

Conversation with Netsanet Mengistu

Netsanet Mengistu was one of the prominent women members of the Ethiopian Students' Movement who went on to found Progynist, a women's rights organization. She says that having been raised in a relatively liberal family, it was when she joined Addis Ababa University that she first experienced catcalling, harassment and misogyny. It was also the time when the Movement was getting energy and Netsanet became actively involved when some of the leaders started approaching women to join the movement. At the time, Netsanet was frustrated at the high rate of women's failure to complete their university education, and some of the sexist representation of women in the large newspapers of the day which caused her to 'hate being a woman.'

In her engagement in the Students' Movement, Netsanet participated mostly in fundraising and campaigning activities along with female friends. As the Derg military regime became increasingly oppressive, Netsanet decided to join and worked underground as a member of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) from 1976-1980. Netsanet firmly states that the struggle in the party was to abolish the class, national and gender oppression. However, the women's question was not addressed as a unique type of oppression since the belief was that once the class struggle is achieved, the question of women would be answered.

Netsanet says that women within the Students' Movement were committed and never hesitated in their struggle; mothers were the guardians of the struggle by giving safe places for the discussions held by the youth in their houses and often warned them of the Derg's movement. Netsanet travelled to different parts of the country taking the agendas of EPRP and creating a consciousness shift among rural women to question for their rights. Netsanet says that while working in different structures of EPRP, she found that there was no sexism by the members or leaders of the party because any remark or deed pointed on ethnicism or gender was counted as chauvinism which was out of the ethics of the party.

Netsanet was jailed by the Derg after serving EPRP for four years. In her prison life, she met incredible women who were arrested from different parties because of vocalizing their voice against the Derg regime and most of them were killed brutally by the Derg regime. She is always amazed about unsaid role of women in keeping together families and children while most of the breadwinners and youths who are expected to support their families had been jailed. She recognizes that the role of women in the struggle was both in a visible and invisible way, although it is seldom recognized by historians.

Prison was also a place where Netsanet developed herself and evolved as a human being. Being exposed to a huge collection of books and getting the opportunity to access education and of teaching others on the other hand, filled her with optimism and courage to impact her people when released from prison in 1986. However, she was unprepared for the reality of Ethiopian society when she left the prison. She says that she found misogyny was at its peak; for her was no safe place to talk her mind and dream. Although she was given an official position in the new administration that took over from the Derg in 1991, she soon resigned from her position as Vice Minister for Foreign Trade Ministry. Netsanet criticizes the then Transitional Government for not bringing up to the power those women who sacrificed their life for the people. She finds the government's promises of women's empowerment to be mostly rhetoric.

Netsanet call herself a Progynyst which is also a name of her organization working on women's empowerment. She came up with the name to show that she is pro-woman and fights for a better world for women.