



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

*Justice, Peace and Freedom*

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## **Women of Ethiopia, Ethiopia Needs You in Our Struggle for Justice, Peace, Equality and Freedom!**

**February 8, 2007**

One month from today, March 8, 2007, will mark the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the International Women's Day. This commemorative day was established by the United Nations in 1977 as a special day to celebrate the progress made to advance gender equality and to assess the challenges that remain in bringing about such equality for women from diverse groups all over the world. Let us consider how we have done in achieving better equality for the women of Ethiopian during these twenty-six years.

Unfortunately, if we are honest, we may need to admit we could have done better—not only for the sake of women, but also for the sake of all of us in Ethiopia who could benefit from their involvement. In fact, in our struggle for peace, justice, democracy, prosperity and the overall well-being of our society we may have forgotten about one of our greatest untapped resources—our women! Let us then assess what we must do to give women a more central place in Ethiopia.

The respect of women and their inclusion in all aspects of society is a task for both men and women. We must do this together, empowering our mothers, sisters, wives, daughters and granddaughters to enter into to the mainstream of all aspects of life to take their positions next to men. Women make up half our population and within this group is huge potential for cultural, spiritual, social and economic good. Without their participation, we will limit our future hope of becoming a vibrant, robust, productive and flourishing society.

I, for one, would not be fighting for human rights without the influence of my blind, but very wise and caring grandmother. She once told me that God wanted human beings to care for and to protect other human beings. She cared for me, demonstrating this personally to me—so did my mother by nurturing me as a child and teaching me how to care for my siblings. My mother gave me some of my best lessons in how to reconcile with my brothers if we fought. She also taught me that losing was okay as none of us can always be winners. Together, my mother and grandmother promoted my education.

My grandmother though was the one who bought me my first pencil and notebook so I could go to school. Perhaps you have women like these in your life. Let us take a second look at how the women of Ethiopia as well as the women of Africa and around the world might help us through the crises that are breaking apart our beloved country, continent of Africa and the world.

For a long time, when we, the Anuak Justice Council, have talked about Ethiopia, we have not specifically addressed women and the issues affecting them as some of the most vulnerable and marginalized in our society, frequently suffering more and carrying larger burdens for the sake of our children and families than the men. Wherever there are human rights abuses, it is the women who frequently suffer the most from being raped and abused by soldiers to being solely responsible for protecting the children and the elders when the men are killed, detained or disappear. We are now calling on women to become engaged as key partners in bringing about our hope for success as a society and nation.

The purpose of this article is to call on all women of every age, ethnic group, religion, educational and socio-economic background to come out of the backrooms of our society—we value you and need you! We need your ideas, influence, expertise, compassion, strength, faith, wisdom and prayers to give birth to a new society of Ethiopia that values each human being as being precious and equal in God’s eyes. Once that great foundational principle is accepted, greater freedom, justice and peace will follow!

With this in mind, we need all men to welcome women as equal partners in solving our crisis. We both bring complementary skills and gifts that are necessary or God would not have created both men and women. God gave more of a role to women than men in not only bringing life into this world, but also in nurturing, caring, loving, guiding, empowering and sustaining the lives of those in their families. They often are the first to sacrifice for the needs of the children in their families and are the ones to bring about reconciliation between family members. Many women more easily recognize the human limitations affecting both men and women, making them more ready to call on God for help for all their needs.

Our history proves that more war has been instigated and more killings have been committed by men than by women. Look at genocide. Who are the perpetrators and masterminds behind it? Again, it is usually not the women. Yet, when it comes to running our society we may have failed because we have not used all available resources—our women. We have put our women in the kitchen while the men are in the living rooms of our society making all the decisions about where we should go and what we should do. We may need to call our women out to the living room, to share with us in opening up the door to a new Ethiopia, one that revisits all life—including our own and the lives of our children and grandchildren.

Our past record is not so good. God may have something to say to us men who are stronger, more privileged and “in charge.” He may disagree with how we have used our strength and power; at times we have failed to protect the more vulnerable and instead have used our position as a means to declare war against life—even the lives of our “loved ones.” In doing so, we Ethiopians have earned the unfortunate record of being more physically abusive to the women in our society than most any others studied, according to an October 11, 2006 United Nations report indicating that nearly 60% of Ethiopian women were subjected to sexual violence, including marital rape.

In the same report from a year earlier, October 12, 2005, it is indicated that domestic abuse is so rampant in Ethiopia that nine out of ten women have accepted it and think their husbands are justified in beating them for such things as “going out without telling their spouse,” or in the opinion of their spouses, “neglecting the children or preparing food badly.”<sup>1</sup>

According to the same report, women are shown to be more vulnerable than men in our society in many ways, such as the lack of adequate female health care, leading to thousands of women dying from childbirth. “Women had higher levels of HIV than did men and were less likely to enroll in schools with only 16% making it into a secondary education. Women bore the brunt of poverty, disease and inequality in Ethiopia, yet they made up 30 percent of the workforce, often carrying out backbreaking tasks for up to 15 hours a day.”<sup>2</sup>

Right now, many women are suffering greatly in Ethiopia. For instance, among the Anuak, a large percentage of them are now widowed or alone because their husbands have been killed or imprisoned. If they stayed in Gambella, they became the sole providers for their families in an agricultural society, attempting to care for their children while also tending to the fields. They and their children live a difficult life, still grieving over the loss of their husbands, fathers, brothers and uncles.

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<sup>1</sup> October 12, 2005 United Nations Report (IRIN)

<sup>2</sup> Same as above.

Some women took their children and escaped to a refugee camp in Pochalla, Southern, Sudan, walking seven days, frequently carrying their young children and sometimes being raped by military men along the way as they sought safety for their children. There are many other cases of women suffering throughout our country because of the human rights abuses rampant in Ethiopia. The impact of these crimes has been especially great on the women who have been left to bear the responsibility of their families after their husbands have been killed, detained or disappeared. Others face deep grief over the loss of a son or daughter.

As leaders in Ethiopia, many of us men have led the way in creating an environment of hatred, violence, division and the devaluation of women, children and of life in general. Perhaps we all would benefit by better re-evaluating our actions towards women and adjusting our attitudes to better include them in the discussion of how to create a more peaceful, loving, caring, just, democratic and God-fearing society. Think about it! We all have women to thank for bringing us into this world. It has often been our mothers and grandmothers who have shaped us, helping us to become the people we are today! Now we need them to help shape the family of Ethiopia.

We often hear about the men in prison, but not about the hundreds of women who are political prisoners of conscience such as opposition party leaders, journalists, human rights defenders, scholars and others who have spoken out against the current government. Let us look at four of these remarkable Ethiopian women who have paid the debt for their country—one even giving birth to a premature child in prison.

In standing up for their moral convictions, they are suffering as much or more than the men, but we have been overlooking them. Bertukan Mideksa, Nigist Gebrehiwot, Seblework Tadesse, and Serkalem Fasil are facing serious fabricated charges of treason and genocide in a trial that is coming up on February 19, 2007. They need our prayers and support. Harsh action against them by the EPRDF is meant to intimidate us Ethiopians into silence, but let their example inspire us on in our journey towards democracy. They and their families have sacrificed much in their struggle for a better life for our people.

Let us hear more about them through a summary a friend provided to the AJC. This and other stories make them real people like us men:

“Judge Bertukan Mideska, 32, is a former federal judge and the Vice-Chair of CUDP (Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party). She was black listed by the ruling party in Ethiopia after courageously refusing to buckle to Prime Minister Meles’s pressure to deny bail to a defendant during a politically charged trial. She left the court and became an accomplished criminal lawyer taking on more pro-bono cases than many of her colleagues. Today this honorable lady is locked in Kaliti prison with dozens of violent criminals in a single, crowded cell. She is the sole provider for her family comprising of her elderly mother, sister and young daughter, leaving them to survive on the little savings she had prior to her imprisonment and the generous support of others.

Nigist Gebrehiwot, 48, is a high school teacher, human rights activist and member of the Central Council of CUDP. Nigist was among the founders of the first national human right organization in Ethiopia known as EHRCO (Ethiopian Human Right Council).

Nigist later joined Kestedemena Party, a member of the Coalition, and worked as a party organizer for CUDP played a key role in the run up to the May 2005 election designing the election campaign with Dr. Berhanu Nega, Mayor-elect of Addis Ababa (also incarcerated and charged with treason and attempted genocide). A mother of three and sole provider of her family, she remains imprisoned for thirteen months confined to a cell occupied by 70 other women leaving her family to bear the emotional and financial burden of her absence.

Serkalem Fasil is a 32-year-old journalist, along with her fellow journalist husband Eskinder Nega and owner of prominent independent newspapers. Serkalem and Eskinder were targeted for their courageous exposure of the ruling party’s campaign to steal the election results and the crackdown on pro democratic forces and the public at large.

Serkalem was 4 months pregnant when she was arrested and spent several months of difficult pregnancy in the notorious Kaliti Prison. She gave birth to her son who was removed from her shortly after she gave birth. She has been suffering from severe depression as a result of her separation from her child and husband who is also languishing in prison.

Seblework Tadesse also incarcerated and charged with treason and attempted genocide worked as the CUDP (Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party) youth coordinator prior to the May 2005 elections. This young lady also faces the death penalty if convicted by the Courts, which are proven to be an extension of the ruling party”.

These and many other like-minded women have stood up for lasting change in Ethiopia and it has not been without high cost. They have been willing to contribute something from their own lives for the sake of others, planting the seeds of change. The seeds they and others have planted, must be cared for, watered and nurtured as they are planting the seeds of tomorrow. These women in prison are like beautiful flowers coming from a lush plant that have now pollinated, spreading the seeds that will produce more flowering plants across Ethiopia—from the east to the west and from the north to the south. As Ethiopian women and men from differing ethnic and religious backgrounds water these seeds, the future blooms of these plants that you help to grow may be your grandmothers, mothers, sisters, daughters, your granddaughters, the mothers of your grandchildren, the wives of your grandsons, your nieces, your neighbors, the women in your tribe or even the women of the world.

These values are not exclusively owned by the West or by feminists, but are values deeply rooted in this world by our Creator who created both women and men as equals in His image, calling us to respect, honor, love and protect women and each other as we would our own bodies. After all, this applies to the woman you married and with whom you may have produced children that will carry on your name. Keep in mind, every Ethiopian woman is someone else’s child, mother, sister, wife, aunt, niece or grandmother—so consider them part of our Ethiopian family. We must look at these women as people of God-given worth and because of this, it is the duty of every Ethiopian man—old or young, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, from your family or tribe or from another family or tribe—to protect, respect and honor each Ethiopian woman. It is your God-given duty as a citizen of this world to value both men and women, as equally precious in God’s sight.

In the Bible, the Apostle Paul talks in I Corinthians 12: 14-20 about the body as being made up of many parts, where all are needed for the whole body to function well. He writes:

**Now the body is not made up of one part, but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be?” As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the part that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.... so, there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”**

Think of this advice in terms of the body of Ethiopia—we need all the parts to be complete. Our Constitution gives equal rights and opportunities to women, but in practice, these laws are violated in our actions by the way women are abused, disrespected or blocked from participation in many areas of our society. I am not exaggerating.

As a young man still living in Africa, I saw many women being hit with a stick or slapped in the face by their husbands or others while other people sat nearby, doing and saying nothing to stop it. As recently as 2003, I saw women being beaten up by their spouses or loved ones in Ethiopia and again, no one sitting near by did anything about it like it was a normal, everyday occurrence!

As someone who has come from a marginalized group, I refuse to speak up for my own ethnic group without speaking up for other marginalized ethnic groups as well as for the women, the children and the vulnerable. If all of us really mean what we say when we talk about creating a new Ethiopia where there is freedom, peace, justice and democracy, we must understand that equality, respect and the protection of the women, children and the disabled of our country should be a top priority. There will be some brothers among us who will say, “Let us deal with issues of changing this government first—the issues affecting women will come later.” But, in my opinion, if we are going to be honest about wanting change, we must include women and other marginalized people in the public discussion. If we are talking about the transformation of Ethiopia, we must start with ourselves and as we do, we may see some transformation in our own families.

There are some things about our culture that we know are not good. We should reform or abandon these things and adopt what we know to be right. For example, in most of our cultures, it is the women who are doing all the cooking, laundering and childcare. They are obtaining the water and gathering of firewood. This does not have to be the case now. We as men can show we care and love our families by helping with the daily tasks of life. Even little gestures can make a difference. Start seeing your wife not as someone who always is supposed to serve you, but as a valued partner in your life, in the life of your family and in the life of your community, church, mosque, synagogue and nation. You may bring new peace to your homes and marriages applying these principles of kindness and unity.

Yet, know that it is oftentimes a challenge to balance family, work and contributing to our struggle for freedom in Ethiopia, especially if there is a lack of communication and openness to considering the perspective of your spouses. I have been told about such a problem existing in 87 different couples that someone had counted as having separated from their spouses in the last year because one was working on issues of justice, while the other one was working on the family. Sometimes one of them had given the other the ultimatum of choosing between work with their political party, or their family. Some have been threatened with divorce if the spouse attends one more meeting. These problems are very real and difficult as both parties probably have justifiable goals and complaints, but how can we listen to each other better and try to share responsibilities more, perhaps encouraging involvement by both in a balanced way. Some of our spouses will not understand, but we should try, as these are some of the issues we must talk about.

Some of my brothers may disagree with me, which is okay, because conflicting ideas can frequently bring about better solutions as our ideas are challenged and tested. The most important point being—that we are talking about a transformed Ethiopia where we can agree to disagree and not be killed, imprisoned or charged with genocide for speaking out!

I appeal to all Ethiopian women to become engaged in bringing about this kind of transformation. You are needed to be part of this quilt of Ethiopia—without the colors, shapes and stitching that mark your presence—the quilt will be incomplete. This is not about competition between men and women. It is not about who should be more in charge and who should be subordinate. It is about nurturing and supporting both sides of the plant so one side is not wilted while the other flourishes. It is about sharing, respecting, valuing and loving one another as part of a greater family, made up of many individuals, both men and women.

This goes for your own family members as well as for the beggars or prostitute you see in the street—they are the children from someone’s family—they are not outsiders to the family of Ethiopia. They may need help and encouragement to break the cycle of poverty and self-destruction. God wants us to treasure other human beings and to not ignore the suffering of others. Even if they are strangers to us, they are not strangers to God. If we want to flourish as a society, we must help our people flourish and that includes our women, by closing in the gap between men and women in the simple matters of daily life.

As an African, I yearned for the fruits of social stability, peace and good governance that would give me a chance to follow my dreams, but did not find them until I got to a western country. This is wrong. Should we not work for such a climate in Ethiopia so that we do not have to leave our country for another to find it? The same is true for the women of Ethiopia. Do they have to leave Ethiopia to find opportunity and sometimes to escape from abuse, disrespect and marginalization committed by none other than their own husbands, brothers, fathers, grandfathers, community members and countrymen? Unfortunately, even many women sometimes accept and promote this kind of devaluation of women. Other women have become passive thinking that men have been running most aspects of society for years and that there is no room for women. However, if you women fail to speak up, you will never have the opportunity to fully contribute—something that keeps one of the greatest lost treasures of Ethiopia, of Africa and even the world from being discovered—our much needed women!

Within more marginalized ethnic groups and regions, women have even less of a window of opportunity. For example, few Anuak women have been given the chance to become educated, yet those who found their way to do so, have proven to be highly capable, motivated, intelligent and committed women who have contributed to the lives of those around them. For example, Ariet Peter Deng, was in Gambella when the massacre of the Anuak of December 13, 2003 began. Her father Mr. Peter Deng was one of the first men to be killed. Because of her leadership skills and education, she was seen as a threat and was arrested at the same time. She has since been released, but she is a real leader and capable of much more in the future.

My sister-in-law’s father, a devout pastor, was one of the first men as well to be killed in the massacre, yet she is an outstanding example of being a woman of faith who is trusting God through her losses without holding on to a revengeful, hate-filled spirit. Instead, she is attending a Christian seminary with her husband and they, along with their children, plan to go back home to carry on the work that her father had started in Gambella.

Women with a heart for Ethiopia, are not only capable of participating in politics, but some of them are also capable of running this government and other positions of great responsibility. For instance, in Liberia, a woman, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the mother of four boys and the grandmother of six children, is Liberia’s first elected female president, as well as the first elected female leader on the continent of Africa. She was needed to pull together a war torn, divided and conflict-ridden country.

We in Ethiopia also need someone who can help us move past our hate-filled, greedy, revengeful, divisive ethnic politics that has reached its zenith with Meles Zenawi. Women have an important role to play. There are many examples in history.

Rosa Parks began the Civil Rights movement in the United States, fueled by her faith and moral convictions. Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt helped promote Universal Declaration of Human Rights for the United Nations that has given us the foundation of our international human rights laws.

There were women surrounding Jesus in the Bible that provided for his support and who gave him rest from his weariness when he needed it. It may be the women who give birth to life that most despise a culture that destroys such life. Even our own Ethiopian women in history, opened clinics and schools

across the country, established women rights organizations, served right along us men at times of war to protect the sovereignty of Ethiopian and even led battalions to combat foreign invaders such as Queen Taitu during the battle of Adwa. There are many who do similar needed work but we need more of you to step up and be heard. You may be the first to call Ethiopia to end the senseless killing, division, hate and oppression that has marked us with a curse we men continue to choose for ourselves due to pride, anger (from our hurt) and stubbornness.

We have come up against major obstacles to our future and we call for women to step out into the open—we need you. Your voices must be heard. Please contribute your wisdom, strength, perseverance, compassion, experience and courage. To start with, reach out to other Ethiopian women, especially those of you who have had the opportunity of an education, should do this. However, even if you are not educated, do your part in empowering our nation to come out from our self-destructive ways and help us to find a way to peace, forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration.

I hope that Ethiopian women will start organizing a national women's conference and movement where Ethiopians from all around the world, from different ethnic groups, from different regions of Ethiopia, from different religious backgrounds, different ages, young and old, educated and uneducated, could come together to talk about the issues that are affecting them that could lead to empowering women—especially as it is women and their children who are suffering so greatly in our country.

Wherever you are, you are called to join together. Call your friends, organize a meeting in your community and brainstorm how you can accomplish goals for bringing greater justice, equality, peace, stability and prosperity to Ethiopia. Such a conference could be a great starting point!

Already some women, the Ethiopian Women for Peace and Democracy (EWPD) have organized a prayer campaign, “World Wide Prayer for Ethiopia's Prisoners of Conscience, for Peace, Justice and Compassion in Ethiopia,” that is calling on everyone to prayer for God's deliverance for the Ethiopian people. As many of you know, we need God's help to accomplish real and sustainable change that only comes when we change our lives to reflect God's principles.

See their article at: [www.ethiomedia.com/addfile/ewpd\\_prayers.pdf](http://www.ethiomedia.com/addfile/ewpd_prayers.pdf). They call on all sisters, brothers and friends all over the world and in Ethiopia to pray for peace, love and forgiveness. They exhort us to relinquish all animosity. They say, “Often we believe we are powerless to make a difference or do not know how to change things for the better. Prayer in unity is simple and yet a very powerful way to peace. Let's take this journey together and make a difference.”

Women of Ethiopia, we need you in our struggle for justice, peace, equality, freedom and democracy. We need you to help us reconcile with God and with each other! You are often the ones who tell your families to resolve their conflicts, to forgive each other and to pray to God for help. We Ethiopians are asking for you to help us do the same now.

May God help women to rise up to help in Ethiopia in our continued struggle. Your ideas may spark the flames that ignite the fires of peace, love and freedom. As these fires bring new light to our way, may we choose the light rather than the darkness under which we have lived for so many years. May God guide Ethiopian women and men to work together to find the peace and joy found in valuing, respecting and appreciating one another as God intended!

If you have ideas for what you see could help us in this effort, please email those thoughts and suggestions to: Mr. Obang O. Metho, E-mail: [advocacy@anuakjustice.org](mailto:advocacy@anuakjustice.org)

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