

STATEMENT

GIRL'S PERSPECTIVE ON GIRLS' EDUCATION BY SOPHIA AYTENEW AT THE ETHIOPIAN TEENAGERS' FORUM ON GIRLS' EDUCATION 4 MARCH 2004

Good Morning,

First, I would like to express how happy I am that our meeting today will discuss issues that affect us girls, my sisters, in particular regarding our education.

At this present time when the world is engaged in a technological race, if at all possible it would be wonderful if we could be ahead, otherwise it would be good if we could just keep up with the rest of the world. While we are impatient to see this happen, the real pace of things has been lagging far behind our very fast dreams. Have we ever stopped to reflect on one of the big secrets behind this failure? Have we stopped to consider why girls and women, who make up more than half of the population, can barely make it past the tenth grade, and why those that may have made it over that obstacle have little chance of ever getting past the twelfth grade, let alone to get an education and achieve successful positions in life? Let us explore some of the reasons for this from the things that we experience in our daily lives.

In addition to the small number of girls within the classrooms, many of those that are in school, for various reasons, are compelled to drop-out. If they do make it through the school system, it is only a few who make it past the national examinations. Even though we are beginning to see some changes in the attitude of the public, which is resulting in some improvements in the situation, the public is still responsible for the unacceptable enrolment rates, high drop-out rates and poor performance in national standardized examinations.

What are the problems? One of the major sources for the problems facing girls is the family. Families have not realized that it is not just enough to send their daughters to school. It all begins when a boy and girl return home from a day at school. Parent's welcome the boy saying, "My Lion! Go out with your friends and play football," while girls are told to, "go and rinse out those socks for me. Don't be lazy." It all begins with words like these.

As the children grow up, both mothers and fathers encourage the boy to grow up to become a pilot, doctor or professor. They show their confidence in his abilities and provide him with all the moral support he needs to achieve those goals. Toward the girl, however, they push learning how to cook, insisting how important this is for her future and her ability to find a husband. That is how she grows up.

If the family does not have a servant to help with the housework it is not the boys who are made to stay home from school but the girls, so that they can help with chores. This happens not because the parents are not educated, because we see many parents who claim they are educated doing this. This results in girls having low self-esteem and confidence, believing that they are not capable of accomplishing much outside of the home.

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For the girl who overcomes all of this and continues going to school, the hurdles do not end there. The amount of leering, shrewd comments and teasing that a girl has to endure from the time she leaves her home until she reaches the school gates is incredible. In school she is faced with boys who want to force her to be their boyfriend. They taunt her asking where she thinks she will get to with an education. It is only a few of us girls who do not experience these things. My fellow sisters here in this audience, you can all attest to this. You have either experienced it yourselves or know others close to you who have.

All of these things that I have mentioned, and many more that I haven't, discourage girls from continuing their education and prevent them from going beyond the primary level, let alone to university.

It is encouraging to see that the Government, various NGOs, and international agencies are beginning to work on the problems that girls face to get an education. I call upon all of us here at this forum to work hard today so that we can add our voices to the efforts underway to promote girls' education and solve the problems that we girls face. I also call upon the public to not only send their daughters to school, but to make sure that the education girls receive is substantive, meaningful and results in success. We all need to make fundamental changes to do this. We should also look at the examples set by those women who have fought against the odds and become successful.

Finally, I would like to say that in all our efforts to promote girls' education we need the support of our fellow male students and fathers. I, therefore, ask that our brothers continue to support us in our efforts.

Thank you.

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