

GIRLS EDUCATION FEATURE

PROMOTING GIRLS' EDUCATION IN BORA DUGDA



Emebet Berhane

Emebet Berhane's daily trips to school are not to join a classroom of fellow students. Instead, Emebet comes to the Weyo Gabriel Elementary School to fill her clay *masero*¹ with water from the public water point located within the school grounds.

Coming to the school is a daily reminder of a dream that she once had - a dream that she had fought very hard to realize. It was a simple dream, shattered by forces and traditions much older than her. Emebet's dream was to finish school.

Emebet was born and raised in the rift valley town of Meki, located 140 kms south of Addis Ababa in Oromia region. It is an area where tradition dictates that girls marry at an age when they should be attending school. In the case of Emebet, it was the practice of marriage by abduction that killed her dream of finishing school.

Two years ago, a group of young men abducted Emebet as she was walking toward her parent's home in Meki. After taking her to a remote hiding place, her abductor eventually brought her to

Weyo Gabriel, the next village after Meki on the Addis Ababa - Moyale Highway. Emebet had just completed eighth grade.

At first, Emebet was determined to fight and refused to give in easily. She recalls, "I wanted to go to school. My desire was to learn so that I could reach a better level, but it was not to be." As soon as the opportunity presented itself, she escaped and ran back to her parent's home in Meki. Her abductor, however, came after her, and took her back to Weyo Gabriel. She ran away a second time, only to be caught again. This time, her abductor arranged to make bride-wealth payments to her family fulfilling his marriage contract obligations as prescribed by tradition, thereby ending their objection to the marriage. Emebet had no say in the matter. With her family no longer supporting her, she resigned herself to the unwelcome marriage and her new life.

Emebet's husband is a farmer, and although she claims to be on good terms with him now, he refuses to let her go to school. They have not had any children, however Emebet hopes that when they do they will not be forced to share her fate. With a resigned expression Emebet declares, "If I have daughters, I want them to be educated. I do not want them to be like me. This abduction tradition is very bad, it forced me to give up my chance for a better life."

¹ Masero is the traditional Ethiopian vessel used for containing water.



Waiting to fill up at the Weyo Gabriel water point

As 4 p.m. draws near, groups of girls and young women begin to congregate along the fence of the Weyo Gabriel Elementary School. They place their water containers in a neat queue, ready for when the water point attendant will open the gates and turn on the taps.

The windmill powered pump was set-up through the UNICEF supported Woreda Integrated Basic Services (WIBS) programme, with drilling assistance from the Italian NGO Liy Volunteers International Association (LVIA) and the Equatorial Business Group, a private establishment based in Addis Ababa.

Through the WIBS programme, which has been operational since 1994, UNICEF assists in the provision of integrated and sustainable social development services to selected disadvantaged woredas (districts) in each region of Ethiopia. The programme is designed to improve the conditions of children and women facing critical basic needs shortages and aims to transform these woredas into development models for others to emulate.

The public water point at the Weyo Gabriel Elementary School was set up as part of this initiative to attract and retain increasing numbers of female students. Throughout rural Ethiopia, access to clean water remains severely limited.² The task of fetching water, typically the task of school age girls, entails trekking several hours a day to and from rivers and ponds with large clay water vessels on their backs. This daily chore is often cited as a major reason for not sending girls to school, as well as for their dropping out. In addition to spending precious class time on rural pathways going to water sources, girls who make these daily journeys are generally unprotected and constantly exposed to the threat of abduction and/or rape. Once abducted and forced into a marriage, the likelihood that the girl will return to school is virtually nil. The often long journey to and from school, particularly for students in rural areas, also exposes girls to abduction.

By providing a clean source of water in their immediate vicinity, the WIBS programme is helping to remove this daily threat of abduction and sexual abuse. It has also drastically reduced time spent on daily household chores, thus freeing up time to attend school.

Increasing girls' school enrolment rates is one of the major WIBS objectives, and this goal is tackled through multi-sectoral interventions with the aim of making conditions in the woreda more conducive for girls to attend school. These interventions include social mobilization and awareness creation activities, which are undertaken to convince parents to send girls to school. A strong effort is made to ensure the presence of female teachers to serve as role models and counselors. Teacher training and curriculum development attempt to remove gender bias from instructions. School facilities are also



Their water vessels full, Emebet and friends head home.

² According to official figures, 28 per cent of households in Ethiopia have access to safe water. Access to safe water is defined as 20 liters per person per day within a distance of 1-2 kilometers. The effective coverage is even lower as 30-60 per cent of existing water schemes are not functioning.

rendered more gender sensitive, the provision of separate latrine facilities for boys and girls being one example.

Prior to the WBS programme, schools in Bora Dugda Woreda, where Meki is located, were built with only one latrine for all students exposing girls to harassment and sexual exploitation. The WBS programme has installed separate latrine facilities for girls in almost all Bora Dugda schools, thereby removing another major reason behind the high drop out rates for girls.

The UNICEF supported WBS programme has contributed to increased enrolment, including girls' enrolment, at the Weyo Gabriel Elementary School. During the 1996-1997 academic year the school only had 162 male and 96 female students. Five years later, the number of students has multiplied to 647 male and 336 female students respectively.



Meskerem Tesfaye, 4th grade.

With the continued support of UNICEF to the education programme of the Government of Ethiopia, conditions have become more conducive for girls like Meskerem Tesfaye, a 14 year-old in the fourth grade, to attend the Weyo Gabriel Elementary School. She is the only one among her siblings to go to school. Her older sisters were betrothed at birth, and because their future husband's families did not want them to be educated, they have never been to school. Meskerem was fortunate not to have been given away at birth as is the common fate for girls in Bora Dugda.

After school, Meskerem attends to her household chores, which include fetching water. "Before this pump was set-up in our school compound, we used to have to walk far to collect water," she recalls. "Now it is much better. The water itself is better. The old water was bad for our teeth and bones, and we are very grateful."

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