



The Power of Africa: Inclusivity in Business and
Governance



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Maastricht School of Management Global Network

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Esteemed Guests,

Conference Organizers,

Conference Attendees,

Let me congratulate the Maastricht School of Management (MSM) on this grand 70th anniversary. I would also like to acknowledge the long-standing contribution of the school in international development and, in particular, for the active support in the areas of education, entrepreneurship, leadership, and management in my own country Ethiopia.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to be with you virtually today to share my experience and insights on the topic “The Power of Africa: Inclusivity in Business and Governance.”



I will share my professional journey and the efforts I made to encourage society to embrace equality/inclusivity and to achieve social justice through institutional reform.

Inclusivity assumes the exclusion or marginalization of certain groups of society from governance, business, and even social life because of their gender, age, social status, ethnicity, or race. It is a deep and sensitive subject for academic research, policymaking, and the rule of law.

Inclusivity both in business and governance is ``not leaving anyone behind.`` However, it is not a straight-forward affair. Promoting inclusivity requires laws, policies, advocacy, competent and committed institutions and ongoing monitoring of progress. Measures such as affirmative action or positive discrimination (although sometimes controversial) can play a role to rectify historical legacies of past discrimination and exclusion.



In the next few minutes, I will share with you how through human agency and collective action, I along with those who shared my vision have challenged society and reformed institutions to embrace inclusivity, particularly inclusivity in the area of gender and justice.

I. EWLA

Let me start with the establishment of the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA). Here I have a confession to make the idea of establishing an association of women lawyers to work for the promotion of women's rights, equality and inclusivity in Ethiopia grew from discussions we had with various African women lawyers while attending a training on human rights, right there in the Netherlands in 1993.

It is only fitting that after 29 years, I am speaking to you all on the strides made regarding the inclusion of women.



In establishing the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association, our objective was to address discrimination against women and to ensure their equal participation in all spheres of endeavor.

The strategy included legislative reform, provision of pro bono legal service, public education, and raising awareness and sensitizing the public.

The objective and activities of EWLA was supported by the public as well as development partners. The project proposal designed to establish the Association was largely funded by the Netherlands Embassy in Addis Ababa. Six months after launching the organization, I received a very encouraging letter from the Netherlands Ambassador, Joe Boss who was based in Addis Ababa in the mid-90s. I take this opportunity to thank the government and the people of the Netherlands.

The Association has advocated for the amendment of four discriminatory laws. The laws include family law, criminal law, pension



law, and citizenship law. Amendment of these laws was the first key step in asserting equality and inclusion for women both in the domestic and public arena.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we all know, having a law in place is an important step but it is not a solution for all problems. To enforce the law and truly empower women is another challenging task.

At EWLA, we used pro bono representation to defend women victims of violence. Some of the stories are well known globally.

In 2014, a highly acclaimed feature film entitled *Difret* was produced based on a case where I, along with my team, defended and ensured the acquittal of a 14-year-old girl who killed her abductor in self-defense.

This case radically challenged the culturally accepted practice in the Western and Southern parts of the country, of acquiring a bride through abduction. It served as a turning point in protecting the rights of young women in Ethiopia and set a precedent for similar future cases.



Over the years, EWLA's work has been weaker due to a draconic civil society law adopted in 2009. However, with the adoption of a new civil society law in 2019, it is currently recovering and back to operation.

Through national and global policy, legal and programmatic intervention, the status of women in Ethiopia and Africa has improved over the years. Nonetheless, it is still a work in progress.

The World Economic Forum Gender gap report still predicts that the world requires another 80 or so years to fully close the global gender gap. However, we should still strive to close the gap through concerted global, regional, and national efforts in a much shorter period of time.

II. Enat Bank

Let me share with you another important initiative aimed at women's inclusion.

This one is the story of Enat Bank.



The idea of establishing a formal financial institution was conceived following an exchange of ideas with a woman friend of mine who happened to be a businesswoman. We talked about the constraints faced by women in business.

The key factor being women's exclusion from the services of formal banks due to multiple factors but mainly due to lack of collateral assets. Women don't own immovable property or when they own one, they don't have the decision-making power since property-related decisions are made traditionally by their spouses. In some countries, even today, discriminatory laws prevent women from engaging in economic activities without the approval of spouses or male relatives.

When we came up with the idea of establishing a woman-focused bank, we did not want to limit ourselves to micro-finance. On the other hand, the idea of establishing a full-fledged bank was also intimidating. Over



several months of discussion, we managed to convince 12 more women to join us as promoters and I was chairing the promoter's committee.

Following two years of effort, the capital for establishing the Bank was raised. All administrative and financial policies were prepared, and the bank started operation in February 2014. I was elected as the first-ever female bank board chair by a unanimous vote of our large shareholder base. It was also the first bank to be led by women since 70% of board members were women.

The bank is not exclusively for women because we know that model has failed elsewhere. As a business entity, it provides non-exclusionary services, but it has devised a strategy to support and engage women.

The bank has already registered tremendous success in deposit mobilization, increasing shareholder value, and designing a non-collateral credit program for women. Currently, there are 64% women shareholders and women hold 60% of the paid-up capital.



One of the unique ventures of the bank is that the different branch locations are named after pioneering Ethiopian women from across different sectors.

To date, the bank has opened 100 branches all over the country.

In addition to the service it provides, this project has shattered the assumption that women can only initiate and receive loans from micro-finance institutions. It is another demonstration that illustrates the power of women's leadership and innovative solution to ensure inclusiveness in business.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

just a couple of months ago, the European Union passed a law that obliges listed companies in all 27 EU member countries to have women take up at least 33% of executive and non-executive roles by mid-2026.



This is also a good example of implementing an affirmative action policy.

Studies show that it is beneficial, and productivity increases when women are included in decision-making. Participation of women increases accountability/profitability and a new way of doing business beyond just adhering to corporate social responsibility. This is logical since we can gain more from the collective intelligence of men as well as women.

III. Appointment as Chief Justice

Let us now look at my nomination as Chief Justice; my appointment is a very important signal of inclusion.

My nomination as the Chief Justice in November 2018 was unexpected. On the other hand, it is a natural progression of my lifelong commitment to pursue justice, equality, and inclusion.



I became the first woman to hold this position.

With the coming to power of a reformist government in 2018, there were many progressive strides taken to include women in leadership positions as demonstrated by the appointment of 50% women cabinet ministers. The appointment of the first female President of Ethiopia, H.E. Sahle Work-Zewde is also historic. The number of women cabinet members has reduced after the June 2021 General Election, but it is still high compared to past records.

When I first assumed office, I made a promise that my goal and mission is to restore public trust in the judiciary since public perception of courts and judges was not favorable. Over the past three years successive reform efforts were implemented to help us achieve the promise that I made to the public.



We kicked off the reform agenda with the adoption of two key legislations pertaining to Federal Courts as well as Judicial Administration. These laws and subsequent regulations and directives became the foundation for building an independent, impartial and accessible judiciary.

The actual reform agendas were started by improving the long-neglected salary of judges and the overall working environment. Case flow management directive was implemented and court backlog has been significantly reduced. In view of addressing accessibility, we embarked upon important court case management technology projects.

Diversity and inclusion of our court is an agenda that I took seriously. Women leaders were appointed to the leadership hierarchy of the court and more female judges were appointed. Currently, the overall average number of female judges is 31% in federal courts. We have to push further to achieve gender parity in the medium to long term.



The key challenge to our court as in many other courts has been the issue of judicial accountability and in particular, the public perception that corruption is rampant in the court. Despite the allegations, evidence are very few.

Nonetheless, in view of addressing this challenge, we adopted a special regulation that would allow the public to formally present their complaint to a dedicated grievance department. The said regulation protects whistle-blowers with the framework of witness protection laws.

Achieving judicial independence is a key historical success that we have achieved over the last 3 years. Judicial independence is an issue that I deeply care about and a key focus of the reform agenda.



On the other hand, finding the right balance between the independence of the judiciary and accountability demands continued attention. Judiciary cannot be complacent about its integrity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The good news about our effort over past three years was that two successive public perception surveys on key global indicators including efficiency, effectiveness, accessibility, and transparency have demonstrated that our court reform agenda has yielded encouraging results. This surveys were conducted since we are highly committed to accountability and transparency.

While this is a positive development, we fully appreciate judicial reform and institution building, especially in countries functioning under multiple economic, political and social constraints is a work in progress.



The progress made in the judiciary is the result of inclusive participation in leadership, judicial work and support team that is striving to adopt a people-centered service.

VI. Conclusion

My Dear audience

I took the time to explain the role that I played to promote inclusion and justice in the public and private sectors.

Of course, the inclusion of the youth is a big global agenda. In Africa, youth education, employment, and participation is a key policy agenda.

Effective utilization of the potential of Africa's youth will help Africa tap into the so-called "demographic dividend". The Western world also has a stake in Africa's peace and development. Not only for matters of



trade and international relations but also as a matter of peace and security.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Inclusion is also about striving to prevent discrimination and using the potential of all segments of our societies without any form of bias on the basis of ethnicity, race, or sexual orientation. Achieving equality and inclusion is the challenge of humanity.

A biography of George Floyd titled “His Name Is George Floyd: One Man's Life and the Struggle for Racial Justice” tells how deeply embedded and entrenched racism is in advanced societies.

Dear participants,

Diversity is also about ethnicity. Africa is a continent of a population with diverse ethnic backgrounds. Embracing ethnicity is a matter of equality and a key component of peace, security, and sustainable development. However unless carefully managed, it could be a recipe for disaster.



In my country Ethiopia over 80 ethnic groups live together. It is a country with a long history and radiant culture.

Unfortunately, peace has become illusive due to successive misguided and short-sighted elite agenda that has not been inclusive and failed to contribute to a successful nation-building. As I speak to you women are subjected to sexual violence and children to death.

Given the resilience, and solid social fabric of the country, Ethiopia will prevail with the blessing of hope. What unites us is much bigger than what divides us. Tomorrow will be a better than today.

Dear participants,

The examples that I shared with you are the highlight of the efforts I made with people who shared my vision and the accomplished goals.

It did not include the complexities of human experience- advocacy in the face of government adversity and the risk involved; women's unique leadership challenges, and the embedded biases despite shattering several glass ceilings; the opportunity and expectation of being the



“First”, the challenge of leading an institution during a difficult transition, navigating various professional terrain and calibrating of skills and emotions for all, facing critics who expect the impossible; unfulfilled promises...

Ladies and gentlemen,

Leadership is a gift, but it is also a hard task. It is about managing wisely and skillfully to succeed and achieve what is most important; it is about being a bridge builder, leadership is choosing the best time for a difficult discussion, and working to convince others to agree to be on board. It is about showing up in the critical moments and taking risks; handling opposition without emotion; building trusted relationships, connecting with people in a way that inspires them, and moving along because you do not want to disappoint them.

Dear participants,

I would like to leave you on a positive note so let me share with you one of my favorite quotes from Theodore Roosevelt:



“It’s not the critic who counts. It’s not the man who points out how the strong man [woman] stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done it better. The credit belongs to the person who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred with blood and sweat, and dust. Who, at the best in the end, knows the triumph of high achievement, and who at worst, if he fails, he fails daring greatly.”

Thank you for being in the arena!

Thank you for your kind attention!