clothes like the foreign women. But we are Hamar women, we are just like all the other Hamar women here, from the same families and compounds and villages, but we are in clothes because we went to school." She is tall, lean and unusually pretty, displaying another big smile of perfect white teeth. "When we were about 15 years old, Redd Barna (Norwegian Save the Children) came here and opened a primary school. They went from house to house asking the parents to send their children. However, none of the Hamar families would allow their children to go. I was the first to go because my family was different. My father is a Hamar from another district and so he was considered to be an outsider. The elders got together and decided that the children of one family should go to school because the Redd Barna kept pestering everyone. The

elders believed that the Redd Barna wanted to kill Hamar children, so they decided that my father's children would be sacrificed to the Redd Barna because my father, as an outsider, had lower status in the community. I had to take off my Hamar skins and put on highlander clothes and change my hairstyle. This is why I look like this today – I got used to it. This was 13 years ago. I loved going to school. I told my girlfriends, two of whom are here today, and they sneaked out of their houses and joined me at school. Now I want them to show you their backs where they were beaten by their fathers.” One of the two women pulled up the back of her T-shirt to show us multiple scars from a lashing. “This is what happened to them, over and over again, because they sneaked away to school. But they continued to go and all of us finished to grade 8. Now we want to go on to high school and finish to grade 12, but the nearest high school is in Jinka, 4 hours away, and we don't have the money to pay to live there and study. So we want to ask your help in getting a high school in Turmi.” I had noticed these three women in western clothing at the small crafts market that was set up at the conference, but I hadn't realized they were Hamar. These girls were translating for the other Hamar women as clients asked prices of items and tried to bargain. Now who they are made sense – they are rare Hamar women who are educated and now serving as the voices of the Hamar women to the outside world. They talk to anyone in English or Amharic, read and do math. They are clever and are stimulating change.

We asked the women if any Hamar children go to school. They answered that there is an elementary school in Turmi. “Our fathers still oppose education for both sexes but some children do go to school. Outside of

town there are no schools and so very few children can go to school. Honestly, they still oppose the girls going to school. The only real chance girls have is to run away from home and find someone to help them go to school.”

A second Hamar woman dressed in highland clothes said she wanted to speak. She said that the life of the Hamar woman became easier when Redd Barna came to help them because they dug wells and made water points. “Before Redd Barna came here 13 years ago, we women had to walk long distances to fetch water. When the water points were built, it was much better. But now some of the pumps are breaking and Redd Barna is gone and there is no one to fix the pumps. We women are the ones who carry water and we pester the men to fix the pumps, but they don't care and they don't fix them. Why didn't Redd Barna teach us women to make the repairs? The water committees are all men, but it should not be so since the men are not responsible for collecting the water. Will you help us get our water pumps repaired?”

The Tsemey woman in the baseball cap said she had something to say. She said that sometimes an NGO brings a new idea to the Hamar women, such as household hygiene or ideas about nutrition. “Then we make a small change in our house,” she said. Our husbands come home and say: what is this new thing you are doing? This is a stupid idea. We will not do things in this new way. Stop it! But if our husbands come up with a new idea, a new way of doing something, then he orders everyone to follow his idea and we must. If the man thinks of it, it is done. If the woman thinks of it, it is stupid. This is the way it is in our society. Shauna, a young Canadian anthropologist studying the role of Mursi women in their society, suddenly broke

into the discussion with a concern. She felt that the discussion was not balanced, that these tribal women were only talking about their problems and not about their strengths. “These women are strong,” she explained. “They build the houses. When I arrived in Mursi a year ago, I asked the men to build me a house. The women came up to me and said, ‘you are not going to let those men build your house, are you? Men can’t build houses. They don’t know how. Your house will soon fall down.’ But I went ahead and let the men build my house, and sure enough, in one year it fell down. The wood beams were eaten by termites and the roof leaked, causing my mud walls to melt away. For my second house, I asked the women to build it. It is a good strong house. The Mursi women are also proud of water collecting. They like to hear the clap clap of their lip plates as they walk across the landscape carrying their water containers on their heads. They are proud of their cooking and all the other jobs they do.

Two hours had passed and the hot sun was beginning to set on the horizon. Those of us seated facing the sun were forced to stand up and move to a new spot as the sun pierced its last rays through the lower branches of the tree and then directly onto our faces. The tribal women, seeing us stir, said they now had to leave to do their household chores and prepare an evening meal for their husbands. We decided we would meet again the next day. We decided that there was much more to be said, and we needed to communicate a message to the larger group. Tomorrow we would formulate that message. Our facilitator encouraged all the tribal women to think during the night about our discussion and come tomorrow with suggestions on improving their lives that could be conveyed in the plenary discussions of the global forum. Gradually all the

women rose and walked away, back to their homes to do the jobs that they had neglected that afternoon by attending this meeting. A couple of women said they would not be home in time to serve their husbands coffee, and this would be bad.

After the women had left, a few of us non-tribal women continued our discussion with Shauna, as she seemed a bit upset. She said she did not feel the meeting was going well. “This meeting was essentially my idea, she said, but I don’t like the way it is turning out. It makes these women appear to be so weak and powerless, but they are not this way. Let me tell you a story. The young Mursi woman who said she would speak later is very strong and has an interesting story to tell. She was sold into marriage to an old man that she did not want to marry. She has a lover, a boyfriend, but they cannot marry because he does not have the 38 head of cattle required by their society to marry. She told her father that she only wanted to marry her boyfriend, but her father refused and insisted she marry the old man. The only way she could think of to get out of the marriage was to kill the old man. So she went to his house one night and tried to strangle him, but having failed, she ran away into the forest to hide. Her father and brothers came after her and beat her. She told them that if she was forced to marry this old man, she would definitely kill him. She ran away again and ended up at Shauna’s house. So now they know she is serious. She and her lover are trying to earn money to buy the required number of cattle. She has migrated to Jinka and works at the anthropology museum there, letting tourists take her picture for money and selling Mursi lip plates that she makes herself. Her lover is also working and together they are saving money to buy the cattle.”



I glanced over at this young Mursi woman as Shauna spoke, seeing her now in a different light. She was flicking her tongue in and out of the space where her four lower incisors had been extracted to make room for her large lip plate, and she was pulling and twisting her loose lower lip whose plate she had now removed. She didn't know, however, that Shauna was talking about her. She was just waiting for Shauna to finish so they could go together to eat supper. As the sun set, Shauna continued. "I am concerned that we are trying to change these people and I am not in favor of forcing them to change." Senait, a highland Ethiopian woman, a college graduate from Addis Ababa in her early twenties working for the United Nations replied, "Through this meeting we are not trying to change the Mursi or Hamar, we are just listening to their needs, and their needs are big. Maybe their lives can be improved without changing the whole culture. We are not saying they are weak women; we are saying they are

oppressed." I chimed in that there is a difference between being capable and be empowered. These women are capable and strong, and they perhaps do influence the men on some matters, but they have no real power in their society. They live at the mercy of the men. Senait added, "Her story shows she is strong, but if you have to kill someone to take control of your life, that is really desperate. The story illustrates how disempowered these women are."

The next afternoon the same group of women gathered. Our facilitator reminded us of our task - to come with suggestions for the plenary meeting. Immediately, an usually large Hamar woman dressed in a cotton shift and with short-cropped hair said she had just one thing to say and then she had to leave. This one thing was about our meeting of yesterday. She said when she got home last evening her husband was angry with her. He asked her why she was attending a women's meeting and what good would it do. He told her that at the global meeting it was decided that the Hamar could no longer raid the Boran and the Geleb (other Ethiopian pastoral groups) for cattle. "Our conflicts have to stop and we have to stop the cattle raiding. So is the women's meeting going to bring us cattle? If not, then it is useless and you are wasting your time. You were not home last night to make my coffee. I had to go and get my coffee from a neighbor's house. The neighbor wanted to know where my wife was, and I told him she was attending the women's meeting. He said you women attending the meeting wanted to become highlanders. Is that what you want? You want to give up our traditions and become a highlander? You want to dress like them and make your hair like them? Look at you, you already dress like them, and now you want their other ideas. You cannot attend that meeting tomorrow. I forbid you. You can go and

tell them what I said and then you must come home.” With that she got up from her seat. The facilitator asked her to stay a moment longer while she gave a Christian view on the roles of men and women – that women were given to men by God to help them. The role of women is very important in society, she said, and God made it that way. The Hamar woman listened and then said that she really had to leave. She rose again and walked away.

Sarah, our Ugandan facilitator, realizing that our enthusiasm of the day before might be draining, continued on the important role of women in any society. She opined that educating women and raising their status was of benefit not only to women but to the whole family. The children will benefit and the men will benefit too. Did others agree? After translations and a few moments of silence the tribal women began to speak. Yes, they agreed. And this is what the message should be at the final closing session of the plenary to be held the following day. They decided that the president of the women’s association, who speaks in such an articulate way, should be the one to present this idea to the entire conference.

The next day at the closing plenary session under the largest awning, about 250 people, mostly men, gathered to hear the final conclusions from the conference. When it was time for the women’s sessions to present their conclusions, the president of the women’s association rose and stood in front of the group. Unexpectedly, the first thing she did was to ask all the women at the conference to stand. “You see these women,” said the president as she extended her arms toward the standing women, “these women gave birth to you, fed you when you were small, made a home for you and raised you up. So why do you oppress these

women? Why do you say they are worthless and that they should not be educated? By educating women your lives will improve, your families will be healthier and all of society will be stronger. You cannot improve your lives without raising up your women and giving them the respect they deserve and educating them.” Her words were direct and to the point. No mincing of words here, no polite euphemisms – just straight talk right to the heart of the matter. Her speech was brief and followed by a few moments of silence. Then the crowd broke into clapping. The various tribal chiefs rose and shook her hand. Had there been a breakthrough? Did these men truly realize that she was right? Would anything change? What about all those husbands who were not present? Would they listen if tribal chiefs told them that they had to respect their wives, not sell them into marriage against their will, and let their daughters go to school? Would they stop thinking solely about cattle and sheep and now consider women? These are questions that remain to be answered in the coming years. These are the additional issues to be followed up by the NGOs and international organizations as they work to improve the lives of pastoral societies - the women’s issues.

