

# WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ETHIOPIA'S 2021 ELECTIONS

## *The Role of Political Parties*

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the role of Ethiopia's main political parties and the participation of women during the three stages of the 2021 election cycle – the pre-voting, voting and post-voting periods. Four political parties – Prosperity, Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice, National Movement of Amhara, and ENAT – were selected and their party manifestos and reports analysed. Interviews were conducted with 12 individuals representing political party leaders and women candidates. Reports of the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) and the media are also included. Data is thematically grouped and interpreted using a conceptual construct of political parties' role in promoting women's political representation as developed by UNDP and NDI. The findings revealed the paradoxes and inconsistencies of political parties' ideologies and strategies which affect women's participation in party politics and the subsequent election outcome. This paper recommends that, given the absence of a quota system to guarantee adequate women's participation in elections, political party self-regulatory measures could offer an alternative option to increase the political participation of women in Ethiopia.*

**Keywords:** election cycle, party politics, women parliamentarians, Ethiopia

### INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia has had only three decades of democratic elections, despite having had elections since the monarchical feudal system which lasted from 1270 to 1974

(Ayele 2022; Teshome-Bahiru 2009). In 2021 Ethiopia held its most recent general elections under extremely challenging circumstances which made it very difficult for female politicians to participate. The circumstances prevailing during the 2021 general elections made a normally challenging situation even more difficult. Ethiopia was facing a plethora of problems both internally and externally: the COVID-19 pandemic forced the general elections to be postponed for a year; inter-communal conflicts and armed clashes made it impossible to hold elections in various parts of the country; and the relations between the federal government and the Tigray Liberation Front deteriorated into a full-scale armed conflict after 4 November 2020. The conflict caused a devastating humanitarian crisis in the country. Major opposition parties in the Oromia region boycotted the elections, complaining about an uneven playing field (Ayele 2022, p.1).

Political parties vary significantly in the extent to which they seek to promote the participation of women as party members, in leadership positions, in recruiting women as party candidates, and in how they address women's interests (Kantola 2019, p.5). Internal party organisation and strategy shape the party-candidate relationship with respect to gender (Aldrich 2020, p. 677). Despite the importance of their active and equivalent participation, women are still underrepresented in party politics and face numerous challenges, including discrimination against their promotion within some parties (Hussain et al. 2021, p. 103). Gender biases in candidate selection processes and the lack of political opportunities inside political parties remain a challenge for women (Dessie 2021, p. 9).

Ethiopia introduced a multi-party system following the 1991 regime change. Subsequently, dozens of political parties have been established, but little has been known about the nature and type of the party systems in general, and how they are promote women's participation in particular. Studies conducted on the political participation of women in Ethiopia (Dessie 2021; Kassa 2015; Tegegn 2008; Richards 2020, p. 4) have emphasised the various socio-cultural barriers and national policy measures for the active and meaningful political participation of women. However, little is known about how political parties' ideology, structure, strategies, and approaches may affect their political representation. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

Using data from the 2021 elections, this study analyses how political parties in Ethiopia attempted to achieve gender balance during the electoral cycle. The research seeks to answer the following key research questions:

- 1) how do political parties' internal party organisation, such as party ideology, organisational structure, women activists, and party rules consider women's political representation?

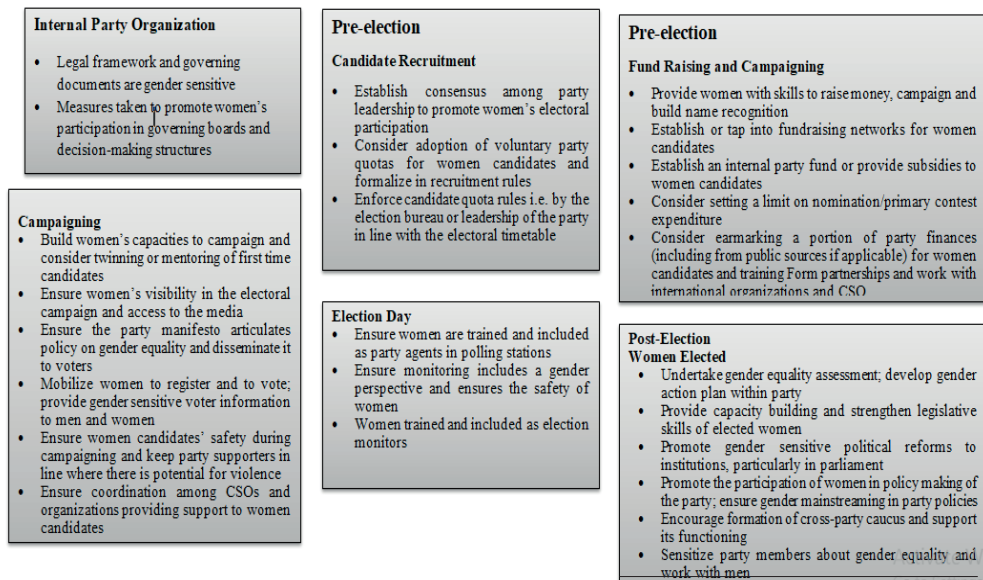
- 2) how do political parties consider women in candidate recruitment, fundraising, and campaigning during the pre-election phase?
- 3) how were women candidates treated during the election phase?
- 4) what does the post-election result indicate about women candidates and political party representation?

## METHODOLOGY

The study is based on combined methodologies of qualitative interviews with political party representatives and a desk review of secondary data from the election manifestoes, legal and policy documents, and election reports of four political parties. The study did not benefit to any extent from previous local studies, and pioneered an analysis of the four parties. These were carefully selected taking into account the number of women candidates they had recruited for the 2021 Ethiopian general elections, their ideological differences, and their geographic coverage during the elections. The political parties are: Prosperity Party (PP) (the ruling party), Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA), National Movement of Amhara (NAMA), and ENAT Party (literally 'Mothers' Party').

As a check on whether promises made in party documents are translated into practice and to assess if there are undocumented approaches taken by the parties to promote women's political representations, 12 individuals representative of political party leaders, and women candidates recruited for the 2021 elections, were interviewed. In addition, election status updates and results from the National Election Board of Ethiopia are followed and thoroughly analysed.

Data is thematically grouped and interpreted using a conceptual/theoretical construct of political parties' roles in promoting women's political representation, as developed by UNDP and NDI (Ballington et al. 2012, pp. 2-3). According to Ballington, the effectiveness of the political parties in promoting women's involvement in the political process can be assessed in relation to the measures parties take across the specific phases of the electoral cycle – the pre-electoral, electoral and post-electoral phases – and to the organisation and financing of the parties (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework developed by the UNDP and NDI to Assess Role of Political Parties to Promote Women's Political Representation.**

Source: Ballington et al. 2012, pp. 2-3

This paper consists of four sections: first, it presents the historical overview of women's political participation in Ethiopia since the monarchical feudal period, with special emphasis on the formation of political parties and the role of women. Second, the article considers six main reasons why women should be represented and should actively participate in politics in general and political parties in particular. These arguments are based on traditional representation, justice, experience, interests, symbolic (that is as role models), and finally democratic representation. Next, the role of four political parties in promoting and enhancing women's political participation in Ethiopia is discussed by assessing their internal party organisation, pre-election candidate recruitment, funding and campaigning on election day itself, and the post-election period. Finally, the paper concludes with lessons to be considered for the next elections.

**THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION FOR WOMEN**

The *traditional argument* in this regard is that promoting women in politics and decision-making roles is based on the obligation to comply with international human rights. Ethiopia is a signatory to major international treaties guaranteeing

gender equality and rights. Moreover, article 35(3) of the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution posits that the historical legacy of inequality and discrimination suffered by women in Ethiopia should be taken into account, and women are entitled to affirmative measures. The purpose of such measures shall be to provide special attention to women so as to enable them to compete and participate on an equal basis with men in political, social and economic life as well as in public and private institutions. Affirmative measures to assist women are also one of the integral requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to which Ethiopia became a signatory in 1981. These stipulations on affirmative action are included in Ethiopia's 1995 Constitution.

The Africa Report indicated that the government of Ethiopia passed an omnibus election law in August 2019; however, key components related to increasing women's participation in politics were voted down. These components included quotas for female candidates in each party, clauses related to violence against women in elections (VAWE), and prioritising female candidates if they received the same number of votes as male candidates (Kiruga 2019). More importantly the law does not make it mandatory to prioritise female candidates if they received an equal number of votes as male candidates.

Secondly, the *justice argument* postulates that since women account for half of the total population they have the right to be represented. In Ethiopia, women account for 51 per cent of the population; however, they have traditionally been underrepresented in decision-making processes at all governance levels and have also been dominated by men and marginalised politically, socially, economically, physically and psychologically (Kassa 2015, pp. 3-4). According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2022 (Galal 2024) Ethiopia has an overall gender gap index score of 0.71, ranking 74 out of 146 countries. Gender disparity is largely notable in political empowerment (0.42) with a low share of political participation by women. Thus the justice argument is cited most frequently by the government of Ethiopia in its policy documents to explain the need for women's participation in Ethiopia's parliament and decision-making positions.

Third, the *experience argument* suggests that the different experiences women have means that their politics differ from men. The Beijing Platform for Action (PFA 1995, para. 181-182) stated that:

women's equal participation in decision-making can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. The presence of women enriches debate through redefining political priorities and addresses women's gender-specific concerns, values and experiences, and provides new perspectives on mainstream political issues.

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic, multilingual and culturally diverse country. Female legislators who belong to various ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds can bring a wide array of issues to parliament and propose solutions accordingly.

Fourth, according to the *interest argument*, women need to be represented to articulate women's specific needs and interests. People's interests and priorities are often shaped by their respective social, economic and ethnic differences. Thus, political parties and electoral systems which enhance or limit the ability of women in government to promote their own interests, can be crucial in allowing women access in equal numbers (Caul 1999, p. 82).

Fifth, the *symbolic argument* says that female politicians act as role models for all women, and will attract other women to the political arena (Kassa 2015, p. 3). The participation and representation of women also symbolises a greater legitimacy of public institutions and changes people's perception of politics as an exclusively male domain (Haack 2014, p. 40). In Ethiopia, the vast majority of women are still living in poverty in deprived socioeconomic conditions. The minority of those who are in leadership positions might not reflect the full picture of women in the country (Gobaw 2017, p. 29). However, the political presence of only a few women is expected to impact on citizens' political attitudes by proving that women are just as capable as men of governing and of fighting for good governance. They provide a role model for female citizens and signal the accessibility of the political system for all social groups (Ashenafi 2009).

Finally, the *democracy argument* asserts that the equal representation of women and men enhances the democratisation of governance. The full and equitable participation of women in public life is essential to building and sustaining strong, vibrant democracies. Women are also seen as less corrupt and more focused on societal welfare; in other words, they are seen as an expression of 'good governance' (Goetz 2007, p. 88). The presence of women in Ethiopia's legislative organs and political parties helps to compensate for past and present injustices, provides a voice for overlooked interests, and contributes to the overall legitimacy of democratic institutions (Kassa 2015, p. 2).

In summary: the arguments discussed above generally fall into two broad categories, the descriptive and the substantive representation of women. Descriptive representation indicates a widely acceptable share of seats in parliament as a measure of political inclusion in society for a category such as women. On the other hand substantive representation deals with women's interests, gender equality and the rationale behind women's representation. A core idea in this strand is that there are certain interests and concerns that arise from women's experiences and that these will be inadequately addressed in a politics dominated by men. Societies will not achieve equality between women and men by simply disregarding gender-related differences (Kassa 2015, p. 6).

Political parties have responded in different ways to demands for gender equality. Not all have taken positive steps, either because of an inherent conviction about their political rights or out of a desire to incorporate specific gender interests, but also as part of an electoral calculation to increase their party's base of political support. Parties which have accepted a composition based on gender have done so with different degrees of commitment and compliance. As a result, parties differ in the number of female candidates on their slates and the number of women holding leadership positions in their executive bodies.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Ethiopian women have played an undeniable role in the country's public life during the monarchical and subsequent eras from the Solomonic dynasty until 1974; for example Queen Sheba of ancient Abyssinia; Princess Yodit of the Zagwe dynasty (960-1000 C.E.); Queen Eleni (1450-1522); Princess Workit and Princess Mestayit (1769-1855); Empress Mentewab I of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; and Empress Tayetu Betul, consort of Emperor Minilik II, held key roles and made decisions on political issues in Ethiopia (Eresso 2021, pp. 2-3; Kebede 2020, p. 563).

During the Italian occupation (1935-1941), women fought against Italy and their role in the public arena began to increase (Adugna 2001, p. 7). The Ethiopian Women's Charitable Organization was established in 1933 and started to provide training and treatment for war victims. The first nation-wide Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association was established in 1935 by Empress Menen to raise funds and projects for women (Eresso 2021, p. 6).

In the late 1960s, the monarchy was facing intense pressure from various quarters to open up and become a political democracy (Teshome-Bahiru 2009, pp. 61-62). The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM), the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) were formed in 1965, 1968 and 1972 respectively (Gudina 2007, p.6). In the 1960s and 1970s there were about 356 female students in universities and the majority had joined active opposition parties such as EPRP and MESON. University students initiated a movement called a 'battle against ignorance and exploitation', aiming to enlighten fellow female students about gendered thinking that excludes women from political engagement. Following the crackdown on the student movement, some female students left the country and joined overseas student unions, including the Ethiopian Student Union in Europe (ESUE) and the Ethiopian Student Union in North America (ESUNA) (Eresso 2021, p. 7).

Subsequently, women had an active presence in the 1974 uprising against the monarchical regime. Thousands of women raised their voices in the mass movement that claimed 'land to the tiller'. During this time women also challenged

the monarchy by demanding equal pay for equal work and participated in the public discourse on gender inequality. During the Derg regime (1974-1991) there was increased politicisation of women's demands that resulted in the formation of the Women's Coordinating Committee (WCC) in 1975. Women from both the EPRP and MEISON joined the committee (Eresso 2021, p. 7). However, the Derg regime was based on Marxist ideology, and it did not guarantee either electoral democracy or multi-party participation. A complex political differentiation had further aggravated the political fragmentation and its polarisation led to the formation of different liberation movements (Gudina 2007, p. 8). It was only in 1994, after the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, that Ethiopia introduced multiparty politics.

To conclude this section, it is clear that despite unfavourable conditions women have been active political participants in Ethiopia. In the 1980s they took part in the Workers' Party of Ethiopia during the Derg regime, women's associations, women's committees, and different ethnically-based liberation fronts. Thirty per cent of the Tigray Liberation Front were female, both combatants and leaders of battalions (Veale 2003, p. 29). When the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991, prominent women politicians, both those in favour of or opposed to the EPRDF, entered the political arena. According to the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia report, the number of women in the Ethiopian parliament has grown gradually, from two per cent in 1995 to 38 per cent in 2021. The first woman speaker of the House of Peoples Representatives (HoPR) was elected in 1995.

Despite the involvement of women in political parties and leadership positions in Ethiopia, women's leagues in political parties, mainly the ruling parties, have faced several criticisms. Women's leagues in political parties often serve as symbolic gestures and have limited decision-making power within the party and the broader political system. This can result in women being involved in the party mainly for ceremonial roles rather than having a real impact on policy and governance. There is still significant underrepresentation of women in higher leadership positions within the party and government. The broader challenges faced by women's leagues reflect broader concerns about genuine gender representation, political participation, and the effectiveness of political parties, which in turn has an impact on changing power dynamics or addressing gender inequality in the country.

#### POLITICAL PARTY PROMOTION OF WOMEN IN THE 2021 ELECTIONS

This section addresses the role of political parties in promoting and enhancing women's political participation in Ethiopia, using the 2021 elections as a case study. The section analyses the extent to which the four political parties ENAT



(‘Mothers Party’ in Amharic), Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZMA), National Movement of Amhara (NAMA), and the ruling Prosperity Party (PP) have embraced women’s participation in politics. The analysis is based on the United Nations Development Programme’s work on *Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties* (Ballington 2012 et al. pp. 2-3) which has recommended the following targets that political parties can take to empower women:

- 1) foundation strategies for internal party organisation
- 2) strategies in the pre-electoral period
- 3) strategies in the electoral period, and
- 4) strategies in the post-election period.

For convenience, this article will divide the phases into internal party organisation and the three phases of the political cycle in separate sub-sections below.

### *Internal Party Organisation*

The political parties in Ethiopia have struggled to effect change in terms of economic, political and social issues. However, the role of the parties in promoting women’s participation remains to criticise, to offer alternative policies, and to replace the ruling party with a new mode of administration. According to Ballington et al. (2012, p. 4) the official statements of a political party indicate how they provide a framework supporting gender equality. More importantly, they provide the party’s vision and the rules the party has adopted. The internal strategies that parties can adopt include adjusting party ideology, rule, party internal structure, and women’s activism.

### *Party Ideology*

Party ideology reflects the governing principles of the parties. The different ideological orientations of the four parties under review are as follows:

The Prosperity Party adopted ‘Civic nationalism economic liberalism’ as its ideological basis, according to its 2021 Election Manifesto. This aspect of civic nationalism contrasts with the ethnic nationalism of its predecessor, the EPRDF Party. Secondly, PP adheres to traditional liberal values of freedom, tolerance, equality, and individual rights. The party endorses an economic liberalism based on an individualistic market economy and private property.

The ENAT party’s name literally means ‘Mother Party’. Although it was severely criticised for allegedly harbouring a hidden agenda to return religion to the political arena, the party adopts a conservative stance on culture, identity,

values, religion, and history on matters of individual rights and economic freedom; and social democratic principles for social justice and fair distribution of wealth (*Capital* 2022). According to the party leader, the party accepts the prevalence of social injustice, including unequal women's political representation.

EZMA party, on the other hand, regards social justice and Ethiopian nationalism as its founding ideology. According to an interview with the party leader in *The Reporter Magazine* (2021), EZEMA would like to substitute the prevailing ethnic nationalism with civic nationalism, but it goes further to encompass social justice issues. With the general assumption that widespread injustices are prevalent, it approaches the issue of women's political representation under the wider scope of ensuring social justice in Ethiopia. The emphasis it gives to social justice can also be inferred from the use of 'social justice' in the party's title.

The National Movement of Amhara (NAMA) incorporates the notion of social justice as a principle but in the context of Amharan ethnic nationalism. As an ethnically-based party, the party's focus is to ensure the Amhara people's fair, just, and equitable share in the country's political power, resource, and burden distribution (NAMA Manifesto). Since NAMA has adopted an egalitarian concept of ethnicity from the perspective of group identity, it does not specify whether or how it specifically promotes women's political representation.

### *Party Rule*

None of the four political parties that we studied has an explicit rule that reserves a certain portion of seats for women candidates. The Prosperity Party (PP) followed the standard practice of its predecessor the EPRDF, which had an unwritten rule that 30 per cent of its candidates should be women. Having evolved from the ruling EPRDF party for three decades, the PP has better organised women and youth structures from federal to district level, though it has been highly criticised for using government structures for party purposes. The PP, the ruling political party in Ethiopia established in 2019 as a successor to the EPRDF, has adopted the women's and youth leagues of the previous EPRDF party structure (Prosperity Party Bylaw Article 15(1) and Article 33(5)).

Nonetheless, its bylaw regarded the women's and youth leagues as only 'supporters' of the party (Prosperity Party Bylaw Article 33(5)). This implies only a supportive but not a decision-making role of women in the party structure. On the other hand, its programme and party manifesto make declarations about efforts to ensure women's political participation and decision-making (Prosperity Party Election Manifesto 2021). The programme and the manifesto promise to ensure and enhance women's economic and social empowerment and fight gender-based violence and other factors inhibiting women from being active citizens in every spectrum.

EZEMA has explicitly mainstreamed the gender issue in its policy directions on the economy, culture, health, and education. However, it does not refer to women's political participation either in its manifesto or in a personal interview (on 19 August 2021) with R Tafesse, one of its female candidates for the National Parliament. Moreover, EZEMA's policy document also asserts a need to fight against gender-based violence (EZEMA Manifesto 2021).

On the other hand, NAMA has specifically included affirmative action measures to enhance women's education and participation opportunities (NAMA Manifesto 2021). Nonetheless, its policy directives on the economy, health and education have not included gender issues.

Lastly, the personal interview with K Atnafu, ENAT's head of internal management and organisation on 16 September 2021, revealed that the party's legal documents and policy developments are designed to address the inclusivity of women but that this is not articulated in detail in the party's documents.

### *Party Structure*

Internal party structure provides a general framework to assess whether a party promotes women's political representation. In order to understand the internal organisational structure of Ethiopian political parties it is imperative to examine the party's governing documents, as well as policy developments (Ballington 2011). The following sections assess whether the parties have designed a women's wing structure; and how women's participation in party conventions illustrates party strategies to promote women's participation in the internal party structure.

Of the four parties, only EZEMA has adopted decentralised party decision-making, candidate nomination and institutionalised candidate recruitment process. As the interview with Tafesse revealed, EZEMA designed a bottom-up approach to party decision-making and candidate nomination. The interviewee indicated that the party has adopted the mandatory recruitment of two women of the four candidates (one for the parliament and three for the state council) in each electoral district.

NAMA and ENAT have adopted a centralised decision-making and candidate nomination process which may provide a favourable foundation for including women on a proportional basis. Nevertheless, the candidate recruitment process for both parties was not merit-based, but rather depended on the bureaucratic discretion of the party leaders which in effect undermines the number of women to be represented.

In the Prosperity Party, the chain of the party decision-making structure is at five levels (local sub-district, district, zone, region and federal levels). However, the party's ultimate decision-making power resides in federal and region level

councils (Prosperity Party bylaw 2021). It adopts a centralised decision-making process and candidate recruitment is at federal and regional level.

### *Women's Activism*

Women participate as party activists when a political party designs a women's wing, and sections and targets are set aside for women's participation in party conventions (Ballington et al 2012, p. 4). According to the interviewees Atnafu and Tafesse, EZEMA and NAMA have designated strategically-positioned women's wings led by women that involve all levels of party decision-making. However, ENAT has failed to adopt most of the strategies deemed necessary for promoting women's representation at party structure level. EZEMA has reserved two executive committee seats for the women's affairs department at district, zone, regional, and federal levels. In the case of the PP, apart from recognising the women's league of the previous EPRDF as a 'supportive structure', it does not establish or designate seats for women's affairs in its internal party organisation and central committee.

None of the four parties has set targets for women's participation in party conventions. Generally, the analysis of the four political parties indicates the existence of party-level differences in terms of internal party organisation designed to promote women's political representation.

When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the leader of the Prosperity Party, took power in 2018, he advocated a more inclusive approach to governance. He appointed women to half the cabinet positions. He also nominated a woman as his first chief justice, identified a woman to become the first woman president, and an exiled woman opposition leader was appointed to become chair of the National Election Board of Ethiopia. Women also constitute 30 per cent of the judiciary.

### ELECTION CYCLE

#### *Pre-Election Candidate Recruitment, Funding and Campaigning*

The role of political parties in promoting women's political representation is assessed through candidate recruitment, funding and campaigning strategies during the pre-election period. In principle, if the party leadership reaches a consensus to increase women's electoral participation, the party enforces a voluntary quota, places women in winnable and safe constituencies, offers incentives to attract women, coordinates with CSOs to support women candidates, and gains support from men (Ballington 2011, pp. 21-28). In relation to funding, the party should enhance money-raising skills, establish fundraising networks for

women, introduce internal party funds, subsidise women candidates, earmark a portion of party finances for women candidates, and form partnerships and work with CSOs and international organisations (Ballington 2011, pp. 28-32). During the campaign period, parties are expected to equip women with the support of CSOs; ensure their media visibility; ensure that the party manifesto articulates policy on gender equality and distributes it to voters; ensure the safety of women candidates during the campaign; and mobilise women voters by providing gender-sensitive voter information (Ballington 2011, pp. 3-37).

Assessing the four political parties against these indicators shows their differences. Even though all the parties have reached a consensus about increasing women's electoral participation, differences are seen in the steps taken to realise it. As interviews with party leaders reveal, except for NAMA, the other three parties claimed that they have introduced an informal quota system for two female candidates out of five candidates at each district level, though this is not specified in their party constitutions.

Nonetheless, whether the quota adopted by the parties has made a difference can be determined by the number of women candidates recruited for the 2021 elections. The International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) report (2022) shows that a total of 9 000 candidates representing 47 parties and 125 independent candidates was registered for the 2021 general elections. The PP had the largest number of candidates with 2 432 registered, followed by EZEMA with 1 385 candidates registered, ENAT with 573 candidates registered, and NAMA with 491 candidates registered, respectively. Overall, the participation of women candidates decreased from 29 per cent in 2015 to 21 per cent in 2021. In total 1 976 women were registered as candidates by political parties and six women were registered as independent candidates (Table 1).

**Table 1: The number of candidates and the women's portion recruited by four political parties for Ethiopia's 2021 elections**

Name of Parties	No of Party Members	No. of Candidates for the Federal Parliament				No. of Candidates to the City and State Councils			
		M	F	Total	Women's proportion (%)	M	F	Total	Women's proportion (%)
PP	38 815	298	209	507	41	1337	954	2 291	41.6
EZEMA	3 860	338	13	351	3.7	1003	163	1 166	14
NAMA	11 866	152	1	153	1.4	345	14	359	3.8
ENAT	1 183	169	10	179	6.4	360	44	404	10.9

Important implications can be drawn regarding the number of women candidates recruited by the four parties for the 2021 elections. First, in Ethiopia, political parties' adoption of a voluntary quota for women is not guaranteed to ensure and promote women's political participation and representation. The ruling party, the PP, has developed an informal quota system for the lower houses. Although EZEMA has adopted a voluntary quota of two out of five candidates (which is 40%), women consist of 3.7% and 14% of the number actually recruited for the parliament and state councils respectively. On the other hand, parties' failure to adopt a voluntary quota system for women's representation publicly does not necessarily mean that party is unfavourable for women. This is inferred from the PP's number of women candidates. As shown in Table 2, the PP nominated about 41 per cent of women candidates for the 2021 elections without openly adopting a voluntary quota for women.

As the interviewees revealed, women candidates in the ruling party have already gained in popularity as they have assumed public office for some time. Despite criticism by its opponents, the ruling party recruits more women by using existing, well-established government structures and resources. On the opposition side, as interviews revealed, women are reluctant to join because of a political space that does not favour women and a hostile public attitude towards women in opposition parties. Moreover, the extremely volatile security situation due to the war between the federation and its regional allies and the armed TPLF group in northern Ethiopia could be one potential factor for the decline of women candidates' representation for the 2021 election. According to the IRI and NDI report (2022), this insecurity due to violence has specific and disproportionately negative effects on the participation of women and other marginalised groups, and poses grave concerns about potential human and political rights violations in and outside the election context.

In the *candidate recruitment* phase, parties have shared their active engagement in providing training, establishing a partnership with CSOs, and support from men for their women candidates. The training focused mainly on leadership and public speaking skills. The support of men for women was evidenced during the election campaign, whereby a few men accompanied and campaigned for the female candidates. However, in terms of equipping women with campaigning capacity, no party has provided them with any training. EZEMA has arranged experience-sharing sessions between experienced candidates and novices. However, most ruling party PP candidates were officials hence they had experience in leading public meetings and were familiar with public speaking.

In terms of *funding*, there are no special arrangements for financing and building name recognition of women candidates by political parties. Apart from funding/CSO support of women training on matters mentioned above,

there is also no specific effort made at the party level to support women during campaigning. Special financial support is designed by the government to fund political parties. The number of female candidates the party nominates is one of the criteria to determine the amount and eligibility for the funding (Proclamation No.1162/2019 Article 100(2c)). According to the IRI and NDI (2022) report, some political parties adopted specific gender policies; however, only 13 parties successfully reached the 20 per cent threshold of registered women candidates to qualify for additional funding. As a result, some opposition parties were criticised for not having a genuine intention of increasing women's representation, but of recruiting women only for the financial incentive during election.

According to the IRI and NDI report (2022), representatives of major opposition parties highlighted a skewed funding field in which the ruling party has more than the normal advantages of incumbency, in part due to the country's political history. Opposition party leaders noted the lopsided support of the business community, citing the example of a fundraising event organised by the PP at the Millennium Hall on 15 March. The prime minister, his cabinet members and a wide range business persons were in attendance and the party raised over ETB 1.5 billion (about USD 35 million). Opposition parties also alleged that the business community could not support them openly, fearing retribution. Most parties complained about the ruling PP's misuse of state resources and abuse of office for campaign purposes from local to federal level. The unpunished abuse of state resources has been described as a common problem in previous and current elections.

Regarding the provision of safety for women candidates during *campaigning*, the ruling party PP relied primarily on the state security apparatus. Opposition parties generally assigned women to campaign with men, and in the urban centres (Atnafu 2021; Derese 2021; Kebede 2021; Tafesse 2021). The parties have adopted two different approaches to providing gender-sensitive voter information for women voters. The ruling PP has explained its efforts to ensure women's representation in its cabinet and women's assumption of key government positions. It has provided statistics indicating that women are assuming key government positions under its administration, and almost half of the government cabinet members are women (The Prosperity Party Election Manifesto 2021). On the other hand, opposition parties have focused on asserting that women are still subjugated in Ethiopia. They provided information to the voters about how women are marginalised from substantive political representation, the ramification of gender-based violence, the economic dependency of women, and their commitment to address traditional challenges that undermine women's roles.

While the majority of women candidates face disproportionate barriers in contesting elections, women candidates from opposition parties and independent

women candidates reportedly faced additional challenges during campaigning. As the campaign season began, candidates from two opposition parties, NAMA and EZEMA, were assassinated (*Borkena* 2021). The NAMA candidate Berihun Asfaw was running for Benishangul-Gumuz state council, while Girma Moges was EZEMA's candidate for a parliamentary seat. Each political party alleged that the assassinations were politically motivated (Ayele 2022).

According to the IRI and NDI report (2022), women candidates from opposition parties were frequently the target of intimidation, threats, and campaign interference by security forces as well as members of the ruling party. Independent women candidates faced a range of additional difficulties in the collection of signatures and financial impediments resulting from late disbursement of state campaign subsidies. Interviews with leaders of opposition political parties revealed that some women candidates withdrew during the election campaign because of family pressure, including the threat of divorce by their husbands. Some women candidates have also faced sexual harassment in door-to-door campaigning. The repressive political culture of the country might contribute to fewer women candidates being recruited by opposition parties even though some have party policy in favour of women's representation.

The variation was also manifested in terms of *media visibility* of women. The extent of women's participation in the 2021 elections debates broadcast by the mainstream media illustrates the difference in media visibility. For instance, the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) organised debates on different social policies with two candidates representing each party in each debate. In almost all the debates, one of the two debaters of PP and EZEMA were women. In the case of ENAT, women participated in very few sessions. NAMA was not represented by women at all during the debate streamed by EBC. Even in the women and youth policy debate, NAMA was represented only by male politicians.

### *Election Day*

According to Ballington et al. (2012, pp. 34-36), on election day political parties have to promote women's political representation. This includes ensuring that women are trained and assigned to polling stations as party agents and participate in election monitoring, which includes gender perspectives and women's safety. Party representatives confirmed that they have appointed women as party agents in polling stations, and affirmed that the bulk of women had taken part in election monitoring which was uncommon in previous elections. There was a prevailing sense of apprehension that the election would involve disturbances and therefore a low voter turnout was expected. According to the official report of the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), turnout in the 436 constituencies where elections went ahead was in the region of 90 per cent.



### *Post-Election Period*

Of the 20 national and 26 regional parties that competed in Ethiopia's 2021 elections, three national parties – PP, NAMA, EZEMA – and two regional parties managed to secure seats in the Federal Parliamentary Assembly (see Table 3). According to the official reports of NEBE, PP won 96 per cent of the seats in Parliament (454 seats). The NAMA won five seats, EZEMA won four seats, Gedeo People's Democratic Party won two, and four independent candidates also won seats in the Federal Parliament. Of the parties considered for this study, 37.8% of the female candidates from PP have won seats; only one female candidate from NAMA has joined the regional council; all four EZEMA candidates who have won seats are men. ENAT, the Mother's Party, failed to secure a single parliamentary seat. There are two possible justifications for this failure to secure a single seat in either the federal and regional parliaments. First, it was a new party, established only a few months prior to the 2021 elections. Second, the party was considered to be dominated by religious ideology rather than taking a 'pro-mothers agenda' as its name claims.

**Table 2: Distribution of parliamentary seats for the 2021 general elections**

Political parties winning Seats	Seats in HoPR	Women in the HoPR
Prosperity Party (PP)	454	176 (37.8%)
National Movement of Amhara (NAMA)	5	1
Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA)	4	0
ENAT Party	0	0
Other regional parties	3	1
Independents	4	0
Total	470	

Source: <https://nebe.org.et/>

EZEMA was expected to be the second major political party in terms of seats won. However, to the surprise of many this party lost in all but four constituencies. However, EZEMA party has left a good impression for its progressive citizen-based ideology and has been proactive in bringing women into public debates during the election campaign. This could be due mainly to the current ethnic-based ideology which has dominated the Ethiopia politics. The very tense ethnic politics in Ethiopia is one of the possible challenges to bring the issue of other ideologies into the political space. Lately, the winning ruling party has made a

political decision to offer more open seats to selected failed leaders of opposition parties from EZEMA and NAMA, who are now appointed as ministers of Higher Education and Innovation respectively.

**GENDER COMPOSITION OF LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN FEDERAL AND REGIONAL OFFICES AFTER THE 2021 ELECTIONS**

In October 2021, the House of People’s Representatives held the sixth round, first year, first special session. Accordingly, the prime minister proposed 22 ministerial positions (of these, seven ministers are women) which have been approved by the Parliament with two votes against and 12 abstentions. The cabinet proposal saw the changing functions and jurisdiction of a number of ministries and government institutions, and for the first time included three opposition figures in ministerial positions. Women were appointed to ministerial offices such as Health; Transport and Logistics; Labour Skills; Women and Social Affairs; Irrigation and Lowland Areas; Planning and Development; and Urbanisation and Infrastructure. Moreover, women were assigned as directors in more than eight federal offices and as team leaders in 19 offices.

Regional bureaus led by women also vary, from two in the Amhara region to six in the Harari regional council. Bureaus of Women, Children, and Youth Affairs are led mainly by women in different regions. Other regional bureaus led by women include Agriculture, Justice, Health, Urban Development, Road and Construction, and the Civil Service Commission (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Composition of the Federal and Regional Offices Heads and Deputy Heads by Gender**

	Council	No of Positions	Directors/ Heads		Deputy Heads/ Team Leaders		Sectors that assigned Women Leaders
			F	M	F	M	
1	Addis Ababa	18	8	21	19	23	Directors for bureaus of Tourism; Water irrigation, & Energy; Health Insurance Agency, Business Investment; Education; Social Security; Geospatial Information Institute

2	<b>Afar</b>	18	3	15	6	20	Directors for bureaus of: Women, Children and Social Affairs; Attorney; Technique and Enterprise Develop- ment
3	<b>Amhara</b>	23	2	21	3	18	The speaker of the council Directors for bureaus of: Women, Children and Social Affairs; Civil Service Com- mission
4	<b>Gambella</b>	17	1	14	3	11	The speaker of the council Directors for bureaus of Women, Children and Social Affairs
5	<b>Harari</b>	14	6	8	1	13	Directors for bureaus of: Agriculture; Women, Children and Social Affairs; Urban Development, Road and Construction; Employ- ment, Skills, and Enterprise; Civil Service
6	<b>Oromia</b>	19	3	16	8	25	Heads of bureaus of: Justice; Culture and Tourism; Women, Children and Social Affairs
7	<b>Sidama</b>	17	5	12			Heads of bureaus of Health; Women, Children and Social Affairs; Urban Develop- ment; Employment, Skills, and Enterprise, Planning and Development
8	<b>SNNPRs</b>	20	3	22	14	25	Heads of bureaus of: Women, Children and Social Affairs; Communication; Planning and Development
9	<b>SWEPRs</b>	20	4	16	10	43	-Finance and Economy Office -WCYA, Revenue Authority -Enterprise and Industry Office
10	<b>Somali</b>	9	4	5	-	9	Bureau of Mines, Innovation and Technology, Women and Social Affairs, Vice Spokesperson of the Council

11	Dire Dawa C/A	14	3	11	-	-	Head of Bureaus of Education, Health, Finance and Economics
12	Addis Ababa C/A	25	1	1	16	7	Mayor of Addis Ababa, Deputy Mayor, General Manager of Addis Ababa Head of bureaus of: Housing Development and Administration; Communication; Regulatory Authority of Government; Development Organizations; Culture Arts and Tourism; Peace and Security Administration; Design and Construction

Source: Data from Federal and Regional offices in 2021

**Table 4: Summary of Strategies to Promote Women’s Political Participation among the Four Political Parties**

Political Party Interventions		Name of Political Parties			
Phases	Strategies	PP	EZMA	ENAT	NAMA
Internal Party Organization	Legal framework & governing documents are gender sensitive	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Measures taken to promote women’s participation in governing boards & decision-making structures	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Women’s wing or section established is strategically positioned within the party	✓	✓		✓
	Targets set for women’s participation in party conventions				
	Gender equality perspective mainstreamed into policy development	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Candidate Recruitment</b>					
Pre-election	Establish consensus among party leadership to promote women’s electoral participation	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Consider adoption of voluntary party quotas for women candidates and formalise these in recruitment rules		✓	✓	

Phases	Strategies	PP	EZMA	ENAT	NAMA
Pre-election	Consider nominating % women candidates	✓	✓		
	Enforce candidate quota rules i.e. by the election bureau or leadership of the party in line with the electoral timetable	-	-	-	-
	Place women in winnable positions on party lists, or in winnable/safe constituencies	-	-	-	-
	Identify incentives to attract women and encourage them to join the party, such as capacity building or advocacy	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ensure coordination with CSOs and organisations providing support to women candidates	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Form strategic partnerships and gain support from men		✓	✓	
	Funding and campaigning		✓	✓	
	Provide women with skills to raise advance funds, campaign and build name recognition				
	Establish or tap into fundraising networks for women candidates such as Emily's List and Wish List				
	Establish an internal party fund or provide subsidies to women candidates				
	Consider setting a limit on nomination/primary contest expenditure	NA	NA	NA	NA
	Consider earmarking a portion of party finances (including from public sources if applicable) for women candidates and training		✓	✓	✓
	Form partnerships and work with international organizations and CSOs		✓	✓	✓
<b>Campaigning</b>					
Pre-election	Build women's capacities to campaign and consider twinning or mentoring first time candidates		✓	✓	✓
	Ensure women's visibility in the electoral campaign and access to the media	✓	✓	✓	✓

Phases	Strategies	PP	EZMA	ENAT	NAMA
Pre-election	Ensure the party manifesto articulates policy on gender equality and disseminate it to voters	✓	✓	-	✓
	Mobilise women to register and to vote; provide gender sensitive voter information to men and women	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ensure safety of women candidates during campaigning and keep party supporters in line where there is a potential for violence	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ensure coordination among CSOs and organisations providing support to women candidates	-	✓	✓	✓
<b>Election Day</b>					
Election	Ensure women are trained and included as party agents in polling stations	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ensure monitoring includes a gender perspective and ensures the safety of women	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Women are trained and included as election monitors	✓	✓	✓	✓
Post-election	Undertake gender equality assessment; develop gender action plan within party	-	-	-	-
	Provide capacity building and strengthen the legislative skills of elected women	✓	-	-	-
	Promote gender sensitive political reforms to institutions, particularly in parliament	✓	-	-	-
	Promote the participation of women in party policy making; ensure gender mainstreaming in party policies	✓	-	-	-
	Encourage formation of cross-party caucus and support its functioning	-	-	-	-
	Sensitise party members about gender equality and work with men	-	-	-	-

Source: Interviews with party leaders and women candidates and review of party manifestoes and other relevant documents

## CONCLUSION

Since the adoption of constitutional democracy and a multi-party system in Ethiopia's 1995 Constitution, the issue of women's political representation has become a topic of scholarly discourse in Ethiopia. Nonetheless, as this article has shown, the existing discussion is limited to the government's role in promoting, and socio-economic factors promoting or hindering women's representation. The role of political parties in promoting women's political representation has been overlooked. The analysis of the Ethiopian political parties in the 2021 elections reveals discrepancies in the measures taken by political parties to promote women's parliamentary representation.

There are party-level differences and inconsistencies in the measures taken within and between parties in the entire election cycle. What is common to the political parties studied here is the existence of a common sense agreement to the relevance of a gender-sensitive party policy document, but without the formal rule that reserves a certain portion for women candidates. Party differences are also observed in terms of mainstreaming the gender issue in policy documents. All the parties discussed in the paper, with the exception of the ENAT Party, have a structure for a women's wing without setting targets for women's mandatory participation. Party-level differences are observed in the structure and extent of women's participation in party decisions. Except for EZEMA, they have adopted centralised decision-making but failed to adopt an institutionalised rule-based candidate recruitment policy in their organisational structure.

Regarding candidate recruitment, there is consensus among all parties on the need to increase women's electoral participation; however, there are many variations in the different measures taken. Although not legislated for, parties such as the PP and EZEMA have adopted an informal voluntary quota for women candidates but there were constraints in enforcing this. However, none of them has adopted women-focused strategies to assign women to winnable and safe constituencies.

Nor have any of the political parties in the study designed a special funding scheme for women. Little effort was made to build any recognition of women or equip them with campaigning skills. However, the Prosperity Party benefitted from its position as the ruling party in government, hence its women candidates were public officers and had prior experience of managing public meetings. Of the opposition parties, only EZEMA had arranged for new women candidates to share a platform with experienced candidates. Unlike the ruling party, opposition parties have established a strategic partnership with CSOs to empower women candidates with the necessary skills and knowledge to campaign. Moreover, fundamental differences were reflected in the media visibility of women during the election campaign. Women were seen on election day as party agents in the

polling stations and election monitors. Despite all its ups and downs, the ruling Prosperity Party won the election with an overwhelming majority.

Recent legal and institutional changes at the Ethiopian National Election Board include an additional subsidy for political parties that register a minimum percentage of women as candidates or as party leaders. There is also an allocation of free airtime for political parties that have incentivised, even with a limited effect, contributions for the promotion of political participation of women in the 2021 elections. In addition, the appointments and election of women to high-level offices, including Ethiopia's president, president of the Supreme Court, and chairperson of the NEBE, are seen as positive signs of more gender-inclusive politics. However, at party level, women's political participation is still influenced by several factors. These include party ideology, access to government institutional structures and resources, funding opportunities, attitudes of the public towards opposition parties, and access to media for campaigning.

Nationwide, the postponement of the election beyond the terms of parliament and state councils (as provided in the Constitution) due to COVID-19, and the subsequent deadly internal conflict, all complicated the situation in the country. These had a negative impact on the election outcome in general and participation of women in the election process in particular.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The issue of women and politics in Ethiopia should extend beyond increasing women's representation. There is a need to examine which women are represented as well as the degree to which women are actively engaged in different political parties before, during and after the-election.

Bylaws of political parties guide the recruitment and engagement of women in politics. There are differences and inconsistencies among the policies developed and measures taken within and between parties regarding women's participation in election. The relevance of gender-sensitive party policy documents and a genuine interest to support women beyond reserving seats or certain portion for women candidates needs critical attention. Reviews of these bylaws and programmes by political parties are thus timely.

There is also a need to review policy and legal frameworks at national level. The Ministry of Women and Social Affairs should adopt a strategy that recognises active and genuine representation and participation of women in party politics prior to election year. The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia should review electoral laws and directives and should adopt a strict supervision of women's engagement in the election cycle before, during and after the event.



Women's engagement in politics requires active and continuous advocacy from multiple actors. There is a need for robust evidence generation that enhances the understanding of party politics and women's active participation in elections. The government, CSOs, NGOs, and political parties should collaborate in advocating for genuine women's representation and participation in the upcoming elections, and on increasing the diversity consciousness of frontline actors and women at large.

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