

More than a Sport: Renegotiating Gender Norms through Running in Ethiopia

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With the introduction of a new democracy and constitution in 1994, Ethiopian women have seen a significant transformation of their rights under the law. However, these laws have yet to be fully realized for Ethiopian women who live largely under the influence of traditional cultural and social norms. The recent involvement of women in Ethiopia's legacy of superior endurance running has begun to reinvent these traditional values and establish new ways in which women may participate in Ethiopian society. A legacy that has brought Ethiopians a renewed sense of pride, superior competitive running has become one of the defining characteristics of the Ethiopian state in the contemporary international community. This article examines the relationship that has developed between sport, nation building and women in Ethiopian society. The following study—based primarily on participant observation and interviews with women runners and leaders of athletic and women's organizations—concludes that the sport of running has provided an avenue for women to actively develop Ethiopia's national identity and renegotiate gender power relations in the male dominated arena of sports and in Ethiopia's patriarchal society.

INTRODUCTION

Sport has played an integral role in the creation of national and social identities throughout history and throughout the world. It has been used in several cases as a mechanism for the construction, reinforcement and transformation of gender roles within a state. Today, sport has become the site for the development of a new national position for the state of Ethiopia and Ethiopian women in the international community. A developing nation with a history of famine, poverty and inequity, Ethiopia has found a new sense of pride in the sport of running that has brought their nation international success and recognition. The recent introduction and success of women in Ethiopia's competitive running legacy was closely aligned with Ethiopia's transition to democracy and the period in which Ethiopian women began to gain new legal rights under the new constitution. This study examines the impact that the involvement of women in Ethiopian competitive running has had on their participation in society and in the creation of the Ethiopian national identity after the transition to democracy.

The following research study analyzes the locations in which modern sport was introduced and developed in Ethiopia in order to investigate the ways that sport became entrenched in Ethiopia's social and national identity. The paper then examines the relationship between Ethiopia's transition to democracy and the emerging place for women in Ethiopian society and national sports legacy. Finally, the case study seeks to analyze the relationship between sports, nation building and society in order to evaluate the impact that running has had on the normative behavior of women in Ethiopian society.

BACKGROUND

Running barefoot across the marathon finish line in Rome in 1960, Abebe Bikila won Ethiopia's first Olympic gold medal while setting a precedent for running against unyielding challenges in the name of Ethiopia. Representing his nation as an imperial guard for Emperor Haile Selassie and as a competitive athlete, Abebe Bekila's victory was symbolic of Ethiopia's emerging role in the international communities of sport and politics. Since then, Ethiopia has developed a legacy of superior endurance runners winning thirty-one Olympic medals, thirteen won by female athletes, and all of which were in distance running events (Nazret 2008). Ethiopian runners quickly became powerful symbols of national identity as they were highly visible, and redefined a new type of success that was accessible to a vast number of Ethiopians (Chappell and Seifu 2000). Sport provided a way for Ethiopia to gather and wield power in the international community that they had previously been unable to access politically and economically. Through the representative actions of Ethiopian runners locally, nationally and internationally, the sport of running has become a powerful method of expressing and reinforcing the Ethiopian national identity.

Since Abebe Bikila stepped across the marathon finish line in 1960, Ethiopia has experienced several transformations including the emergence of an internationally recognized democracy, a shift in the position of women nationally and the creation of a formidable competitive running legacy. A year after the constitution guaranteeing women rights and opportunities in Ethiopian society was instated in 1991; Derartu Tulu introduced women into Ethiopia's tradition of superior endurance runners. Reflecting the emerging place for women in Ethiopian society, 20 year old Derartu Tulu became the first black African woman to win an Olympic gold metal when she won the 10,000 meters event at the 1992 Summer Games in Barcelona (Longman 2007). With her victory, Tulu not only became a symbol of the potential of Ethiopian women to excel in long-distance running but of the capacity for black women internationally to overcome the barriers facing them in sports and in society.

The heroic story of Derartu Tulu overcoming hardships and discrimination in pursuit of her passion for excellence in running inspired a nation and introduced a new role model for young Ethiopian women. Elshadai Negash, an Ethiopian athletics journalist, described Derartu's victory as 'the biggest turning point in Ethiopian female running. Before, women didn't receive any direct support [from the Ethiopian Athletics Federation and greater society] but now there is a greater concentration of women runners' and the need to give equal attention to both male and female athletes.¹ Derartu's coach Sintayaehu Eshetu described in an interview at the Oromia Athletics Conference Championship, how 'before Derartu Tulu became famous, running was popular in Bekoji, but not as popular as it was once she became a famous runner.'²

Eight years after Derartu's victory invigorated the nation's running legacy, a wave of young, female Ethiopian runners won four of the six available medals in the 5,000 meter and 10,000 meter long distance running events in the 2004 Olympics (Longman 2007). In an interview conducted in Addis Ababa, Elshadai Negash described the 2004 Olympics as the 'second turning point in Ethiopian female running. It was a unique unveiling of this new generation of young runners with Tirunesh Dibaba winning her world title at the age of 17. Their performance started to really captivate the world... coming from deprived backgrounds, training with men because they were so competitive. Women all over the country began running, competing and wanting to be like Tirunesh'.³ Today, women's involvement in the sport has grown to rival that of men's, as 'seven of the 10 top-earning athletes in Ethiopia are women' (Wax 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout its relatively brief history, modern sport has proven to be a driving force in reproducing and changing culture, power dynamics and gender relations. In Britain and the United States, sport was socially constructed to reflect and enact cultural systems of gender, race and class-based stratification.⁴ Modern sport provided a location in which appropriate physical behavior and gender relations were defined and later became a vehicle for transmitting British and American social and cultural values to other countries. Shari Dworkin and Michael Messner (2002) argue that it is the very centrality of the body in sport practice and ideology that provides a powerful way to examine critically and illuminate the social construction of gender. In Ethiopia, the introduction and development of modern sport, primarily through educational and military systems, has fostered a historical relationship between sport, society and nation building. Today, Ethiopian competitive running serves as an emerging case study of the transformative power of sport in society. A nation with a relatively brief history of foreign occupation, Ethiopia, along with Egypt, was one of the only two sovereign black states in Africa until the 1950s (Chappell and Seifu, 2000: 37). Ethiopia's relatively brief history with foreign occupation has provided a unique lens with which to investigate the cultural, social and national ramifications of the foreign introduction of modern sport in this emerging African nation. The following analysis of the development of the modern Ethiopian running legacy seeks to illuminate the ways in which sport became a mechanism for socialization and nation building in twentieth century Ethiopia.

Introduction of modern sport in Ethiopian society

The evolution of modern sport was primarily rooted in European tradition as colonizing nations sought to develop their national and social identities in addition to those of their colonies. Developed in the nineteenth century, modern organized sports were used in English and European boys' schools to develop the character and leadership of strong men through the formative experiences of physical discipline and accomplishment (Connell 1983; Fletcher 1984; Whitson 1994). The construction of modern sport was used as a method of establishing and reinforcing Victorian social norms and cultural values. Modern sport provided a location in which appropriate physical behavior and gender relations were defined and later became a vehicle for transmitting British and

European social and cultural values to other countries. In the case of Ethiopia, modern organized sport was introduced and developed primarily by England and the USSR through the military and education system.

The British used modern sport as a method of socialization not only for their own populations but also for those they colonized. British cultural practices were exported through the implementation of sport programs in colonized nations. The sport programs used in British schools trained the elite colonized individuals for the British practice of indirect rule and worked to create a distinctly British population in the colonized country (Bale and Sang 1996; Bale and Cronin 2003: 5). However modern sport also served as an arena in which the colonized resisted British imperialism and established their own national identities and eventual independence. Such was the case in Sudan where educated Sudanese elites used football clubs as a mechanism for uniting the populace in the struggle for independence (Sugden and Tomlinson 2003). The relationship between sport, colonization and national identity has been analyzed with regard to cricket in India (Mills and Dimeo 2003) and Pakistan (Williams 2003), running in Kenya (Bale and Sang 1996) and soccer in Palestine (Ben-Porat 2001), South Africa (Keech 2002), and Ireland (Bairner 1993). Developed and used as a tool for socialization, modern sport became a location for the resistance and establishment of new gender, social and power relations internationally as the use of modern sport expanded in the nineteenth century.

Though Ethiopia did not experience direct colonization by Britain, the nation saw an expansion of foreign influence in the 1920s and 1930s as British foreign nationals and missionaries began to develop a network of sports organizations based in the public sector. The first sports club in Ethiopia was established in 1928 and was associated with St George's Church. In much the same way that the initial sports organizations developed in Britain, many of the first Ethiopian sports clubs began to develop in relation to churches, factories and youth clubs. Robert Chappell and Ejeta Seifu (2000: 40) describe how sports programs in Ethiopian schools grew as foreign nationals promoted them 'for the purpose of improving health and developing discipline.' As competitive sport continued to develop in Ethiopia, the nation's first sports office was established in 1936 in order to organize competitions between teams established by foreign nationals such as St. George's Church, the British Military Mission and groups of Armenian and Greek communities.

Introduced by foreign nationals and missionaries through the educational system, sport became a facet of the strategy used by missionaries and foreign nationals to create an educated Ethiopian population that reflected their values, norms and behavior. With the increasing level of competition between sporting groups, the Ethiopian School Sport Association was established in 1938 to govern the competitions and eventually Ethiopia entered into the international realm of sports competition by joining the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) in 1952 (Chappell and Seifu 2000). Ethiopia's involvement in internationally competitive sport not only represented the establishment of a new national sports infrastructure but also served as a significant step into the international community for this emerging African nation. Sporting clubs developed by British and foreign nationals through social organizations such as churches

and schools served as the foundation of Ethiopia's national sporting tradition and catalyzed the burgeoning relationship between sport and Ethiopian society.

As Ethiopia entered the international sports community, athletic performance became a symbolic method for the nation to compete against and dominate other nations in a power structure outside of international politics. Alan Bairner explains that sport provides a powerful form of symbolic action that states the case for the nation itself (Bairner 2001). For populations reforming as modern states, as John Bale writes, apart from war, 'no other form of bonding serves to unite a nation better than representational sports and nowhere is the sport-place bond more graphically illustrated than in the Olympic Games' (Bale and Sang 1996: 39). Bale goes on to describe how success in international competitions can create a more positive image of a country. Ethiopia's international success in the sport of running during the mid-to-late twentieth century largely exemplified this concept. As Abebe Bekila and numerous other competitive runners stepped foot onto the international stage in the 1960s, 'their success had an immediate impact on Ethiopia' (Chappell and Seifu, 2000: 40). Robert Chappell and Ejeta Seifu describe how Ethiopian athletes became 'unofficial ambassadors in competitions where they received international visibility and prestige' and the opportunity to represent 'their intensely proud and emerging nation' (Chappell and Seifu, 2000: 40). After the Italian occupation from 1936 to 1941, sport became a significant component of the creation of Ethiopia's national identity as it provided the unique opportunity for the nation to wield and express power in the international community.

The development of sport during the Marxist Derg Regime (1974-1987)

Recognizing the significance of sport in the cultivation of national and social identities, the Soviet Union utilized sport as a tool in expanding their sphere of influence in Africa in the mid-to-late twentieth century. In Ethiopia, the influence of the Soviet Union marked a shift in the infrastructure of sport – moving the authority of sports organizations from the private sector to that of the government. With the introduction of a Marxist regime in 1974, the Ethiopian government took control of the pre-existing sports clubs and changed their names and affiliations to reflect the armed forces and trade unions (Chappell and Seifu, 2000: 38). Chappell and Seifu (2000) argue that the Soviet Union sought to maximize the benefits of their imperial relationship with Ethiopia through the control of sports organizations. The military sports teams provided the opportune conditions for the development of elite athletes. Runners were able to compete professionally and were exempted from service in the military so long as they represented their sponsoring organization through sport (Chappell and Seifu, 2000: 41). Aligning military service with that of athletic service, the Marxist government was able to develop a sporting legacy that developed national allegiance and represented the strength of the Marxist government internationally.

The success and power experienced through sport are not isolated with in the realm of athletics but are often translated into the larger societal and national context. This was the case in Ethiopia where the Soviet Union recognized that expressions of power in sport are central in the relationship between modern sport and a nation's identity. Nicholas Dixon

(2000: 75) explains how ‘a national team’s success reflects well on a country, and fans may feel that they, in turn, are augmented by an increase in the worth of the country to which they belong.’ The athletic domination of another team or individual becomes a representative experience for participants and spectators as the athletes represent a town, province or country against another group (Bale and Sang, 1996; Gibson 1993). Through this representation, the success that national sports teams experience is then shared by the state and its population further developing the allegiance that the population feels towards the sports team and their own nation. Regional and international sport competitions provide a means for instilling this kind of national identity, and the Olympics in particular provide a way for countries to gain international recognition and solidify national loyalty (Bairner 2001). Through international competitions, Ethiopia’s national sports team became a vehicle for further developing the power and strength of the nation internationally.

Ethiopia’s transition to democracy and the changing position of women in Ethiopian society

The involvement of women in Ethiopia’s success in international competitive running was limited under the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie and the Marxist regime but developed significantly as women began to take on new societal roles during Ethiopia’s transition to democracy. According to the US Department of State Bureau of African Affairs (2009), the forces of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) advanced on Addis Ababa in 1991 and took control of the collapsing Marxist military dictatorship which had forcibly removed Emperor Haile Selassie in 1975. The EPRDF then established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) and together with President Meles Zenawi, pledged to oversee the formation of a multi-party democracy. Leading up to this change in political power, women played a pivotal role in combating and challenging the Derg regime through their military service and humanitarian work with the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) which comprised a significant portion of the party that took control of the state in 1975, the EPRDF (Young 1997). Through their involvement in the transition to democracy, women challenged the previously contrived notions of their physical capabilities and the ways in which they could contribute to Ethiopian politics and society.

In the academic discourse on women and nationalism, feminist scholars have largely found that the role women have in nation building has been marginalized and/or defined by patriarchal structures. Tamer Mayer (2000: 5) explains that the nation is composed of individuals who repeat accepted norms and behaviors that construct not only their own gender identity but the identity of the entire nation. These behaviors are part of culturally constructed hierarchies that involve power in the social relations that individuals have and how they are able to engage with the nation. In Ethiopia, the involvement of women as fighters in the TPLF, and particularly in combat, worked to establish new normative behavior of how women were able to contribute to the development of the national identity and political structure (Young 1997). The shift in the societal role of women that occurred in Ethiopia during the 1970s is characteristic of the increase in access to politics and citizenship that women have experienced in other nations undergoing revolutionary

change such as the transition to democracy (Alvarez 1990; Jaquette 1991; Sarvasy and Siim 1994).

In 1994, with the contributions made by women to the establishment of the new government and the values of a democratic society in mind, the Ethiopian government instated a constitution that included a provision recognizing the equality of women under the law. In the new constitution, article 35 requires women 'equality in all matters related to employment,' 'equality in the acquisition and management of property,' guarantees 'the right to plan families,' prohibits 'laws or customary practices that harm women' and 'permits affirmative and remedial measures to rectify the consequences of historical discrimination against Ethiopian women' (World Bank 1998: 10).

Although the introduction of the new constitution in 1994 defined new legal rights for women, the implementation of laws protecting women's rights have yet to be fully realized due to limited active support by the national government and fragmented regional governmental structures. In a report on the implementation of the Ethiopian National Policy of Women, the World Bank found that 'The lack of institutional capacity at the sub regional levels, particularly at the *wereda* (district) and *kebele* (village) levels, poses one of the biggest challenges to the effective implementation of the women's policy' (World Bank 1998: 2). In addition the report found that 'customary laws, which form part of the broader regulatory framework within which women operate, vary from region to region' having a direct impact on the access women have to their legal rights (World Bank 1998: 1). Today, local cultural norms and traditions often have a greater impact on women's roles -- at home, in society and in the government -- than the national laws.

The new constitution and the institutionalized protection of women's rights in Ethiopia transformed the ways in which women were viewed under the law. However, women continued to face challenges in accessing their legal equity in Ethiopia's society and culture. As Ethiopian women continue to redefine the ways in which they are engaged in society and in the creation of the national identity, sport has become an increasingly critical location for the development of new behavioral and social norms. The following analysis will examine the impact that running has contributed to the expanding role of women in Ethiopia under the new constitution.

METHODOLOGY

This paper seeks to situate the emergence of internationally competitive female runners in Ethiopia within the scholarly discourse on sport, society and national identity. It examines the impact that the emergence of competitive female athletes has had on the construction of social and national identities of women in Ethiopia. Within the discourse on sportswomen in Africa, there is a dearth of written work on female runners in Ethiopia -- especially in regards to the relationship between their involvement in sport, society and nation building. The paper examines the role that modern sport has had in the development of behavioral and social norms for women in a developing African nation

and seeks to contribute this Ethiopian case study to the developing field of academic literature connecting feminist theory, sport in society and nationalism studies.

The following analysis draws upon qualitative research conducted over a two month period in Ethiopia to investigate the function that competitive running has served in the reinforcement and/or transformation of female behavior and participation in Ethiopian society and the creation of the Ethiopian national identity. Interviews were conducted with Ethiopian female athletes, coaches, journalists and individuals working in the field of international development and women's rights to conduct and inform this research study. This analysis also draws upon participant observation conducted in Ethiopia throughout the research period. The participant observation conducted by the author involved participation in athletic training sessions, observation of rural, regional and national athletic competitions and living with Ethiopian runners over a two month period. Additionally, the analysis will draw upon critical academic literature to analyze the research findings with in the context of the discourse on sport and feminist theory in developing nations.

In total, forty three individuals involved in running and women's empowerment in Ethiopia were interviewed for the purposes of this study. Nine individuals were interviewed due to their involvement in Ethiopian athletics, journalism and gender equity. The remaining thirty three individuals were female athletes, representing multiple levels of competition, duration of running careers and regional locations. The thirty three female subjects were selected as they represented four distinctly different experiences as runners on athletic teams in Ethiopia: internationally competitive, nationally competitive, recreational involvement in sport and rural running teams. Each female athlete was asked to participate in an interview and questionnaire. The coaches, athletic directors and/or managers of the runners in each group were also interviewed as part of the nine non-athlete interviews conducted.

ANALYSIS

In Ethiopia, sport has become a key location for the development and reinforcement of power dynamics among individuals, communities and in the nation as a whole. With the recent participation of women in the Ethiopian running legacy, women have been able to access the power that is inherent in sport at multiple levels of competition. Women participating in the sport recreationally have found greater confidence in their interaction with other female athletes and their pursuit of a personal goal. Those women who compete internationally for Ethiopia also represent their nation and embody the power of their people in the international community. Through their expression of power over both male and female opponents in the sport of running, women are beginning to rearticulate Ethiopian gendered power dynamics both in sport and in society.

Ethiopian nation building and the involvement of women in sport

In the construction of national identities, academics have found that women often symbolize a nation's purity or serve as mechanisms for cultural and social reproduction.

This symbolism is enacted through the active social and political behavior of men and women in addition to the ideological construction of these relations as a national value (Enloe 1990: 54). The relations that men and women have in society and the ways that these roles are articulated symbolically in the state are therefore interconnected and influence one another. This relationship is especially visible in the role that Ethiopian women have forged in nation building through sport. Embodying strength and individualism, female athletes have begun to shape a new symbolic national identity for women as they represent their gender and nation through their involvement in the national legacy of running.

The influence that running has had on the role of Ethiopian women in nation building may be examined not only by the contributions women make to competitive running internationally but the impact that the act of running has had on the development of new familial and social behaviors for those who participate recreationally. Sylvia Walby (1992) argues that patriarchal constructions in the household and public spheres should be analyzed for their causal relationship to the women's citizenship. Walby finds that women have been engaged at the level of the nation less often than men and looks to the role of women in the family and in society as a defining element in their involvement at the state level. In this way, the social and familial spheres serve as important sites for the creation of the symbolic national identity for women. Through sport, Ethiopian female athletes actively step outside the confines of their traditional familial roles and serve a new purpose within society. The involvement of female athletes at the recreational and professional level of competition has influenced the representative value that women have in their local communities, the Ethiopian state and the international community.

The victories of internationally competitive runners like Meseret Defar and Derartu Tulu have served as powerful forms of symbolic action, stating the case for the Ethiopian nation in the international community. In this way, women have become active participants in the development of the Ethiopian national identity through their success in sport. Derartu Tulu describes how she didn't understand the impact of her accomplishments in sport until she returned home from the Barcelona Olympics stating that, 'wherever I went, people would come and salute me. They would ask me to talk to their kids and I was a guest of honor in important social gatherings. That was when the significance of my victory really hit me' (UNEP 2006: 12). Derartu's achievements and courage in the sport of running had earned the young woman international recognition, placing her in a position of power in a society that had previously determined her role to be child birth and agricultural labor. In African Women Run for Change, Chepyator Thomson (2005: 254) describes how 'African women in track & field and distance running have reshaped indigenous-based familial roles and perspectives to represent their countries in world competitions. They have expanded their economic, social and cultural roles to allow for their participation in nation-state building and development of their rural state communities'. The involvement of women in Ethiopian competitive running has expanded the ways in which they are engaged with society and has created new methods for women to access power in the individual, family and state realms.

The role that sport has had in promoting the status of the Ethiopian nation internationally has also significantly influenced the level of participation that women have been able to access in the sport. Though the involvement of women in competitive running challenges the traditional role that women are to have in society, the participation of women in the sport of running has become acceptable and even encouraged as it has contributed to the national identity. For many female athletes who compete for military teams, the contribution they make to the status of the nation through competitive sport is viewed as an alternative form of military service (Chappell and Seifu, 41). As a result of its contribution to the strength and identity of the nation, the Ethiopian government has taken an interest in increasing the participation of both men and women in the sport of running. The cultural significance of running in Ethiopia has expanded the level of involvement that women have been able to have in the sport which in turn has intensified the impact that running has had on the position of women in Ethiopian society.

Due to the success that female athletes have had in competitive running, the promotion of the position of the nation has become closely aligned with the promotion of women in competitive running. Dube Jillo, the technical coordinator for the Ethiopian Athletic Federation, explained in an interview conducted in Addis Ababa: 'if an athlete wins, it benefits the government and the Ethiopian government views the increased participation in Ethiopian Athletics as being good for the society. Women athletes are strong and are becoming better than men now. We can try to improve this number for the future.'⁵ With the support of the government, the involvement of women in the sport of running has been able to expand rapidly as it has become a culturally acceptable activity for women to participate in. Women have challenged the perceptions of how they may contribute to society, interact with men and develop their own future as a result of the governmental and societal support of this sport. Without this support, the involvement of women in running may have continued to be limited by cultural and social norms as it was before Derartu Tulu found international success in the sport.

In addition to the government, communities throughout Ethiopia have also begun to view running as a way for women to contribute to the status of the nation. Eleni Gebermedhin, a semi-professional female Ethiopian distance runner, described how after Derartu Tulu's victory and the introduction of competitive Ethiopian female runners, many Ethiopian parents began encouraging their children to run and participate in a legacy that brought the nation much pride.⁶ Meseret Birhanu, a 16 year old female runner on Team Tesfa in Addis Ababa, described how she was inspired to begin running competitively 'when she was small she read a book about Abebe Bikila, was encouraged by her teachers to run and saw the success of famous athletes in the media'.⁷ She then decided that she wanted to 'become a famous athlete and get income for her family to have a better life'.⁸ Today many parents, like those of Askwal Haile who runs for Team Tesfa, are beginning to encourage their daughters to develop their own talents and goals through running because they find 'pride in the running legacy of Ethiopia' and in their daughter who participated in the sport.⁹

Before female athletes had become internationally successful in competitive running, the participation of women in the sport was largely viewed as a distraction from family

responsibilities and an inappropriate use of time for young women. However, this perception has begun to shift as more families are now encouraging the involvement of their female children in the sport of running. This shift reflects the significant impact that the success of female athletes has had on the development of new social norms and values throughout Ethiopia - specifically at the familial level. Female athletes who run recreationally and competitively have continued to reinforce these new social and cultural norms through their involvement in sport.

Behavioral and societal changes

Much of traditional Ethiopian society has dictated that women maintain a modest appearance, docile demeanor and focus their energy on the household and family. The expectations of Ethiopian women in society closely mirrored that of European women during the Victorian era when it was believed that an 'ideal woman should perform her patriotic duties of attracting a mate, bearing and rearing children, and serving her husband. Any social activity that might restrict or interfere with these responsibilities was discouraged or prevented' (McPherson et al., 1989: 221). Similarly, when women first began to run competitively in Ethiopia, they were limited in what they could wear and how they could participate in the sport. The success of Derartu Tulu in internationally competitive running catalyzed a change in the behavioral patterns of sportswomen. The shifting position of women in sport and society experienced in Ethiopia is an example of the transformative role sport has had on gender relations in societies internationally.

Sport has provided a method for women to exercise their physical power, focus their attention on personal goals and redefine how they present themselves in public both in Ethiopia and in nations with longer traditions of female engagement in sport. The initial involvement of women in modern sport, which began in the Victorian era (1837-1901), was dictated by the ways that women were expected to behave, use their body and interact with men.¹⁰ Jennifer Hargreaves (2002) finds that all forms of exercise for women in the Victorian era required a 'proper' demeanor, decency, and modesty that avoided overexertion, bodily display, and any sign of sensual pleasure from bodily activity. In the late 1800s, however, the advent of the bicycle and bloomer came to symbolize the ways in which women were finding greater physical and social liberation through sport. American suffragist leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton described how 'many a woman is riding to suffrage on a bicycle' revealing the integral role sport had in the social movement for gender equity during the 1800s. In much the same way, female athletes like Derartu Tulu and Tirunesh Dibaba have had a visible impact on the Ethiopian society as 'two decades ago, it was considered a taboo for girls in Ethiopia to wear running gear and run in public. Today however, after the success of Derartu Tulu and other female runners, girls have equal opportunity [to] train with boys' (UNEP 2006: 7). Accessing competitive running in primary school, young women transformed their training attire from skirts to pants to shorts and spandex as they sought to develop their talent in the sport at the local, national and international level of competition. Sport became a location in which women developed new behavioral norms for their gender as they pursued excellence in competitive running.

The opportunities for women to pursue a goal or interest they are passionate about are very rare in Ethiopia as most women are limited in how they are able to behave as a result of traditional norms. Ethiopian women 'have great constraints placed upon them in terms of their commitment to family life, child-caring and household activities. Most women are economically dependent on men, which restricts their participation in leisure time pursuits' (Chappell and Seifu 2000: 43). As competitive running became synonymous with the pride and identity of the nation, women began to participate in the sport even though it fell outside the traditional categories of family or agricultural activities. The sport of running has provided a leisure time pursuit for women who otherwise would not be able to engage in a physically and socially liberating activity such as running. Meseret Birhanu of Team Tesfa described in an interview how 'although we do not get paid on our running team, we have hope now that good things will happen to us, especially when we look at our friends that don't run'.¹¹ Through sport, women have been able to explore their individual abilities and improve upon themselves in ways that would otherwise be unavailable to them in traditional Ethiopian society.

The involvement of women in running has provided an environment where women may find independence and power through their interactions with other female athletes as well as their conscious decision to pursue an activity outside of their culturally defined familial role. Eleni Gebermedhin, a 24 year old long distance runner from the Tigre region described how 'there is no one around when we run in the forest and field so it provides a good condition for us [runners] to be sociable with one another'.¹² When asked about the benefits of running at the non-professional level, Eleni responded that running provides women 'social respect and encourages your self confidence to be a leader'.¹³ Long distance running facilitates conversations between women that normally wouldn't occur in a context that is seemingly less threatening to men, since female running has become a culturally accepted activity. These conversations among runners are incredibly important as 'women find confidence and courage in their relations with other women and through the work of organizations and movements can more easily give voice to what they want' (Hargreaves 2000: 13).

Through sport, Ethiopian women have begun to transform the ritual practices that have defined how they are to interact with men and express themselves physically. John Hargreaves (1986: 13) argues that the control over the appearance, treatment and functionality of the body is an important aspect of social order in all societies. The ritual practices governing the body symbolize and uphold fundamental social relationships (Hargreaves 1986). Modern sport has provided a location for women to take control of their own bodies, exert power over opponents and challenge social inequities. In Ethiopia, the progressive involvement of women in competitive running has developed new ways in which women may contribute to society, express themselves physically and establish new patterns of behavior.

Infrastructural challenges posed by the Ethiopian institution of running

The development of Ethiopian sport through educational and military infrastructures in the mid twentieth century linked competitive running with Ethiopian social and national identities. The historical distribution of resources to teams based in the military and educational system continues to be a defining characteristic of the competitive sport network in Ethiopia today. In 1949 the Ethiopian government established the Ethiopian Athletic Federation (EAF) to promote the development of competitive athletes. Today, the EAF continues to oversee nearly all of the running organizations and activity in Ethiopia. Much of the EAF's budget is concentrated on providing training, coaching, and running materials to the elite national team with very little being allocated to the rural teams. This distribution may change in the future as the organization looks to cultivate the next generation of international competitors and expand the increasingly successful women's running program. However, the current competitive running structure in Ethiopia has provided a challenging environment for athletes to find financial security as professional runners. In addition, the system does not support the simultaneous pursuit of athletic and educational growth. Though sport was used historically as a means of socialization and nation building in the Ethiopian educational and military systems, these systems have yet to provide the necessary infrastructure to support athletes in their pursuit of financial or educational opportunities. The following section will examine the institutional challenges facing runners in Ethiopia and their impact on Ethiopian female athletes who pursue a professional career in competitive running.

Competitive running structure

To aid with the development of young athletes and continue the national running legacy, the EAF established twenty six projects in regions across Ethiopia. On average, zonal teams have more than one hundred athletes running and only a small percentage of them are able to be funded by the EAF. Elshadai Negash, an Ethiopian athletics journalist, explained in an interview conducted in Addis Ababa that the athletes 'have the determination, but in few cases do they have the support' they need to be successful.¹⁴ Inadequate funding is a serious challenge for many athletes as they invest their time and energy into a sport that does not offer a salary for most runners. Though military teams provide an income for athletes, these teams are extremely competitive and inaccessible to most aspiring runners.

As Ethiopia has a limited number of professional races and access to financial resources for athletes, female runners often find it challenging develop a professional career running. Many athletes have difficulties finding opportunities to be scouted by professional teams and managers and have limited access to races at a competitive level. Irko Yada, the marathon coach for the Ethiopian Defense Sport Club, explained that since there are only 'three national races for middle distance runners, two races for long distance runners and two races for marathon runners a year,' the type of team an athlete is on can determine his or her access to these races and potential for becoming a runner who earns a salary.¹⁵ Abdulay Admassu, the Vice Chief of the Arsi Zone Youth and Sport Administration, said that 'managers are not interested in coming to the Arsi Zone (a zone

of multiple rural woredas or districts south of Addis Ababa)' and only come to higher level competitions in Addis Ababa, the capital city, not to competitions at the regional level.¹⁶ As a result, a large number of young athletes in search of a professional career in running migrate to the capital to be scouted for teams that would allow them to compete at a more visible level.

As in many countries, the opportunity to become a full-time professional athlete in Ethiopia is limited and dependant on several variables including fitness, access to competitions and exposure to the right teams and managers. Many Ethiopian athletes find that a career in competitive running is not possible and turn to other professions such as coaching as a more financially stable alternative. The lack of infrastructural support for athletes pursuing running competitively or as part of their education is reflective of the overarching challenge posed to Ethiopians seeking upward social and economic mobility. With limited resources concentrated in the government, many Ethiopian citizens and runners have found it difficult to secure the proper skills or education needed to become financial secure.

Education and sport

Unlike the sporting structure of nations like the United States or Britain, sports are not integrated into the Ethiopian higher education system and are instead their own separate entity. Currently, the structure of the Ethiopian running circuit does not encourage athletes to complete their education as they pursue a career in competitive running. As a result, many athletes are left with fewer opportunities to support themselves when their running career is over. Elshadai Negash, an Ethiopian athletics journalist, described this disconnect as the 'cruel part of running'. He explains that 'athletes start running in school, but when they have to concentrate on running, they have to choose [between running and schooling] and once they make it out [of the running circuit] they have missed their school years'.¹⁷ Recently though, the long standing relationship between the Ethiopian education system and sports has been re-examined by the Ethiopian government as a location for the development of nationally competitive athletes. Additionally, high profile athletes like Meseret Defar have begun to use their national status as a platform to advocate for greater education opportunities for young people – especially women.

In 2006, the Ethiopian Ministry of Youth and Sports collaborated with the Ministry of Education to open talent spotting centers in six middle schools around the country to allow promising athletes to combine their school work with athletics training (EAF 2007). Abdulay Admasu, the Vice Chief of Arsi Zone Youth and Sport Administration, explains how 'there is one school athletics project in Arsi - Bekoji the birth place of most famous athletes. [There is] not enough support from Ministry of Youth and Sport. Sometimes [the Ministry of Youth and Sport] gives sport wear for only [the] coaches and [the school athletics program athletes are] not [as] strong as the athletics federation project athletes.'¹⁸ Some universities, like the privately run Trinity University in Ethiopia, offer limited athletic scholarships to athletes, encouraging runners to continue their education. However, most universities and high schools do not provide programs or

scholarships for students to continue their education and pursue competitive running at the same time. As a result, many Ethiopian athletes choose to run with private and government teams rather than with teams affiliated with educational institutions. Though the Ministry has begun to recognize the necessity to provide ways for youth to be active in both school and running, most athletes find that they must choose either running or education in addition to their obligations to their families.

Despite the difficulties these challenges pose to individual athletes, the hardships that runners face in Ethiopia has contributed to the sense of pride that Ethiopians feel towards the accomplishments of their national athletes. Elite runners serve as role models for Ethiopian men and women and have used their position in society to discuss the challenges facing their communities and advocate for reform. As more Ethiopian female runners become serious international competitors, they provide inspiring examples of strong, confident women defying traditional Ethiopian gender roles. Young women like Amsal from Team Tesfa look to role models like Meseret Defar because they ‘like her beliefs and that she used to be in a bad situation but is now successful’.¹⁹ In addition to running, Meseret Defar is the Honorary Ambassador for the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) championing the causes of women, delaying early marriage and the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Meseret understands both her role as a model for exemplary running and courage as well as her responsibility to those Ethiopian women who have not been lucky enough to find the personal freedom through running that she has. Stating that her ‘primary concern is that [she] wants people to learn’ and she ‘doesn’t care about the money but wants to be a role model for Ethiopian women,’ Meseret Defar sets a positive example for women across the nation.²⁰

In Ethiopia, as in many other countries internationally, very few athletes are able to compete on an international level and even fewer are able to make a long term career out of doing so. The sports institution in Ethiopia lacks the infrastructure and support needed to provide future financial security for the vast majority of those who pursue professional competitive running. Additionally, this system has yet to integrate education and sport in a way that promotes the development of educated Ethiopian athletes. However, the Ethiopian female athletes that have dominated international endurance running in the past two decades continue to make significant contributions to the status of their nation and Ethiopian women. Through their achievements they have created space for women across the country to compete in running as a form of recreation and self determination.

CONCLUSION

Modern sport has proven to be a mechanism for reproducing and changing culture, power dynamics and gender relations internationally. The impact that running has had on the Ethiopian national identity, culture and position of women in the country reflects the transformative capacity of sport in society. In Ethiopia, sport has provided a way for women to reinvent their social and cultural practices. Running has presented a new environment in which women may engage socially with one another and the opposite sex. The sport has also established new patterns of behavior that have worked to develop cultural and social practices supporting greater equity and participation of women.

The sport of running has served as a form of representative action for both the individual athlete and the Ethiopian nation itself. Female runners have been able to harness the power of sport in their everyday day lives; competing against male athletes, defying traditional gender roles and establishing new goals and social practices for themselves. The accomplishments and victories of elite athletes reflect the integrity and strength of the Ethiopian people and serve as a source of power for a nation that is working to establish itself in the international community. The involvement of women in the competitive running has created a way for women to engage directly with the development of the Ethiopian national identity. Serving as cultural ambassadors, female athletes represent the values and strength of their nation when competing internationally. Challenging and transforming the very social and cultural practices that restricted their involvement in society, Ethiopian women are beginning to find greater equity through their own personal involvement in the sport of running and the involvement of their peers.

¹ Elshadai Negesh (Athletics Journalist, IAAF, BBC, Fortune in Addis, Running Times, Runner's World, Race Results Weekly, Africa Report and Salam-ta), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, June 10, 2009.

² Sintayaehu Eshetu, (Head Running Coach of Bekoji Athletics), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, July 03, 2009.

³ Elshadai Negesh (Athletics Journalist, IAAF, BBC, Fortune in Addis, Running Times, Runner's World, Race Results Weekly, Africa Report and Salam-ta), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, June 10, 2009.

⁴ Michael Messner, 'Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5 no. 3 (1988): 197-211; Todd Crosset, 'Masculinity, Sexuality, and the Development of Early Modern Sport' in Michael Messner, Donald Sabo (ed.) *Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, (Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Books, 1990), 45-54; Michael, Kimmel, 'Baseball and the Reconstruction of American Masculinity' in Michael Messner, Donald Sabo (ed.) *Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, (Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Books, 1990), 55-67; David Whitson, 'Sport in the Social Construction of Masculinity' in Michael Messner, David Sabo, (ed.) *Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, (Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Books, 1990); Jim McKay, *No Pain, No Gain?: Sport and Australian Culture*. (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991), 19-30; Shari Dworkin, Michael Messner, 'Just Do... What? Sport, Bodies and Gender' in Sheila Scraton, Anne Flintoff, (ed.) *Gender and Sport: A Reader*, (Psychology Press, 2002), 17-29.

⁵ Dube Jillo, (Technical Coordinator, Ethiopian Athletic Federation), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, July 25, 2009.

⁶ Eleni Gebermedhin, (long distance and marathon runner, formerly an athlete for Trinity University, age 24), interview, Addis Ababa, August 2009.

⁷ Meseret Birhanu, (female athlete, Team Tesfa, age 16), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

⁸ Askwal Haile, (female Athlete, Team Tesfa, age 17), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, June 10, 2009.

⁹ Askwal Haile, (female Athlete, Team Tesfa, age 17), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, June 10, 2009.

¹⁰ John Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture: a Social and Historical Analysis of Popular Sports in Britain*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986); J.A. Mangan, Roberta Park, *From "Fair Sex" to Feminism: Sport and the Socialization of Women in the Industrial and Post-Industrial Eras*, (London: Frank Cass, 1987); Barry McPherson, James Curtis, John Loy, *The Social Significance of Sport: An Introduction to the Sociology of Sport*, (Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Books; 1989).

¹¹ Meseret Birhanu, (female athlete, Team Tesfa, age 16), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

¹² Eleni Gebermedhin, (long distance and marathon runner, formerly an athlete for Trinity University, age 24), interview, Addis Ababa, August 2009.

¹³ Eleni Gebermedhin, (long distance and marathon runner, formerly an athlete for Trinity University, age 24), interview, Addis Ababa, August 2009.

¹⁴ Elshadai, Negesh (Athletics Journalist, IAAF, BBC, Fortune in Addis, Running Times, Runner's World, Race Results Weekly, Africa Report and Salam-ta), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, June 10, 2009.

¹⁵ Irko Yada, (Assistant marathon coach, Military Team), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, June 12, 2009.

¹⁶ Abdullahi Admassu, (Vice Chief, Arsi Zone Youth and Sport Administration), interview by Kayla Nolan, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, July 4, 2009,

¹⁷ Elshadai, Negesh (Athletics Journalist, IAAF, BBC, Fortune in Addis, Running Times, Runner's World, Race Results Weekly, Africa Report and Salam-ta), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, June 10, 2009.

¹⁸ Abdullahi Admassu, (Vice Chief, Arsi Zone Youth and Sport Administration), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, July 4, 2009.

¹⁹ Amsal Tsgaye, (female athlete, Team Tesfa, age 15), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, July 2009.

²⁰Meseret Defar, (Olympic gold medalist and women's 5000 meter world record holder, member of the Ethiopian National Running Team, age 24), interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, August 2009.

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