

More Than a Sport
Empowerment of Women Through
Running in Ethiopia

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Introduction

Despite poverty, oppression and instability, Ethiopian women have found a renewed sense of hope in the glory of the Ethiopian long-distance running legacy. Originally a tradition among Ethiopian men, more recently, women have embraced and succeeded in long distance running. The sport has provided new economic, political and social opportunities to the sixty-seven women running for the Ethiopian National Team and the approximately two-hundred athletes running for the four semi-professional government run teams. Inspired by the accomplishments of the Ethiopian elite women runners, hundreds of young women have begun pursuing running professionally and recreationally through out the nation.

Does the sport of running have the capacity to challenge or alter gender norms in Ethiopia? Can participation in the sport enhance girls' sense of agency, self-empowerment and personal freedom? Can the sport of running be used as a vehicle for social, political and institutional change in Ethiopia?

In the United States, Jackie Robinson's success in the sport of baseball created a foundation for what later became a civil rights movement that transformed the nation. Through his courageous actions on and off the field, "Robinson engaged Americans in a conversation about race long before the momentous events of the 1960s. He was a true pioneer. His life is a testament to how the struggle for equality has many fronts in America," including the ball field.¹ Recognizing his contributions to the fight for racial equality; Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. called Robinson "a legend and a symbol in his own time" who "challenged the dark skies of intolerance and frustration."² Just as Jackie Robinson inspired and challenged a nation through his accomplishments and courage on

the baseball field, advancements in racial and gender equality in sports may serve as a catalyst for change both within the sport and in the greater society and government.

The transformation of women's lives in relation to women's involvement in sports, has already taken place in the developed world. Working hand in hand with the global women's rights movement, the involvement of women in sports has empowered women in developed nations by providing equal representation in an arena that was previously dominated by men. In the United States in the 1970s, women were "entering the workforce in increasing numbers, women had gained more control over their lives through new birth-control technology, and the feminist movement emerged."³ In 1972, "sex discrimination was prohibited in any education program receiving federal funds," ushering in an era where women would find improved opportunities for participation in sports and all aspects of the American society.⁴ In 1970, 1 out of every 27 high school girls played varsity sports in the US. Today, that figure is one in 2.5. From 1971 to 1997 female high school participation increased from 294,015 to 2,472,043 and college participation more than tripled, from 31,000 to 128,208.⁵ Sports became an agent for social change, as sports pioneers like Billie Jean King symbolized and reflected the social movement for gender equality.

Today, Hargreaves observes that the involvement of women in sport is a method of empowering women from a broad and diverse set of backgrounds. She wrote:

"Different women across the world are struggling for identity, and sport has become an increasingly significant way for women to assign meaning to their lives. Female sport – and specifically the Women's International Sport Movement – is an important example of feminist cultural politics put into action through organized opposition to the domination of men in sport and

through the freeing and empowering of the bodies of women from diverse backgrounds.”⁶

The number of women involved in sports globally is growing, as reflected in the significant increase in the percentage of countries entering co-ed (male and female) teams into the Olympic Games from zero teams being entered that included both male and female athletes in 1896 to 85.8% of all Olympic teams entered being co-ed.⁷ The increase in female participation has significant implications for the status of women globally as “female sports are integral to the totality of relations of cultural power which include those between men and women; those between different groups of women; and those which are tied to economic, political and ideological relations of power.”⁸ Though there has been a significant increase in the representation of women in athletics internationally, the female sports culture has continued to be dominated by leaders from developed nations. These women continue to have backgrounds similar to their predecessors, who first established international organizations for women’s sports in the late 1940s. This structure has left the experiences and challenges of women coming from minority groups and underdeveloped nations, marginalized and excluded from the mainstream progression of the female sports culture.

The marginalization of these minority groups and female populations from their counterparts in developing nations is especially disconcerting as these women face unique hardships and barriers in their struggle to win equality and representation with in their national sports teams and societies. Women in developing nations have much to gain politically, economically and socially from participating in sports, though they face a multitude of cultural and infrastructural challenges. This study will explore the possibilities and limits of sport as a means of empowerment for women, as well as its

capacity to challenge gender norms and promote the position of women in a developing African nation.

Women's Rights and Participation in Ethiopian Society and Government

As of 2007, Ethiopia was ranked as the world's tenth poorest country based on its GDP per capita.⁹ The nation placed 85th out of 109 countries in the gender empowerment measure (GEM), a UN index revealing whether women take an active part in economic and political life by tracking the share of seats in parliament held by women; of female legislators, senior officials and managers; of female professional and technical workers and the gender disparity in earned income, reflecting economic independence.¹⁰ The Ethiopian adult literacy rate for women is roughly 32% with a net primary school enrolment ratio of about 27% for females and 42% for women.¹¹ Today, women represent only 7.6% of the House of People Representative (Parliament) and 12.9% of State (Regional) Council.¹² In addition, "violence and discrimination against women is still widespread in the country."¹³

Though today Ethiopia continues to have extremely low levels of female representation in all aspects of Ethiopian society, the nation has a history of addressing women's rights issues as part of its transition from a government ruled by Emperor Haile Selassie to the current democracy. The state of gender equity in Ethiopia today reflects the challenges presented by a history of government repression of the greater Ethiopian population and stifled efforts to empower Ethiopian women at the governmental and community level.

After the Italian occupation from 1936 to 1941, Emperor Haile Selassie maintained control of Ethiopia until he was deposed by a military coup in 1974. Before the military coup, women formed groups independent of the government to represent themselves in the greater Ethiopian society like the Ethiopian Women's Coordinating Committee (EWCC), Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association (EWWA), Ethiopian Officer's Wives Association (EOWA) and the Ethiopian Female Students' Association (EFSA). Though these groups offered a way for women to organize themselves around issues relating to gender, the associations were "limited in scope, only existed in the cities and had little or no impact on government policies, laws, regulations or development programs" in Ethiopia.¹⁴ Once Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed, Lt. Col Mengistu Haile Mariam assumed power and installed a government that was "socialist in name and military in style."¹⁵ From 1977 through early 1978, the country experienced a massive militarization where "thousands of enemies of the Derg [the party in power] were tortured and/or killed in a purge called the 'red terror.'"¹⁶ During the rule of the Derg, institutions were established to represent women in the government like the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association (REWA) while the non-governmental organizations like the Women's Coordinating Committee were forbidden from assembling. This was an important period for the progression of women's rights and political activism in Ethiopia as it shaped how gender issues were to be viewed and advocated for in Ethiopia.

During this period, REWA reflected the growing national awareness of the need to protect the rights of women as well as the government's meticulous control of the greater society. Claiming a membership of over 5 million, the Revolutionary Ethiopia

Women's Association "took an active part in educating women [and] encouraged the creation of women's organizations in factories, local associations and in the civil service."¹⁷ However, the inability of REWA to influence the role of women at the national level lead many to believe that the organization was not "designed to influence government policies or help women benefit from development programs" but rather to consolidate the power of the Derg. An example of the limited involvement of women at the national level was in 1984 when the government "selected only one woman as a full member of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia" [and] of the 2,000 delegates who attended the WPE's inaugural congress [that year], only 6 percent were women."¹⁸ Though the presence of the REWA helped to legitimize the challenges facing Ethiopian women, it failed to make substantial change at the governmental level.

In 1991, the forces of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) advanced on Addis Ababa and took control of the collapsing Derg government. Leading up to this change in political power, women played a pivotal role in combating, challenging and ousting the Derg regime through military service and humanitarian work.¹⁹ The participation of women in the events leading up to the downfall of the Derg stimulated discussion of the involvement of women in the new government. 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. 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 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.”²⁰

In addition to including the protection of women’s rights in the constitution, Ethiopia became a “signatory of global agreements on women rights such as the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)” and “expressed its commitment to gender equity and equality by issuing a national Policy on Ethiopian Women.”²¹ The National Policy on Ethiopian Women instated in 1993 works to eliminate “prejudices as well as customary and other practices that are based on the idea of male supremacy and enabling women to hold public office and to participate in the decision making process at all levels.”²²

Though the new government established the protection of women’s rights under the constitutional law, it continued to stifle the political activism of both women and men in Ethiopia. Ethiopia’s first elections were held in May of 1995 and were boycotted by most opposition parties, “ensuring a landslide victory for the EPRDF.”²³ This was the first of a series of elections that failed to represent a free, fair and multi-party democratic election.

As the nation struggled to form the foundations of democracy, female representation in the government began to increase slowly. In the 1995 general election for regional council, 77 (5%) of 1355 members were women. In the election held in 2000 for regional council, 244 (12.9%) of 1647 members of the regional council were women.²⁴ The increase in female representation in government reflected the efforts made

in 1994 to protect the rights of women. The influence of these policy changes were limited however at the lowest level of *Woreda* (district) council and the lowest administrative unit, the *Kebele* (village), where only 6.6% of the 70,430 Woreda council members were women and 13.9% of the 928,288 elected Kebele officials were women in 2000.²⁵ Though efforts to increase female representation in legislature were slowly manifesting themselves, a democratic Ethiopia had yet to be realized.

The 2005 national elections exemplified the struggle citizens and politicians faced in establishing a democratic election and government in Ethiopia. Unprecedented in the country's history, the national campaign period for the 2005 elections allowed "genuine political competition by the various political parties [with] fair access to publicly-controlled media outlets, and [a] level of public participation and political debate on radio and television between opposition and government leaders and supporters [that] provided a solid background for an open and genuine exchange of views on the important issues affecting Ethiopian society."²⁶

There was a massive interest and participation in the electoral process in 2005 as the European Union Observer team estimated voter registration at no less than 85% of the eligible population.²⁷ There were a total of 1,847 candidates for the House of Peoples' Representatives with 253 of them being women.²⁸ Though early elections results showed considerable gains for opposition candidates, it was "unofficially reported that the ruling party had won the parliamentary elections [leading] to spontaneous public protests and demonstrations throughout the country alleging election fraud."²⁹ In the subsequent months, public protests and demonstrations claiming the election results were changed to favor the ruling party continued as the government made massive arrests, incarcerated

protesters and political opponents, and in an attempt to suppress protests, shot, killed or severally wounded hundreds of demonstrators. Among those incarcerated was the prominent female politician, Birtukan Mideksa, who was elected the party chairman of the new Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) party. After nearly 20 months in prison, Birtukan Mideksa stated in a testimony to the US House of Representatives

Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health:

“There is no democracy in Ethiopia today, despite empty claims of ‘recent bold democratic initiatives taken by our government, the immense progress in creating a competitive, pluralistic system of government and a more open civil society.’ The fact of the matter is that there is neither pluralism nor commitment to democratic principles and practices in Ethiopia.”³⁰

The repressive nature of the Ethiopian government is reflected in all aspects of Ethiopian society and has established a political environment that has not been conducive for making substantial radical changes in any arena, including the development of gender equality.

Although the introduction of the new constitution in 1994 defined new legal rights for women, the implementation of laws protecting the rights of women 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:

“Despite the commitment to equitable public policy, which is reflected in the national enactments and the organizational arrangements established by regional government for implementing the women’s policy, regional development plans are, for the most part, gender-neutral ... 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."³¹

The national government has yet to take a gender-based approach in its development plans or become actively involved in the implementation of these policies at the regional level despite their promises to protect and promote the rights of women. Instead, "the responsibility for implementing development policies has shifted to regional governments, which are not fully prepared to assume the new tasks and do not yet have requisite institutional capacity."³² In addition, "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.³³ The constitution has made discrimination against women in Ethiopia illegal and laws such as the Ethiopian Penal Code have outlawed harmful practices against women like Female Genital Mutilation, but women at the rural level continue to have restricted access to these protections and instead live under the forces outside the Ethiopian legal structure.

As the enforcement of the laws protecting the rights of women in Ethiopia have yet to be realized, the roles of women in communities across Ethiopia continue to be dictated by cultural norms and practices. The United Nations Population Fund found that "in rural parts of [Ethiopia] where creating access [to education] is a serious challenge, girls are discouraged to attend school due to various cultural factors [including:] household responsibilities, fear of 'too much exposure' resulting in a difficult marriage or simply undermining the value of educating girls."³⁴ Similarly, women are continuously exposed to "harmful traditional practices such as female genital cutting/mutilation" despite laws forbidding the practice.³⁵ The Ethiopian Penal Code states that FGM "carries a punishment of imprisonment of not less than three months or a fine of not less than

300Birr [US\$23],” serving as a weak deterrent against a practice heavily embedded in Ethiopian culture.³⁶ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the prevalence and use of FGM on the population of Ethiopian women “dropped from 61 percent in 1997 to 46 percent in 2008 – although an estimated three out of four Ethiopian women have undergone [what is classified as] the removal of all or parts of the female genitalia for non-medical reasons.”³⁷

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. Tiruset Haile Mekonnen, the Associate Economic Affairs Officer at the African Center for Gender and Social Development, explained in an interview that “there have been changes in the constitution to protect women, the problem is implementation. Unless it’s monitored, the changes made are not worth it.”³⁸ Tiruset Mekonnen went on to identify tradition and culture as two of the major challenges facing the protection of women’s rights as “culture and tradition define the role of women using unwritten laws as the guides.”³⁹ Despite legal changes, women continue to face inequality within Ethiopian society as they work to protect their rights in a political and social atmosphere that allows little dissent.

Given the multiple obstacles facing women in Ethiopian society, are there avenues that provide women with opportunities for political, economic, and social advancement? This study seeks to discover the potential running has to empower women at a local and community level in a way that has previously been made unavailable to Ethiopian women. It researches the impact that the participation of women in Ethiopian running has on the position, sense of agency and personal freedom of women in Ethiopia.

Methodology

During the summer of 2009, I spent 8 weeks in Ethiopia investigating the involvement of women in long-distance running. While in Addis Ababa, I lived with a family of three that I was in contact with through a mutual friend at Occidental College. Though I had originally planned for them to be available only as a contact while I stayed in hostels in the capital, their generosity and offer to host me enriched my understanding of Ethiopian customs, culture and values while immersing myself in a traditional Ethiopian lifestyle in Addis Ababa.

In order to gain a full understanding of the impact running has on the lives of Ethiopian women the research study was divided into three main parts:

- 1) I interviewed 32 women in individual and group interviews who are currently involved in competitive running through various non-profit organizations, Ethiopian Athletic Federation teams and the Ethiopian National team,
- 2) I interviewed scholars, academics, journalists and university students about the status of women's equality in Ethiopia and
- 3) I studied the activities of women running within and outside of athletic organizations as well as the developed institution of competitive long distance running in Ethiopia through. This included interviewing coaches and members of the Ethiopian Athletics Federation staff as well as attending the practices and races that various running teams were involved in.

The purpose of interviewing the female runners was to gain an understanding of their experiences as women and as runners in Ethiopia, including their needs and

aspirations. Jennifer Hargreaves, author of Heroines of Sport. The Politics of Difference, describes how:

“The use of biography or life history as a methodological approach can provide unique insights into the meanings that sport has in the lives of women. It is possible to build the analysis around the experiences of women themselves and hence understand better the ways in which they construct personal identities and imagines collective identities.”⁴⁰

Developing trust and overcoming cultural barriers is vital in conducting research across cultures. It was important that the thirty-six female athletes interviewed feel comfortable enough to speak openly about their lives as runners and individuals. Four main tactics and factors were utilized to ensure that a comfortable atmosphere, trust, and rapport were established during the interviews:

1. Using interpreters that the female athletes were familiar with;
2. Conducting the interviews in locations that the athletes were accustomed to, like team practices, races, coffee shops and individual homes;
3. Relating my own experiences as a young, female runner to those of the athletes interviewed; and
4. Using the contacts and language skills of my host family to make connections with the female athletes, coaches and organizations I interviewed.

The use of these tactics became very important as the process of audio recording the interviews and having athletes sign release wavers often created an intimidating and formal atmosphere that was not conducive to facilitating an open dialogue.

In total, I interviewed thirty two female athletes, representing multiple levels of competition, duration of running careers and regional locations. The athletes interviews conducted in Asella and with Team Tesfa, the Simien Running Girls and the Running

Across Borders Team were in group sessions. I also interviewed nine individuals who are involved in Ethiopian athletics, journalism and the empowerment of women.

Four types of female athletes were interviewed, representing multiple levels of competition and community environments.

The first group included female athletes training in Addis Ababa on private teams funded by non-profits, representing the experiences of those females who were on teams that provided funding for food and athletic apparel as well as access to the competitions and athletic opportunities available in the capital.

The second group was comprised of athletes running independently and on regional teams in Asella, a small agricultural town transformed into a hub for running activity due to the multiple successful Ethiopian athletes that originated from the area. These females represented those athletes who had access to very few competitions, managers and athletic opportunities but were inspired by the intense focus on running present in their communities.

The third group of athletes was part of a private running team in Debark, a small mountain town that has very little economic activity outside of limited tourism. These athletes ran for a team that provided the runners with food and running apparel, but had very limited access to opportunities that would enable them to move forward with their running career. This group of girls also lived and trained in a community that had yet to fully embrace the sport as a means to better and enrich one's life.

The last group of athletes was those who ran professionally on the national team in Addis Ababa, representing the experiences of women who had reached the highest level of competition and recognition in the Ethiopian running circuit.

Female Athletes Interviewed

Ranked by Competition Level of Team

Level of Competition	Type of Team	Athlete (age, team, location interviewed)
2 nd Division	Privately Sponsored Team	<p>Worke Motuma: age 16, Team Tesfa, Addis Ababa</p> <p>Meseret Birhanu: age 16, Team Tesfa, Addis Ababa</p> <p>Askwal Haile: age 17, Team Tesfa, Addis Ababa</p> <p>Amsal Tsgaye: age 15, Team Tesfa, Addis Ababa</p> <p>Dikinish Mekasha Tefera: age 19, Running Across Borders Team Addis Ababa</p> <p>Seada Nura Bati: age 18, Running Across Borders Team, Addis Ababa</p> <p>Dunkane Keba Desso: age 18, Running Across Borders, Addis Ababa</p> <p>Halima Hadji Hayicho: age 15, Running Across Borders, Addis Ababa</p> <p>Alemtsehay Girima: age 16, Simien Girls Running Team, Debarq</p> <p>Emebet Yirga: age 15 Simien Girls Running Team, Debarq</p> <p>Tigist Bekele: age 16, Simien Girls Running Team, Debarq</p> <p>Yemet Aragalu: age 16, Simien Girls Running Team, Debarq</p> <p>Lemlem Mulat: age 16, Simien Girls Running Team, Debarq</p> <p>Astede Alemu: age 16, Simien Girls Running Team, Debarq</p> <p>Almez Getnet: age 16, Simien Girls Running Team, Debarq</p> <p>Askale Anmaro: age 14, Simien Girls Running Team, Debarq</p> <p>Eslabeth Asefa: age 16, World Vision Project Team, Asella</p> <p>Yematawork Girma: age 16, World Vision Project Team, Asella</p> <p>Amina Husen: age 17, World Vision Project Team, Asella</p>
	EAF Project Team	<p>Bose Gameda: age 16, EAF Asella Team, Asella</p> <p>India Mahamed: age 17, EAF Asella Team, Asella</p> <p>Gisha Fikru: age 16, EAF Asella Team, Asella</p> <p>Seada Jundi: age 16, Asella Team, Asella</p> <p>Kalkidan Begashaw: age 16, EAF Asella Team, Asella</p> <p>Gifti Derartu: age 16, EAF Bekoji Team, Asella</p> <p>Adanu Mekonen: age 16, Bekoji Team, Asella</p>
1 st Division	Government Sponsored Team	<p>Mahlate Melese: age 19, 1500 meter runner in first division running team, Addis Ababa</p> <p>Eleni Gebermedhin: age 24, long distance and marathon runner, formerly an athlete for Trinity University, Addis Ababa</p>
National and International	Ethiopian National Team	<p>Meseret Defar: age 24, Olympic gold medalist and women's 5000 meter world record holder, member of the Ethiopian National Running Team, Addis Ababa</p> <p>Meslech Melkamu: age 24, 2008 African Athletics Championships gold medalist in the 5000 meter, 4th woman in history to break the 30-minute barrier in the 10,000 meter race, member of the Ethiopian National Running Team, Addis Ababa</p>

** Three athletes from Team Tesfa were interviewed in a group setting where their names were not translated out of Amharic and thus are not included in the above table.*

I was in contact with the coaches, athletic directors and/or managers of the individuals in each group. Acquiring these contacts was made easier by the legitimacy that came with my own knowledge and experience in the sport as well as the language

and networking skills of my host family. As I have run cross-country and track for more than seven years, I was able to use my background in running cross country, as well as my age, gender, American citizenship and limited knowledge of Ethiopian customs to network among running organizations, the Ethiopian Athletic Federation, and numerous coaches and athletic personnel to interview individuals representing a broad spectrum of experiences.

My host family helped me to overcome the challenges of the language and customs barrier as well as provide me with practical information, such as how to navigate the city's transportation system and how to use a 12 hour clock system calibrated to the rising and setting of the sun. This invaluable assistance made the process of attaining, arranging and travelling to interviews possible in ways that otherwise may not have been available to me on my own. I used 6 interpreters while conducting the research. The use of interpreters both limited and enhanced the research. Much depended on the skill of the interpreter and his/her relationship with the athletes. Though each translator had a solid grasp of the English language, there were differences in how they translated what the athletes said in response to my questions. Many interpreters, for example, summarized an athlete's answer in one or two words, even though the runner gave an extensive response. This limited my ability to fully understand what the girls were trying to express as well as what they had been asked.

Though using interpreters limited the breadth of information received from individual interviews, it also provided answers that were, in some cases, more personal and reflective because of the relationship the interpreter had to the athlete.

The ethnographic research – the formal interviews as well as the informal contacts with the runners in their own environments -- was especially helpful in revealing the impact that running had on the runners' individual lives as well as the influence that female athletic competition has had on specific communities and Ethiopian society in general.

The ethnographic research involved three strategies:

1. immersion in an Ethiopian family living a traditional Ethiopian lifestyle, which provided an intimate understanding of Ethiopian customs, culture, values and family structure;
2. visiting Asella during the Oromia Athletics Conference Championship, which allowed me to access athletes from various parts of the Oromo Region and observe the attendance, involvement and enthusiasm of spectators and athletes at a large rural running competition; and
3. living with athletes from the non-profit organization Running Across Borders which seeks to expand economic opportunities to East African youth through running, at their training home in Addis Ababa where I was able to observe the way in which the female and male athletes interacting with one another in a casual, routine environment.

Findings

Running has long been a tradition among Ethiopian men. Ethiopian women have only recently embraced and succeeded in long distance running in the past two decades. Running barefoot across the marathon finish line in Rome in 1960, an imperial bodyguard Abebe Bikila, won Ethiopia's first Olympic gold medal while setting a precedent for running against unyielding challenges in the name of Ethiopia. Since then,

Ethiopia has won thirty-one Olympic medals, thirteen won by female athletes, and all of which were in distance running events.⁴¹ In an interview, the assistant marathon coach for the Ethiopian Military Team, Irko Yada, described how running has become a “cultural competition” for Ethiopians who see their athletes “winning every race.”⁴² Running has created a renewed sense of pride in the strength and endurance of the Ethiopian people and a nation that is struggling to define itself in the contemporary international community.

In 1992, a champion runner, Derartu Tulu, introduced women into Ethiopia’s tradition of superior endurance runners and reflected the new emerging place for women in Ethiopian society. At the age of 20, she won the gold medal in the 10,000 meters event at the 1992 Summer Games in Barcelona and invited the South African silver medalist, Elana Meyer, to share her victory lap in a “poignant show of post-apartheid harmony.”⁴³ Tulu was the first black African woman in history to win an Olympic gold medal.⁴⁴ 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.

When Derartu Tulu was a young child she lived in Bekoji, a small agricultural village, with her family of 14. Like many Ethiopian families, Deratu explains that her “family had trouble deciding who goes to school since they cannot afford to send us all to school.”⁴⁵ Deratu was able to go to school two years later than her fellow friends and like many young Ethiopian women had “trouble balancing between her schoolwork and assisting her mother in the household chores and was always late to school which was far from home.”⁴⁶ Derartu began running, sometimes sprinting to school so she would avoid

the “late-comer’s punishment.”⁴⁷ Her physical education teacher, Sintayaehu Eshetu, noticed Deratu’s talent for running and entered her in a 400 meter race at the Bekoji elementary school. The only female racing, Derartu won and describes how “it was a major confidence boost for me to beat the boy, running in my skirt. People started referring to me as ‘the man in disguise.’”⁴⁸ Once Derartu was recognized as the school champion she was selected to run in the Woreda (district) championships but declined the offer to run because she did not have her mother’s support. Deratu Tulu recalls the day before the race:

“A military car came to pick me up. I had never been outside Bekoji back then and stepped into a car. Since the military came to arrest criminals, the children in our area thought that I had stolen something. I was shocked myself until they finally told me that I was selected for the district run. I told the officials that I have a heart sickness and that my mother would kill me if I go.”⁴⁹

Deratu lied about having a heart sickness for fear of disobeying her mother but her friends and coaches did not believe her story and instead convinced her to race at the Woreda championship where she won the 800 meter and 1,500 meter competitions. Due to her accomplishments at the Woreda race she was selected by the Arsi Region to compete in the Ethiopian National championships in Addis Ababa where she finished third in the 800 meter and 1,500 meter races “attracting interest from a number of Ethiopia’s top clubs.”⁵⁰ Though Derartu wanted to follow her passion for running she explains, “I turned them, [the running clubs] down because I knew that my mother would never allow it. She used to say ‘I was a mother at your age and look at you making a complete fool out of yourself not stopping this childish game called running.’”⁵¹

Eight months later, Deratu returned to Addis Ababa and finished third in the junior race at the Ethiopian cross country championship where she was offered a monthly salary of 120 Birr (\$9.50) by the prisons police club.⁵² Derartu accepted the offer and “left home in search of better athletic achievements without telling her mom.” Running for the club was challenging due to the “Prison club’s incentive-work payment policy whereby an athlete was paid the full amount of the salary only [if] they maintained their [athletic] form.”⁵³ Through this club Derartu was offered the chance to compete outside Ethiopia at the IAAF World Cross Country Championship in Norway but finished a disappointing 23rd. The following year, Deratu was entered in the Barcelona Olympics where we made history. Derartu describes how she didn’t understand the impact of her accomplishment until she returned home. “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.”⁵⁴ 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.

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.⁵⁵

Derartu's coach Sintayaehu Eshetu described in an interview I conducted 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."⁵⁶ 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."⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸ In an interview I conducted in Addis Ababa, Elshadai Negash described the 2004 Olympics as the "second turning point in Ethiopian female running. It was a quite unique unveiling of this new generation of young runners with Tirunesh Dibaba winning her world title at the age of 17. Normally, [Ethiopia] had good athletes who were expected to do well but not win. In 1994, [Ethiopia] had 5 or 6 world class female athletes. 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."⁵⁹

The Ethiopian Athletic Federation (EAF), "especially at the moment (2009), has seen women coming in large numbers to run. The women are strong and are becoming better than men now. We, [the EAF], can try to improve this number for the future," said Dube Jillo, the technical coordinator of the Ethiopian Athletics Federation in an interview regarding current female involvement in Ethiopian running. These women are driven to run by a strong sense of national pride, future earnings, fame, personal accomplishment and the opportunity to make a better life for themselves and their families. Though they

may run for individual reasons, their involvement in the sport challenges traditional perceptions of how women may contribute to society in Ethiopia.

Faced with obstacles to advancement in Ethiopia's political, social and economic institutions due to pervasive cultural values and norms, many Ethiopian women have turned to running as a way to define and pursue their own goals of bettering their lives and the lives of their families. Meseret, a 17 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."⁶⁰ She then decided that she wanted to "become a famous athlete and get income for her family to have a better life."⁶¹ Meseret's 17 year old teammate Worke, described how "running started as an interest and turned into a goal; when you start something with an interest it becomes your goal."⁶²

For many Ethiopian women, the opportunity to pursue a goal or interest they are passionate about is very rare since most women follow lifestyles that are dictated by other people and 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."⁶³ As competitive running has become synonymous with the pride and identity of the nation, women have been able to participate in the sport even though it falls outside the traditional categories of family or agricultural activities. Running provides the opportunity for women to participate in what may be their only leisure time activity. The sport gives them a time and a place to explore their own individual abilities and improve upon themselves. Through running, women are able to actively take control

of their lives and work everyday to reach their own personal goals. Meseret described 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.”⁶⁴

Under a government that stifles Ethiopian women’s political activism, a culture that limits their equality, and an economy that leaves them in immense poverty, running offers them hope that they can take action to better their lives and create a place for themselves next to men as equals in Ethiopian society.

The sport of running provides a way for women to become competitive participants in a legacy that has renewed a sense of pride and hope for Ethiopian citizens and has helped to define a new era of nation-building. Eleni Gebermedhin, a semi-professional female Ethiopian distance runner, described in an interview how the sport of running provides a unique opportunity for individuals to announce and introduce their culture.⁶⁵ 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. One of the female athletes interviewed described how her parents encouraged her to follow her passion for running because they found “pride in the running legacy of Ethiopia” and their daughter who participated in the sport.⁶⁶ Many other women runners echoed these sentiments in the interviews conducted reflecting the growing sense of pride in an activity that had once been culturally taboo for women to participate in. In an interview conducted with Dube Jillo, the technical coordinator for the Ethiopian Athletic Federation, the role competitive Ethiopian running has in nation-building became clear as Jillo explained: “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.”⁶⁷

When Abebe Bikila first emerged into the international competitive running scene, Ethiopia became a symbol of strength and inspiration for not only the country but for the African continent as well. As a nation and continent seeking to have a presence in the international community, Ethiopia lead the way in what would become a legacy of African dominance in running. Authors of Sport, Culture and Politics in Ethiopia, Robert Chappell and Ejeta Seifu describe how sport, especially running, created a greater sense of unity and pride in Ethiopia and the greater African continent:

“Sport was used to help unify the people of Ethiopia and break down regionalism, provide a good national spirit, and gain Ethiopia national recognition in the sporting world. The greatest instrument of integration was the national sports hero such as Abebe Bikila, who won the first Olympic gold medal by a black African nation in 1960. As African runners, in particular, emerged in the 1960s they proudly displayed their national colours. By 1970 African runners became powerful symbols of national identity. They were highly visible, and represented a kind of success that was within the reach of vast numbers of Africans. Their success had an immediate impact in Ethiopia, and in addition they served as role models for the next generation of athletes. They became unofficial ambassadors in competitions where they received international visibility and prestige. Ethiopians had the tremendous incentive of representing their intensely proud, emerging nation. Sport served as a common denominator for integrating numerous tribes with diverse languages and customs into a single nation.”⁶⁸

Seeking to promote the development of competitive athletes in Ethiopia and continue this strong sense of national identity, the government established the Ethiopian Athletics Federation in 1949 which oversees nearly all running organizations and activity

in Ethiopia. Much of the EAF's budget is concentrated in 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. To aid with the development of young athletes and continue the national running legacy, the EAF has established twenty six projects in regions across Ethiopia. The EAF provides running supplies like shoes once a year to anywhere from ten to sixty athletes that run on project teams. Coach Sintayehu Eshetu's Bekoji team has 378 athletes and only 13 of them are funded by the EAF. 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. Tamene Disassa, the Asella Team Coach explained that "the project runners are provided running materials once a year while the young [non project runners] get support from their parents but it's not enough" to sustain their athletic needs.⁶⁹ This leaves many athletes running barefoot, eating only one meal a day and working long hours while training up to twice a day. With only one full length paved track in the entire country, athletes compete and train on local dirt tracks.

Elshadai Negash, an Ethiopian athletics journalist, explained in an interview how the athletes "have the determination, but in few cases do they have the support" they need to be successful.⁷⁰ Inadequate funding is a serious challenge for many athletes as they invest their time and energy into a sport that for most, does not offer a salary.

Another challenge to women runners is the difficulty of being scouted, having access to races, and reaching a professional level of competition. Races begin in Kabales, small rural villages of a few hundred people, and progressively get more competitive as athletes

move to the Woreda: small towns of a few thousand people, Zonal: multiple Woredas competing against each other, Regional: multiple zones competing against each other and finally the national level in order to compete in races that might be scouted by managers and potentially lead to a career in running.

At each level of competition, an athlete must rank in the top three in his or her individual race to continue onto the next level. As a result, only thirty athletes per running event are able to compete at the national level. Abdulay Admassu, the Vice Chief of the Arsi Zone Youth and Sport Administration, said in an interview that “managers are not interested in coming to the Arsi Zone” and only come to higher level competitions in Addis Ababa, the capital city, not to competitions at the regional level.⁷¹

Irko Yada, the marathon coach for the 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.⁷²

In these races each event is allowed only thirty athletes to compete and only the top five competitors are picked up by managers who can then arrange for the runners to race in more prominent competitions throughout the world. These managers cover part or all of the travelling and athletic expenses that are incurred while attending international races. The competitions in the capital provide approximately 5000 Birr (about \$398) for prize money and the invaluable chance of gaining international attention.

The structure of the Ethiopian running program and the limited availability of races make it challenging for athletes to reach a level of competition where they are able to make a salary or earn a large amount of prize money.

The Ethiopian running program includes four types of running teams: Second division teams which are divided into two groups: EAF project teams and privately funded teams, then there are first division teams like government sponsored teams and finally the national running team.

EAF project teams are located in rural areas, supply athletic gear to about 30 athletes per team once a year and provide access to competitions at the rural level. These teams receive funding only from the EAF and usually have around 200 athletes running for the team.

Teams funded by NGOs often supply athletic gear and money for food to team members and can register athletes for local or larger races if they are located in the capital. These teams are limited in size and usually sponsor around twenty athletes, though more may run with the team without being sponsored.

The government sponsored teams like the Military and Police teams are extremely competitive and allow only a select number of runners onto their roster. The military sponsored team has a total of 236 athletes with 180 men and 56 women, “a common ratio and number of athletes for the government running teams,” explained the Military Team marathon coach, Irko Yado⁷³. Athletes who run for these teams are usually hired to work for the government after their running career is over and receive a small salary while running for the team.

Finally, there is the national team which competes both internationally and nationally while receiving a salary with the opportunity to become a coach or administrator after their running career is over. The first division teams and privately funded teams recruit athletes at competitions and at popular training locations like Meskel Square in Addis Ababa. With the limited number and availability of Ethiopian competitions, these teams offer support and legitimacy to individual athletes.

Though the structure of the Ethiopian running program not only makes it difficult for athletes to reach a level of competition where they can find financial security, but it also pushes many of these athletes to leave the educational system in their quest to become successful runners. As a result, they are left with fewer opportunities to support themselves when their running career is over. Elshadai Negash, an Ethiopian athletics journalist, described this as the “cruel part of running. He said, in an interview, 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.⁷⁴

Unlike in the United States, sports are not integrated into the Ethiopian educational system and are instead their own separate entity. In 2006, the Ethiopian Ministry of Youth and Sports collaborated with the Ministry of Education to open talent spotting centers in six schools around the country to allow promising athletes to combine their school work with athletics training.⁷⁵ 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. Until now [there is] not enough support from Ministry of Youth and Sport. Sometimes they [the Ministry of Youth and

Sport] gives sport wear for only [the] coach. [The school athletics program athletes are] not [as] strong as the athletics federation project athletes.”⁷⁶ Some universities, like the privately run Trinity University in Ethiopia, offer limited athletic scholarships to athletes, encouraging runners to continue their education. Though the Ethiopian Ministry of Youth and Sports has begun to recognize the necessity to provide ways for youth to be active in both school and running, most athletes continue to find that they must choose either pursuing running or education in addition to their obligations to the needs of their family.

The disconnect between running and formal education is reinforced by many Ethiopian coaches and running teams, who discourage runners from pursuing education. For example, Tamene Disassa, the Asella coach, said in an interview that “education is not good for athletes; they need to get jobs by running.”⁷⁷ This was a common opinion held by EAF coaches at the rural level. Meseret, the 17 year old runner from Team Tesfa, found that her “previous club told her to learn in the evening and focus on running but this privately funded club [Team Tesfa] has been more supportive of her education.”⁷⁸ Most Ethiopian running clubs focus solely on creating elite athletes and do not adapt their training schedule to allow athletes to attend school while they train. Eighteen year old Dunkane Keba Desso experienced this cut-throat club mentality when she was running for one club, “got sick and the club fired her.”⁷⁹ There is a mentality that the athletes in the club are not only replaceable but are expendable and must be focused solely on running otherwise they will be dropped from the club. This environment contributes to many runners choosing to prioritize running over education as is the case for Askwal who “would like to continue [her] education to the University level but if it is

an obstacle to [her] running then [she] will stop” pursuing an education and focus on running⁸⁰.

Though many female athletes have chosen to focus on their running instead of their studies, it is apparent that these athletes understand the value of education and are frustrated by their limited exposure to academia. Several female athletes I interviewed had to choose between running and continuing their education when they became serious about running on a competitive running team. Worke, a 19 year old female runner, said that she “quit school to train because it was too hard to balance the two but plans to start school at the beginning of the year now that the club [that she runs for] will support her joining school.”⁸¹ Worke’s 17 year old teammate, Amsal, said she “stopped education because of running as it was too difficult” to train and go to school at the same time but is also planning on enrolling in secondary school now that the team she runs for, Team Tesfa, will adapt their training schedule to enable her to attend school.⁸² Many female athletes interviewed expressed their understanding of the importance of education when asked if they would want their sons or daughters to be runners. Worke said that “because [she] was not educated, [she] wants [her] son to be educated because running should come second to education.”⁸³ Two female athletes on Team Tesfa, Amsal and Askwal, reflected the trend among athlete responses when they said that they would want their daughters to get educated before they became runners.⁸⁴ Though many of the female athletes interviewed understood the value of an education, they felt that if they wanted to become successful professional athletes, higher education would have to.

Despite the challenges of balancing competitive running, education and the responsibilities of familial roles, Ethiopian women have begun to transform their role and

participation in all three arenas. In the years following the simultaneous introduction of women into Ethiopia's elite sport of running and the new Ethiopian democracy, the nation saw the gross enrollment ratio (GER) of women in primary school increase. From 1994 to 2004, the GER of women in grades 1-4 increased by 11.9%, from 75% to 86.9% while the GER for women in grades 5-8 increased by 17.6% from 19.3% to 36.9%.⁸⁵ These statistics reveal that over the past decade there has been not only a greater increase in the overall attendance of women in primary school, but there has been an even greater increase in the percentage of women continuing their education through grade 8. The increasing numbers of women accessing higher levels of education and participating in competitive running reflects the changes in familial roles and perspectives that are necessary for women to be able to participate in both education and sport.

A recent study conducted by the Population Reference Bureau found that "marriage before age 15 [was] much less common among girls who were ages 15 to 19 in 2005 (13%) than among their mothers (38%)," revealing the expanding place young women have outside the traditional Ethiopian familial role of marriage and childbirth.⁸⁶ By delaying marriage, women subsequently postpone childbirth as the Population Reference Bureau found that "nearly 40 percent of women surveyed in [the] 2005 [study] had had their first child before age 18, and about 16 percent of women ages 15 to 19 are either pregnant or already mothers [revealing that] early marriage is closely followed by early childbearing."⁸⁷

Through the development of a new social norm that has legitimized the pursuit of competitive running by women; female runners have forged a path in which they are able to develop their own sense of independence in the pursuit of their passion for running. In

doing so, these athletes have created space for themselves and other young Ethiopian women to delay marriage thus enabling them to access secondary levels of education and pursue personal interests like running. Although some women have found themselves at a crossroads between running competitively and continuing their education, the participation of women in competitive running increases the capacity of young women throughout Ethiopia to further their position in society as they are progressively provided the space to define their own identity and familial role.

The sport of running enables women to find independence and empowerment through not only their conscious decision to pursue a role besides that of child bearer but in their interactions with other female athletes who are working to shape their body, mind and nation. Eleni Gebermedhin, a 24 year old long distance runner from the Tigre region in Ethiopia described in an interview 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.”⁸⁸ 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.”⁸⁹ 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.”⁹⁰

These young female athletes are not only building self confidence but are gathering and running with other women who are becoming more aware of their place in society, a prime environment for change on a local level to manifest itself. 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 acceptable activity.

As more Ethiopian female runners become serious international competitors, they provide a multitude of inspiring examples of strong, confident women defying the traditional role women are expected to serve in Ethiopian society. Young women like Amsal, Askwal and Meseret 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.”⁹¹ In addition to running, Meseret Defar is the Honorary Ambassador for the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) championing the causes of women, youth 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,” runners like Meseret Defar set positive examples for women across the nation.⁹²

These women athletes have had a clear 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.”⁹³ Across the nation, women have become able to publicly participate in the sport and wear gear most suitable for running: shorts and spandex. Due to the accomplishments and impact on the culture that successful female athletes have made in Ethiopia, “parents want to understand their children more and have them develop the character of the famous runners.”⁹⁴ Through

running, these famous female athletes have been able to influence the public perception of women in Ethiopian culture and challenge traditional gender norms.

Competitive running has provided a way for women to play a vital role in maintaining and advancing the legal inclusion of women's rights in a realm that has yet to fully reflect these advancements: contemporary Ethiopian culture. The growing involvement of women in Ethiopian running provides a link between the newly defined legal rights of Ethiopian women and the perception of women in Ethiopian culture. In doing so, running progressively allows women to access their rights as citizens. As running has created space within the culture for women to explore roles outside of childbearing and the constitution has established greater equity under the law, the representation of women in government and society has slowly increased. This has been seen through the increased percentage of women attending primary and secondary school, increasing numbers of female representatives in government and the involvement of women in competitive running.

Jepkorir Rose Chepyator-Thomson, author of African Women Run for Change, recognizes the influence running has on culture and societal structure when describing 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.”⁹⁵ Public opinion is also influenced by the growing visibility of women as equals to men in running, undermining traditional stereotypes and providing a new identity for women.

Through running, women are able to break down the cultural barriers that keep them from accessing their legal rights and equity under the constitution.

Though the national government has established new laws to protect women, these laws are difficult to enforce as women in Ethiopia continue to live lives largely dictated by cultural norms and practices. This is especially true for women living in rural areas. These areas often have limited governmental structures and lack the funding necessary to enforce the penalties of women's rights violations. For this reason, the running has become a key tool in the protection of women's rights. It directly challenges the cultural and traditional constructs of the identity of Ethiopian women. But it does so passively through the involvement of women in a tradition of excellence. In this way it allows change to come from individual communities and the women within them.

Empowerment is not simply having economic and educational opportunities available but also gaining the confidence, sense of self, and organization necessary to make decisions independently and consciously. Women in many developing countries remain under the forces of parents, husbands, employers, tradition, religion, and other people and institutions with regard to their bodies, occupations, education, and future. Regaining control over one's life requires an increase "in self-confidence and self-esteem, a sense of agency and of 'self' in a wider context, and a sense of *dignidad* (being worthy of having a right to respect from others)."⁹⁶ This is the essence of empowerment and it is what Ethiopian running represents to women. It does not necessarily provide economic and educational opportunities but rather an environment in which women acquire the means by which to obtain and utilize these opportunities. Even though "most human action is purposeful and strategic, it will always have unintended consequences

that were not part of the original strategy. And in some cases the unintended consequences may turn out to be more important and long lasting than the intended ones.”⁹⁷

Though not the intended goal, the enhanced sense of self one attains while participating in a sport that includes both men and women at the highest levels of success will continue to impact the lives of female athletes, regardless if they attain financial success from their athletic achievements. Though the gender relations of power in Ethiopian politics, society and culture are unequal at present, Ethiopian women have found the power to rearticulate gender norms through the sport of running. Finding personal freedom and agency in running, Ethiopian women have become involved in a sport that has become essential to Ethiopian nation-building. As visible by the impact running has had on the women who participate in the sport, “it would be wrong to underestimate the positive benefits that sport has brought to the lives of increasing numbers of women from developing countries.”⁹⁸

Conclusion

Running provides a way for women to empower themselves; finding self confidence in the independence of their own decisions, the support of fellow female runners and the hope that they may be able to shape their own future. Challenging gender norms by their participation in the sport of running, Ethiopian female runners are able to influence how the Ethiopian society perceives the role of women. As more women find equality through their involvement in running teams and reap the individual benefits of participating in the sport, it is inevitable that they will push for greater

equality and representation in society as successful athletes like Meseret Defar already have.

Running on its own cannot solve the social, political and economic challenges facing women. It does however; serve as a vehicle for change at the community level by enhancing the sense of agency, personal freedom and self-empowerment of women who participate in the sport. Much as Jackie Robinson's achievements in baseball engaged Americans in a conversation about race before the civil rights movement erupted in the 1960s, Meseret Defar's achievements in running have brought attention to the challenges facing women in Ethiopia and have contributed to the continued legal efforts to promote the economic, political and social position of women in Ethiopia.

The involvement of women in Ethiopia's running culture provides a unique way to integrate development, gender equity and a culturally progressive sport to redefine the role of women in Ethiopian society and the direction the nation takes as it continues to grow under the newly democratic government. According to Dr. Robert Chappell, a sports science consultant who was formerly with the Department of Sport Sciences at Brunel University, London, "little research has so far been carried out on sport in developing world countries.' Far less research has been carried out in relation to opportunities for girls and women in developing countries."⁹⁹ The apparent impact successful female athletes have already had on Ethiopian culture and the lives of individual women through out the nation reveals the importance of sport as a vehicle for social change. When working to further gender equity and the protection of women's rights in developing nations it is essential to consider all methods of empowerment, including sport. As running has played a critical role for female athletes in defining their

role at home, in society and in the government, the value and influence of sport in the lives of women in developing nations must be further researched and reflected in the methods of those working to further the position of women internationally.

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