

Joint Open Letter to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

Regarding the Situation of Women and Girls in Ethiopia

For the 70th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Dear Members of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

We, the undersigned regional and international civil society organizations, write to express our deep concern about the persistent and widespread human rights abuses faced by women and girls across Ethiopia. As the international community gathers to discuss the Commission on the Status of Women, we bring to the attention of the Committee the importance of bringing the situation of women and girls across Ethiopia to the fore, including those impacted by the war and humanitarian crises.

War, Insecurity, and Gender-Based Violence

Women and girls in various parts of the country, including in Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and Benishangul-Gumuz, have been significantly affected by war and insecurity. [Reports](#) indicate that conflict-related sexual violence has been noted in various parts of the country by the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF), Amhara Militia (Fano), and other armed actors, thereby requiring immediate action. Widespread abuses against women and girls across multiple regions have been documented by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human rights and multiple international human rights organizations, amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

These acts violate Geneva Conventions, particularly Common Article 3, as well as Additional Protocol II (applicable to NIAC) and the protections of civilians under the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibit violence against civilians, including rape, outrages upon personal dignity, and cruel treatment. When committed during armed conflict, these acts constitute war crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and when they are widespread or systematic against a civilian population, they also constitute crimes against humanity under Article 7 of the same statute.

These abuses simultaneously violate International Human Rights Law (IHRL), including the prohibitions against torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the obligations to eliminate gender-based violence and discrimination under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Humanitarian Crisis and Displacement

The humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia has impacted women and girls in a disproportionate manner. [According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#), millions of people in Ethiopia need humanitarian aid due to conflict, drought, and displacement.

In displacement situations, women and girls are at a higher risk of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation. In these areas, access to essential services for women and girls is still limited.

[The United Nations Population Fund has stated](#) that humanitarian crises make women and girls more vulnerable to gender-based violence while reducing access to life-saving services for women and girls.

These constitute violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL). Under IHL, parties to conflict must protect civilians from violence, including sexual violence, and ensure humane treatment. The denial of humanitarian assistance also violates IHL rules requiring the facilitation of impartial humanitarian relief for civilians in need.

Simultaneously, these conditions violate IHRL protections, including rights guaranteed under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), particularly obligations to protect women from gender-based violence and discrimination, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which protect the rights to security, health, and an adequate standard of living.

Structural Inequality and Harmful Practices

Women and girls in Ethiopia are also subjected to various forms of structural discrimination and harmful practices. Gender inequality is one of the major challenges in Ethiopia in economic, political, and social spheres.

Women in Ethiopia still experience barriers in education, employment, and politics. Harmful practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation are still prevalent in Ethiopia.

This violates International Human Rights Law (IHRL). Under IHRL, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) obligates states to eliminate discrimination against women in political, economic, social, cultural, civil, and any other field and to modify social and cultural patterns that perpetuate gender inequality, including harmful practices that impair women's rights and freedoms.

Similarly, international human rights bodies recognise that practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage violate women and girls' rights to equality, bodily integrity, health, security, and freedom from discrimination and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

Ethiopia is also party to key human rights treaties (such as CEDAW and the African Union's Maputo Protocol) which explicitly require prohibition of harmful practices like FGM and child marriage and require states to protect women from discrimination.

Thus, these issues violate Ethiopia's obligations under international human rights law by denying women and girls equal access to education, employment, participation in public life, and protection from harmful practices.

Impunity and Barriers to Justice

In spite of the magnitude of gender-based crimes, perpetrators are not held accountable for their actions. Survivors of sexual violence face challenges in reporting violations due to stigmatization, lack of protection, and limited access to justice mechanisms.

Meaningful accountability, and survivor-centered justice are crucial in preventing the recurrence of gender-based crimes and achieving lasting peace.

The failure to hold perpetrators accountable for gender-based crimes, coupled with stigmatization, lack of protection, and limited access to justice for survivors, violates IHL's war-crime prohibitions on sexual violence and IHRL's guarantees of non-discrimination, due process, and effective remedy.

Women's Participation in Peace and Governance

There is still low participation of women in peace and governance processes. Inclusive peace processes involve the meaningful participation of women at all levels of decision-making.

Research and international policy frameworks have emphasized the importance of the meaningful participation of women to bring about sustainable peace.

The underrepresentation of women in decision-making violates both international human rights law and principles of international humanitarian law that promote equality and protection of vulnerable groups.

Under international human rights law, it contravenes the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which guarantees women's equal participation in political and public life.

It also violates the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, which emphasizes the necessity of women's full and meaningful participation in conflict prevention, peace negotiations, and governance to ensure sustainable peace.

Recommendations

In light of this, we urge the Committee to:

1. To formally request Ethiopia submit a special report on conflict-related sexual violence and the status of CEDAW implementation, with a specific deadline.
2. Recommend that member states condition bilateral aid and development assistance on measurable progress in accountability for gender-based crimes.
3. Urge referral of documented violations to the ICC or support for an independent international investigative mechanism with a specific mandate on sexual and gender-based violence.
4. Call for targeted sanctions (travel bans, asset freezes) against military and political leaders credibly linked to sexual violence and GBV.
5. Recommend that the AU Peace and Security Council and the UN Human Rights Council establish a dedicated monitoring mechanism for gender-based violence in Ethiopia's conflict zones.
6. Call on trade partners and international financial institutions to leverage economic relationships to press for compliance with international obligations.
7. Draw attention to the situation of women and girls in Ethiopia during CSW70
8. Support the provision of humanitarian assistance that prioritizes protection services, reproductive care, and psychosocial support for women and girls.
9. Encourage the meaningful engagement of women and women-led civil society organizations in rebuilding and governance processes.
10. Enhance the protection of women human rights defenders and civil society organizations.

The challenges women and girls face in Ethiopia need to receive attention and action from the international community. The fight against gender-based violence, accountability, and women's participation in the peace and governance process are critical for the protection of human rights as well as the realization of lasting peace and development in the nation.

Respectfully,

1. Africans for the Horn of Africa Initiative (Af4HA)
2. Atrocities Watch Africa
3. The Commission of Inquiry on the Tigray Genocide
4. Down Syndrome Ethiopia
5. GEM Tigray

6. Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect
7. Harambee Collective
8. Health Professionals Network for Tigray (HPN4Tigray)
9. Omna Tigray
10. Oromo Legacy Leadership and Advocacy Association (OLLAA)
11. Tigray Accountability Coalition (TAC)
12. Umbrella for the Needy
13. Women with Disabilities Development Association of Tigray
14. Yikhono: A Movement To End Gender-Based Violence