Psychosocial and Economic Empowerment within Periodic Religious Gatherings of Women

EXPLORING THE ETHIOPIAN EXPERIENCE

Eyerusalem Belay
2020 CARD werdwet fellow

Belaynesh Tefera (Ph.D.)
Research Advisor

Psychosocial and Economic Empowerment within Periodic Religious Gatherings of Women

EXPLORING THE ETHIOPIAN EXPERIENCE

Eyerusalem Belay
2020 CARD werdwet fellow

Belaynesh Tefera (Ph.D.)
Research Advisor

CARD
የመብቶችና ዲሞክራሲ ዕድገት ማዕከል
Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy

Eyerusalem Belay (2020) CARD Werdwet Research Fellow
Belaynesh Tefera (Ph.D.), Research Advisor
January 2021
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to explore the sensitive relationship between gender empowerment and religion in the context of Ethiopian societies. It focuses on studying socio-religious gatherings of women across three religions (Orthodox Christianity, Islam and Protestantism) with the intent of identifying realities of empowerment.

Method: 55 semi-structured and structured individual interviews with female members of Tsïwwa Mahbär's; university Jumu'ah and prayer groups; 2 focus group discussions with stakeholders in gender and human rights issues; and representatives from the religious communities under study were used to explore personal experiences and opinions in relation to the gender-religion questions raised.

Results: Thematic inductive and deductive analyses of individual interview transcripts showed that there was internal economic support between members and mobilization of funds for charitable activities. Interviewees also expressed a strong sense of belonging to these gatherings narrating their emotional satisfaction, psychosocial support and personal growth. Similar thematic inductive and deductive analyses of video transcripts of focus group discussions validated the data obtained during the individual interviews and further substantiated broader issues of gender and religion and their relationship in the Ethiopian societies under study.

Conclusion: This study provides qualitative narratives of how Ethiopian women use religion-based gatherings as platforms for economic and psychosocial empowerment, albeit with a necessary contextualization of empowerment.

Key words: Gender Empowerment, Economic Empowerment, Psychosocial Empowerment, Religion, Religious Gatherings, Tsïwwa Mahbär, University Jumu'ah, Prayer Groups, Ethiopia

Contents

Appendices 89

Box and Figures

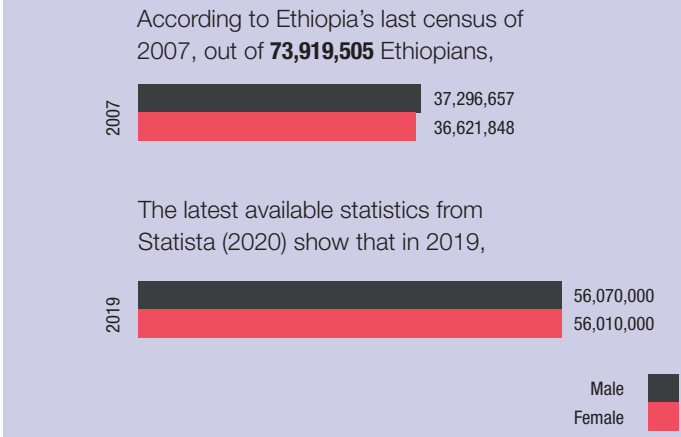
Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

Chapter One: Introduction

Religious Identities of Ethiopian Women

Ethiopia is an East African country bordering Eritrea, Somalia, Kenya, South Sudan, and Sudan.

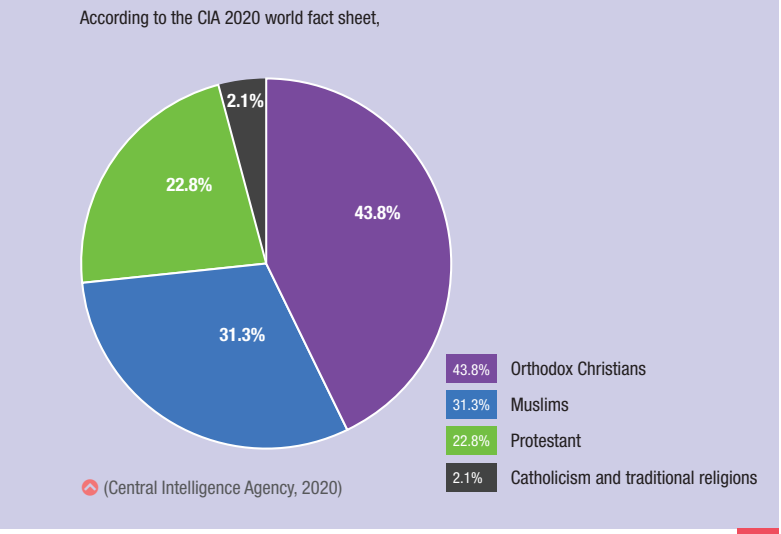
Figure 0.1



https://www.ethiopianreview.com/pdf/001/Cen2007_firstdraft(1).pdf

Read More

Figure 0.2



https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ethiopia/
Read More

While this research found no statistical data on how many Ethiopian women fall under the above religious groups, large numbers of women attendees are evidently observable at churches and mosques all over Ethiopia. **A higher religious tendency of women in comparison to their male counterparts has been observed in some studies. In the United States, for example, women are more likely than men to say religion is "very important" in their lives (60% vs. 47%). American women are also more likely than American men to say they pray daily (64% vs. 47%) and attend religious services at least once a week (40% vs. 32%) (Pew Research Center , 2016).** The Pew Research Center, in its study of gender gaps in religions around the world, studied data collected from 192 countries across six different faith groups (Christians, Muslims, Buddhist, Hindus, Jews and religiously unaffiliated people) and found that, globally, women are more devout than men by several standard measures of religious commitment (Pew Research Center , 2016).

The cause for the gap in the religiosity of women has been subject to scholarly debate since the 1980s, with some authors arguing socialization, social depravation or biological experience of motherhood as causes for such gaps (Jensen, 2019).

The reality, nonetheless, remains that women across the globe are more likely to be affiliated with a religious group, more likely to regularly attend religious services, and more likely to attach significance to their religion even despite being excluded from leadership positions.

This is especially true for developing countries, such as Ethiopia, where studies have shown that people are, on average, more religious than those in advanced economies (Pew Research Center , 2018).

Ethiopians in general and, by statistical inference, Ethiopian women in particular are not only religious but significantly more religious than their counterparts in other parts of the world.

A 2015 survey by Pew Research Center found Ethiopia to be the most religious country in the world.

Similarity, in 2017 the Center found that adherents of the Orthodox Christian faith in Ethiopia were significantly more religious than their counterparts in the US or in Europe. 78% of Ethiopians say they attend church services weekly; 65% say they pray daily, and 98% say their religion is 'very important' in their lives in contrast to 52% that say the same in the US and 28% in Europe. Diamant (2017) also reports that Orthodox believers in Ethiopia are more conservative in their views on morality and social issues such as homosexuality, prostitution, abortion, and divorce than their European counterparts. Hence, for the religious Ethiopian woman, her religion is of great significance as it plays a role in dictating identity, social relationships and outlook on life and gender issues.

While existing literature on the impact of religion on identity is scarce, available studies have shown the significant role religion plays in the formation of self and social identity. Religion might serve as a powerful influence on an individual's identity, assuming that the person involved is deeply religious or significantly committed to his/her religion.

Box 0.1

The influence of religion on self-identity works in one of two ways:

1. Through parental influence - children whose parents are significantly religious are more likely to be significantly religious themselves; and
2. Through community influence - assuming that members of a particular community are mostly religious, it would be the case that most people would adhere to the norms of the community. If it is the case that the norms of the community are binding on most, if not all, members of the community, then, religion might play a significant role in identity formation (Oppong, 2013).

Further, according to Tajfel's (1979) Social Identity Theory, social groups such as religious-based groups serve as important sources of pride and self-esteem. Social groups give people a sense of social identity and a sense of belonging to the social world. Greenfield and Marks (2007) in their quantitative examination found that more frequent formal religious participation was associated with better mental wellbeing and stronger religious social identity. In light of the above literature and results that were observed during the current study, Ethiopian women closely associated with religious groups, hence deriving their social values and group identities from their religion.

> **The women interviewed for this study expressed fierce protectiveness and satisfaction in their religion and subsequent religious associations. For an Ethiopian woman, religion not only dictates her identity and morality but also her understanding of gender, gender roles and the question of gender empowerment.**

Empowerment of Women in Ethiopia

While the term "empowerment" is so often used in various organizational contexts, it is one that is rarely defined. The standard vocabulary definition of "empowerment" as provided by Merriam-Webster is as follows:

Definition

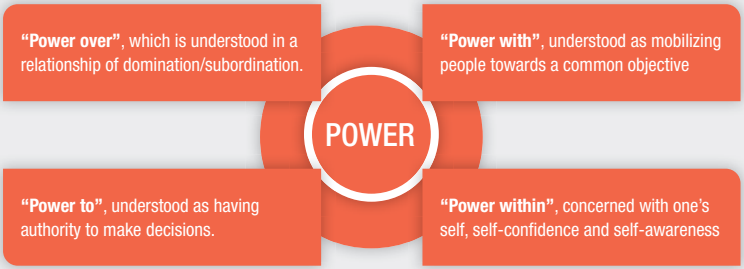
Empowerment:

The act or action of empowering someone or something: the granting of the power, right, or authority to perform various acts or duties

(Merriam-Webster, 2020)

Box 0.2

At the root of the term empowerment is "power", which can operate in four ways:



(Oxaal & Baden, 1997, p. 1)

The goal for gender empowerment is one that is pursued by international and national actors alike. The empowerment of women can take shape in the form of economic, social, political, educational and psychological empowerment.

This study, however, will focus on economic and psychosocial empowerment as parameters for exploring possible empowerment of Ethiopian women within their religious gatherings.

Economic empowerment in particular is viewed by the UN Women as central for achieving equality and empowerment. Economic empowerment can be understood to mean women's ability to participate equally in existing markets; their access to and control over productive resources; access to decent work, control over their own time, lives and bodies; and increased voice, agency and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels from the household to international institutions (UN Women, 2020). Psycho-social empowerment is a combination of social and psychological empowerment in which an individual's psychological development is understood in relation to his/her social and cultural environment. The excerpt below from UN Women demonstrates how economic and psychosocial empowerment can be understood and pursued:

> **The empowerment of women concerns women gaining power and control over their own lives. It involves building self-confidence, expansion of choices, increased access to and control over resources and actions to transform the structures and institutions which reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality. The process of empowerment is as important as the goal. Empowerment comes from within; women empower themselves. Inputs to promote the empowerment of women should facilitate women's articulation of their needs and priorities and a more active role in promoting these interests and needs. Empowerment should not be seen as a zero-sum game where gains for women automatically imply losses for men. Increasing women's power in empowerment strategies does not refer to power over, or controlling forms of power, but rather to alternative forms of power: power to, power with, and power from within, which focus on utilizing individual and collective strengths to work towards common goals without coercion or domination (UN Women, 2020).**

In the pursuit of gender empowerment and equality, the Ethiopian government has put in place legislative frameworks that promote gender equality starting with the FDRE Constitution of 1995, which reiterates equal rights of women and provides affirmative action to remedy past inequalities. Similar principles of equality are also included in the 2000 Revised Family Code, the 2005 Revised Penal Code, and the 1993 National Policy on

Ethiopian Women. The country has also ratified the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (CPRW) and the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It has also adopted and endorsed the principles of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPA), the Millennium Development Goals, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

While the government has made commendable efforts, the reality of women in Ethiopia, as noted by the concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Ethiopia, showed that there is still work to be done in regards to access to justice for women; the prevalence of harmful traditional harmful practices such as child marriage, FGM, abduction; the perpetuation of gender stereotypes; and limitations of women's role in society (CEDAW, 2019).

Ethiopian women are still facing inequality; the country is ranked 82nd out of 153 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index.

The gender report for 2020 indicates notable gaps in nearly all areas including economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, access to finances, and civil and political freedom. Gaps were in particular evident in the ratio of female to male enrollment in secondary and tertiary education, legislators, senior officials, managers, and in parliament (World Economic Forum, 2020). As such, there is still much work to be done by public and private stakeholders in promoting and achieving equality and empowerment for Ethiopian women.

This study notes the continued importance of legal and institutional reforms, social and economic policy measures, and the persistent challenges to socio-cultural and religious narratives of inequality. It recognizes women as their own "empowerers".

Hence, the study takes a bottom-up approach to empowerment. Empowerment is not something that is done for women but rather a goal they collectively pursue on their own terms and within their contextual realities. This is especially true for Ethiopian women who are influenced by religion.

This study takes into account the realities of women in Ethiopia on the ground and explores possibilities of empowerment within socio-religious communities, introducing a new narrative in the pursuit of gender equality in the country.

The Religion and Gender Dialogue:

Empowerment for Ethiopian Women within Religious Gatherings

There exist various views in regards to the relationship between religion and gender. Classical feminist authors such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1885) argued that history shows the moral degradation of woman is due more to theological superstitions than to all other influences put together. Others have labeled religion as "misogynist, racist, homophobic and backward". Recent studies on gender equality, law, and religion depict religion as a potential source of human rights breaches (Rivers, 2007). As Franenberry (2018) points out,

> "Many feminist philosophers themselves have harbored either a suspicion of religion or an impoverished understanding of it, and so have been slow to develop a significant body of scholarship in this area."

The relationship between religion and gender is historically dynamic and complex with some authors such McElroy (2005) arguing that there is no inherent tension between religion and feminism. This argument dates back to the abolishment movement of the 1830s, which was fueled by religious women. Others, such as Kirkley (2000), contend that atheist communities show higher belief in gender equality.

While religious institutions and doctrines have a male-dominated modus operandi with religious leadership almost universally still prohibited to women and religions maintaining a patriarchal narrative of gender roles and gender relationships, religion still continues to be popular, albeit with decreasing influence in the western world.

> **Despite all the arguments against religion, especially in light of gender issues, women still continue to be more religious than men as studies repeatedly support. Instead of abandoning religion all together,**

women have found ways to reform religion from within as can be seen from the rise of Christian, Muslim and Jewish feminist movements. This approach to empowerment within religion is one this study takes.

The study notes that the dominant secularist approach to empowerment has led to the exclusion of women of faith who are still entitled to equality. Such claim is even more evident for women who live in the religious Ethiopian societies. This polarized choice between one's religion and views on gender empowerment is one Ethiopian women face, as this study found.

Box 0.3

When asked if they saw religion as an obstacle or an opportunity for gender empowerment, 15 participants in two separate focus group discussions provided diverse answers including the following:

1. Religion is a tool for oppression.
2. The theology of religion enforces and perpetuates traditional gender roles.
3. For me personally, it was a major obstacle because I was a bit extreme in my views on gender roles, yet it was still my religion that made me the persistent person I am today.
4. While it can be empowering as a personal belief, it's a major obstacle as an institution.
5. My religion has impacted, shaped and positively contributed to all areas of my life.
6. It is both an opportunity and an obstacle, especially due to cultural narratives and the theology.
7. In my experience, it has taught me about myself, my purpose; it has showed me my potential and helped me inspire other women.

While the answers provided by each person are subject to personal experience and views of the participants, exploring the relationship between religion and empowerment and the possibility

of empowerment within the religious gatherings of Ethiopian women is at the heart of this research. The thematic inspiration for this study is ***Yeqaqe Werdwet*, a woman who lived 160 years ago in the 19th century and fought for equal rights in marriage in the then traditional *Guraghe* community in Ethiopia.** Consequently, this present research is also a continuation of this theme in that it explores religion-based female gatherings that provide support to Ethiopian women and contribute to gender empowerment.

The studied periodic religious gatherings are used by Ethiopian women of faith to discuss and address their socio-economic needs. This research is an exploration of the significance and impact of such periodic female religious gatherings. Tsïwwa Mahbär's, female Muslim university student Jumu'ah's, and female prayer groups from the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, Muslim and Protestant Christianity respectively were the subjects of study. These socio-religious units are made up of women of all ages, ethnicity, economic status, and even personal temperament towards religion and gender. Further, such gatherings exist across the three largest religions in Ethiopia and despite differences in the religions, the groups studied exhibited similarities in their psycho-social interactions and support of their members.

These gatherings, while religious in their nature, have evolved to meet non-religious needs of their members, giving rise to a unique Ethiopian experience of psycho-social and economic empowerment, the details of which will be presented in the coming chapters.

Thus, in investigating the socio-economic and psychological significance of such gatherings, this research seeks to bring into awareness the possible benefits and/or lack thereof of supporting and promoting such gatherings by relevant stakeholders. It aims to provide a contextual narrative of empowerment for Ethiopian women and bring a fresh outlook on the complex and, at times, bitter gender-religion understanding. And finally, given the lack of literature on the area and as an exploratory research, it will also serve as a primary base for further research and policy development.

Box 0.4

In sum, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What economic benefits do Ethiopian women gain from periodic religious gatherings?

2. What psychosocial benefits do Ethiopian women gain from periodic religious gatherings?

3. Is empowerment possible within religious communities?

1.1 Background of the Study: Religion and Periodic Religious Gatherings of Ethiopian Women

As provided in the introduction, Ethiopia is a religious country with Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Protestantism being the three largest groups, as can been seen from as far back as the 2007 population census and other data sources. The study identifies and studies periodic gatherings of women within these major religious groups. A background and contextual introduction to the religions and the socio-religious units studied is provided below. While care has been taken to introduce each religion and religious unit with equal depth, the available literature on each religion and religious gatherings and diversity of data obtained from each group studied limited the author in providing uniform narratives for each gathering. The reader should take note that such variation was the result of external factors provided above and not an inherent bias.

1.1.1 Orthodox Christianity and Tsïwwa Mahbärs

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (Yäityop'ya ortodoks täwahedo bétäkrestyan) is one of the oldest oriental churches in the world. The church has 36 million followers, making Ethiopians the second largest in the world after Russians (Diamant, 2017). According to Habele Selassie (2003), the introduction of Christianity as a state religion in the 4th century "marked a turning point in Ethiopian history". The Church played an integral role in shaping the country's culture, politics, and social life. Following the 1974 revolution, secularism was introduced officially, separating the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and state affairs.

> **The Ethiopian Orthodox church, with its influential history and conservative believers, is where a group of women periodically gather for Tsïwwa Mahbär.**

These rituals are one of the long-standing traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. As stated by Flemmen & Zenebe (2016) in their study of Religious Mahbär's in Ethiopia,

Key Word

Tsïwwa's:

Are voluntary associations of laypersons to honor saints on the day of the saint each month with a rotating host providing food and drinks for the guests.

Box 0.5

Tsïwwa rituals are the sum of these core elements:

The tsïwwa, the mäsob, commemoration (zïkïr) of a patron saint, a Muse or Moses in English, membership, lay people's homes, praying and sharing food and drink

(Flemmen & Zenebe, 2016).

Tsïwwa Mahbär's

Box 0.6

"On the afternoon of July 28, 2020, the research team arrived at the home of the host for Mariyam Tsïwwa Mahbär in Selale Fiche, Oromia Region. The home was decorated with Qetema, freshly-cut grass used to decorate houses for special occasions in the Ethiopian culture. There were already a few people at the home of the host along with a male priest also known as Zekari Kahen, an overseeing priest. The hostess, an elderly woman, was dressed in a Habesha qemis, a traditional dress worn by Ethiopian women, and attendees all wore a Netela, a traditional white cotton scarf. At the far corner of the room sat a table with the ritual pot containing the Tella, a traditional Ethiopian beer and a Mesob, a woven round wicker basket containing the bread and pictures of saints including St. Mary, the saint honored by this specific Tsïwwa. The table was lit with candles and the priest sat next to it, signaling his role as the religious overseer of the group. As soon as we arrived, we knelt in front of the Tsïwwa, paying tribute to St. Mary, and lit the candles we had also brought. The hostess offered us the bread and Tella, as was the custom to do when each guest arrived. After we had settled to our seats, we overheard members conversing in Oromiffa on various issues such as the Covid-19 outbreak, recent burning of churches, and other personal matters.
This Mariyam Tsïwwa is an all-female gathering that honors St. Mary on the 21st day of each month (Julian calendar). It was founded in 2012 and currently has 31 members. The Tsïwwa has a female leader called Muse or Moses, symbolic of the biblical story of Moses, leading the people of Israel. The Muse is a lifelong leader selected by the members while the Gilgel Muse is her aid and also serves for life; she is the next in line to lead when the Muse dies or leaves the Tsïwwa. Other members with internal roles (as treasurers and auditors, for example) are charged with financial matters.

Box 0.6 (...Continued)

Once all members of the group have assembled, the priest rose up to bless the Injera, a sour fermented flatbread; each member broke off a piece and it was passed along, representing the unity and fraternity of the members. Food and drinks were served by the hostess, and members talked, laughed, and enjoyed friendly banter as we ate. They frequently referred to each other as 'sister'. Towards the end of the event, the priest rose up once again to give a concluding prayer and bless the hostess. In doing so, members were asked if they were unhappy with the food or the service, to which they answered in unison that all was to their liking. The host knelt down to receive the blessing of the members and the priest. The priest then asked for the next host to come forth and kneel down to receive the blessings of the priest and the members. Before the Tsïwwa could leave the house, members lit candles and sang hymns blessing the St. Mary and symbolically walked the ritual pot and Mesob back and forth ceremoniously as other members ululated in joy. As the Tsïwwa was carried carefully to the home of the next host, members continued to light their candles and sing. Upon arrival at the house of the next host, the members went in ululating, celebrating the blessing the Tsïwwa brings to this new home. The new host presented Qolo, roasted grain, and Arqe, a local liquor. After wishing the host and each other well, members left nearly 3 hours after the event began"

(Personal Communication, July 28, 2020).

The above observation is just one of the various types of Tsïwwa rituals in Ethiopia. Some take place in church compounds where beggars, monks, church clergy, and church attendees can also join in. Flemmen & Zenebe (2016) distinctively refer to these meetings as Sänbäte, while participants in this study made no distinction between those that are held at home and those that are held at church compounds. Instead, they collectively refer to both as Tsïwwa Mahbär's. There are also other less formal gatherings without the presence of the ritual pot, Mesob, or the priest,

which are held in dorm rooms of universities, and at times groups also join their Tsïwwa with the conventional functions of Iddir's, non-religious burial associations, creating a sort of hybrid.

There are also differences in the memberships of Tsïwwa Mahbär's. Some have only male members while others such as the participants of this study are made up of female members only and some others have mixed membership. While this study focused on female Tsïwwa's, a mixed Mahbär where membership was exclusive of married couples was also included. Given the significant variation in practice and rituals of Tsïwwa's, the observation provided above should only be taken by the reader as a contextual narrative to understand the remaining discussion on these indigenous associations.

These gatherings are religious in their very essence. As a scholar of the Orthodox faith stated,

Tsïwwa's are founded on the biblical promise of the Book of Matthew 10:42, which states:

> "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward"
>
> *New International Version*
> (Personal Communication, September 27, 2020).

The priest at one of the Tsïwwa's observed further explained that the bread and Tella blessed by the priest and served at the rituals represent the Holy Blood and Body of Christ, and the Mesob where the bread is kept is symbolic of the Virgin Mary and her honor of carrying Jesus Christ. Adding to the religious underpinning of these associations, Flemmen & Zenebe (2016) argued that the practice of sharing food and drinks and giving it to the needy is linked to the New Testament practices and the 120, the first founding family of the Christianity religion. Thus, both the church and members attach great spiritual value to these gatherings.

Tsïwwa members consider each other as sisters-brothers, and intermarriage between families of the members is frowned upon. **These associations are lifetime associations with some Tsïwwa's studied being as old as 35 years.**

Members take their membership seriously, not missing gatherings unless for exceptional reasons and notifying the Muse in advance.

> **In this socio-religious family, Orthodox women support each other through death, weddings, childbirth, sickness, and any other social events for decades on end.**

1.1.2 Islam and University Student Jumu'ah

Islam constitutes the second largest religious group in Ethiopia, with **Somali, Afar, and Oromia regional states** respectively having the three largest Muslim populations. The history of Islam in Ethiopia dates back to 615 AD. According to Abbink (1998), the Prophet had advised his followers, who were facing persecution by the Quraysh authorities in Arabia, to seek refuge in the Aksumite empire where "a righteous king would give them protection", marking the first migration in Islam history. The group was welcomed to Ethiopia and given protection from the persecuting Meccan authorities.

The spread of the religion was gradual and took place in the lowlands and among pastoralist communities via trade routes and teachers, while the north remained a Christian stronghold. During the end of the Middle Ages, the city of Harar became the center of Islamic culture and civilization. While there were brief periods of confrontation between the two religions in the first half of the 16th century, the relationship between the two major religious groups had been historically tolerant (Abbink, 1998, pp. 113-114).

Key Word

Jumu'ah:

The Arabic meaning of the word Jumu'ah is 'Friday', derived from the verb ijta'ama, which means the gathering together of people

(Hussain, 2012).

Box 0.7

According to Harvard University (2020), "The Friday prayer is exactly like the daily ritual prayers, or salat, performed during the rest of the week, except that on Friday the Imam or prayer leader delivers a two-part sermon known as the khutbah, with a pause between the two parts of the sermon to allow for a time of personal prayer, or Du'a."

While these Friday prayers are of great spiritual importance as holy congregations, they are also events where Muslims can meet and discuss important social and political issues.

This study will examine female university student Jumu'ah's from their social and economic aspects.

University Jumu'ah

Given the lack of contextual literature on Muslim university Jumu'ah's in Ethiopia, it is important to provide a contextual narrative of these gatherings.

When Muslim students join universities across Ethiopia, they are welcomed by a group of fellow Muslim students that meet to pray together for Friday prayers and, in some cases, for daily prayers; some also meet together outside of prayer hours to study together and socialize.

Term

University Jumu'ah:

This term in this study is used to mean the association of Muslim university students across Ethiopia that gather for Friday prayers, daily prayers, and for non-prayer social interactions, as was the contextual usage of the term provided by the interviewees.

For the purpose of this study, three female university Jumu'ah's from Saint Paul's Millennium Medical College in Addis Ababa, Haramaya University in Oromia Region, and Wollo University in Amhara Region were examined as platforms for psychosocial and economic empowerment of their members. Given the assorted practice of each Jumu'ah, it is important to briefly introduce each Jumu'ah to the reader.

Fetwel Zahra Jumu'ah of St. Paul's Millennium Medical College

This Jumu'ah is made up of male and female Muslim medical school students in their early 20's who meet to pray together at the local Saba Masjid. In addition, the female Jumu'ah also engages in other social activities such as charitable activities, academic support to members, organizing welcome events for newcomers, and organizing farewells for graduating members. These welcome events are where the Jumu'ah recruits its members. Some of the reasons interviewees gave for joining these gatherings include: getting religious knowledge, interest to partake in social and charitable activities, getting support with familiarization in a new environment, in search of social interaction with fellow female Muslim students, balancing the demand of medical school with religious life, and looking for academic support.

Meeting days and times have varied over the years. Meetings are held at least once a week when it is possible. They have also been held twice or three times a week over the years. Meeting times are arranged taking into account the academic schedules of members. The meeting time is normally between Maghrib prayers and Isha prayers (Interviewees B1 (4), B1(5), and B1 (6)).[1] According to the current Jumu'ah Amira (leader), the female Jumu'ah meets twice a week, once for religious teachings and a second time for "female programs prepared by members themselves" (Interviewee B1 (1)).

Given the small number of members, the Jumu'ah has no formal structure; rather, it is loosely organized. **The Amir (male)** and the **Amira (female)** are the leaders over all matters of the Jumu'ah. There are also Deputy Amir's/Amira's. Aside from that,

1 Interviewees for this study were identified by using a code unique to each interviewee. The code is a summation of the interviewee's sample group; A for Tsiwwa Mahbär's; B for University Jumu'ah. and C for Female Prayer groups and numbers added in reference to location each Sample Set and the orders the interviews were conducted. See Annex 1 for more details.

the Jumu'ah has a treasurer that receives money collected by representatives of each batch. In addition, there are leaders for academic and social aspects of the Jumu'ah, although these roles are more or less semi-formal.

Interview

According to members of the Jumu'ah interviewed, there is no defined set of criteria for selection. Interviewees have provided the following criteria based on their observation:

- ✔ Religious background
- ✔ Commitment
- ✔ Accessibility
- ✔ Volunteering
- ✔ Sociability
- ✔ Academic excellence.

The commitment level for members varies; some are very active, only missing Jumu'ah due to family issues or during exams, while others attend very rarely. All interviewees, however, stated that their families are supportive that they attend these gatherings, in some cases encouraging even more participation.

Haramaya University Muslim Student Jumu'ah

This Jumu'ah is made up of male and female Muslim students learning at the University. The female Jumu'ah, which was the focus of this study, comprises students from various fields of study such as biotechnology, applied biology, software engineering, and French studies. Members are also from different parts of the country including those from Addis Ababa, Dessie, Kombolcha, and Jimma. Members are in their early 20's with former alumni interviewed being in their late 20's. Most interviewees joined the Jumu'ah in their first year of joining the University, as they were welcomed by senior Jumu'ah members. Interviewees B2 (4) and B2 (7) even stated that they had no intention of joining a religious Jumu'ah but the friendliness of the members and the active nature of the group had encouraged them to join.

The female Jumu'ah has various programs throughout the week that are held at the local Gendebay Masjid: some for reading the Quran, some for religious teachings, some for praying together, and a special women's program every Saturday from Zuhr prayers (an afternoon prayer, the fourth prayer of the day) to Asr prayer (the fifth prayer of the day that takes place typically when the sun is halfway down from noon to sunset). Any member is allowed to host this weekly event by organizing teachings, training, or poetry. Programs are organized in both the Amharic and Oromiifa languages. Once a month, on Wednesday nights, the Jumu'ah also hosts a "ladies' night".

According to Interviewee B2(2):

> ***These monthly nights have religious content, but we also talk about everything including what kind of men we should marry, how we can survive the work world after graduation, how the members can be politically and economically strong, how we can be more confident, how we can be self-sufficient and we share life experience from our seniors; we even talk about personal beauty tricks, how to raise kids, and how to lead a happy married life.***

The Jumu'ah has an Amir (a male leader) and an Amira (a female leader). Given the diverse activities it is engaged in, the female Jumu'ah has internal structures divided into "sectors", and each sector has a leader. As all members live on the university campus, they all expressed their commitment to these groups, missing meetings only in case of exams or academic pressure. Further, they also provided family support and some even stated that their family forced such memberships.

Shemsiya Selfiya Wollo University Muslim Student Jumu'ah

Wollo University is different in that it actually has two different Jumu'ah's based on religious interpretations (Interviewee B4). The Shemsiya Selfiya Jumu'ah was one of two selected for this study. As was the case with the other gatherings studied, members are in their early 20's and joined the Jumu'ah in their

freshman year. The gathering has three main internal structures: finance Amir, academic Amir, and protocol Amir. The Jumu'ah has various schedules. The members meet every day for prayers and also organize special programs for females. All interviewees say they attend meetings regularly, only missing it due to exams, sicknesses, or classes. Further, all interviewees said their families were supportive of their engagement. In contrast to the previous two gatherings, religious elements dominate the Shemsiya Selfiya Jumu'ah.

1.1.3 Protestantism and Female Prayer Groups

Also known as (*P'ent'ay*) in Amharic, derived from the English word "Pentecostal", the term Protestant refers to Evangelical Christians in Ethiopia. While the term is used as a blanket to all evangelical believers, Protestants in Ethiopia belong to various denominations such as Baptists, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Meionites, and other indigenous denominations.

Protestantism in Ethiopia is a relatively recent religious phenomenon attributed in large part due to foreign missionary activities. According to Hammerschmidt (1963), Peter Heyling, a German Lutheran, was the first missionary to Ethiopia. After his arrival in 1634, he served in the court of Emperor Fasilides. His reformation efforts had, however, resulted in disputes with the church and he was expelled in 1650.

The first organized Pentecostal missionaries from Finland and Sweden arrived in the 1950s, and the 1960s saw the conversion of young Ethiopian students. It was, however, under the Derg regime of the 1970s that the movement grew underground (Haustein, 2014).

Figure 0.3

With the religiously lax post-Derg environment, the Protestant movement in Ethiopia experienced massive growth.

(Central Intelligence Agency, 2020)

Female Prayer Groups

In their study of religious Mahbär in Ethiopia, Flemmen & Zenebe (2016) found that Protestants in Ethiopia never practiced Mahbär. While protestants do not have the ritual practices of Tsïwwa, they did, however, note that religious unions such as **"Bible study groups, betäsäb hïbrät (any church member above the age of 16), youth hïbrät (from 16 to 29 years), and hïbrät consisting of married women and unmarried women (heads of households) who meet monthly and are a kind of women's Iddir with spiritual activities added were common among Protestants"** (Flemmen & Zenebe, 2016, pp. 29-30).

It is these gatherings of protestant women that were investigated as platforms for empowerment. In this investigation, members from six groups across Addis Ababa and Hawassa were interviewed.

Interviewees provided the biblical promises of Matthew 18:19-20 as their motive for joining and forming such groups:

> 19 "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven."
>
> 20 "For where two or three gathers in my name, there am I with them."
>
> *Matthew 18:19-20 New International Version.*

These groups exist among women of all ages. An interviewee in her early 20's said she was a member of a prayer group in Addis Ababa as was her mother and her grandmother in Wollega, indicating its appeal to a wide age group.

Some groups are organized under a church and meet on church premises while others are gatherings initiated by individuals that live around the same area and are not under any supervision from religious institutions. These groups also have diverse structures. Some are loosely structured with members playing semi-leadership roles and taking place in cafes and homes of members while others have stronger internal structures with defined roles and internal rules. There is a great degree of

flexibility in how members choose to organize themselves and in the activities of these groups. Some exclusively focus on spiritual elements while others focus on self-development and still others have stronger social outreach elements.

Given the need for an introduction into the workings of these groups, two selected groups will briefly be introduced below.

The Gaius Youth Ministry Sisters-in-Christ Young Women Prayer Group

In a focus group discussion with the founders and coordinators of the prayer group, participants said that the Sisters-in-Christ young women prayer group was founded in 2012 Ethiopian Calendar (E.C) and currently has about 25 members most of whom are in their early 20s. **Membership is open to anyone interested without any criteria.** However, it was made mandatory that once members joined, they had to complete the full year program. Their members are attendees of Gaius Ministry, a Christian youth ministry that was founded in 2009 E.C and currently has three small youth centers in Addis Ababa.

Focus Group Discussion 0.1

When expressing what led them to organize such a group, participants provided:

After we joined the Ministry, started attending programs, and became close to some of the young girls, we noticed how surprised some of them were when we told them about ourselves. We are both holders of an MA in Project Management. We had assumed that it was normal at this age for women to excel academically and in their private lives. These girls were well dressed and looked after themselves but they were insecure when it came to excelling academically or even spiritually. It was this insecurity we noticed that led us to design a one-year pilot project of creating a small circle for young women and empower them

(Focus Group Discussion, August 21, 2020)

Focus Group Discussion 0.2

Other participants said:

In designing a small group for young women only, we have more things in common and are more open to discuss some topics we wouldn't be comfortable raising with men. More so, the challenges we face as women are more or less the same making it easier to learn from one another and relate to each another.

(Focus Group Discussion, August 21, 2020).

The group meets once a month, during which members pray together and share bible reading summaries, play different games, and also take a special training designed for that month. The group is not formally structured; it has coordinators and is further broken up into small groups of 5 or 4 members which change every month, and each small group has a leader. The coordinators said that this allows for members to gain leadership skills.

The Aba Sena Female Prayer Group

The Aba Sena Mothers Prayer group was founded by women who lived around the same area known as "Aba Sena" around Megenagna, Addis Ababa. It currently has 12 members between the ages of 50 and 75. They meet every Thursday evening to pray for about 2 hours.

The group has prayed together for over 20 years.

All six interviewees said their prayer group had great support from their families, with husbands reminding them to attend, family members giving them prayer requests. An interviewee stated that the group was exclusive to women because they felt God desired the hearts of women too (Interviewee C2 (4)).

1.2 Research Problem

A study was conducted by Stinson, Goodman, Bermingham & Ali (2013) in which 10 atheist men in America were questioned on their opinions on gender equality and the feminist movement. While all interviewees supported gender equality, there was a

difference of opinion on gender normative behaviors, the definition of feminism, and some even expressed negative stereotypes on the feminist movement. Studies such as this indicate the complexity and depth of any discussion on religion and gender.

To blankly assume atheism as good for gender equality and religion as bad is an oversimplification of a historically and practically dynamic relationship.

While challenging these opposing views is not the purpose of this study, this very tension between religion and gender is what it aims to ease by exploring a possible link between religious-based gatherings of women in Ethiopia and their roles in empowering their members.

For the Ethiopian women, religion not only defines moral values but is also integral in national identity, history, culture, and individual opinions. In a country such as this, the rift between religious groups and groups working on gender equality is even more evident.

> **In focus group discussions held during the research development phase of this study, religious groups frowned upon those advocating for gender equality and considered them as eroding the traditional values of the Ethiopian communities, and the same disdain was expressed by groups supporting gender equality. A participant expressed religion as "an enemy they have to live with" and considered attacking theology or religion in Ethiopia as a "death sentence", while another gender rights activist said that she didn't feel welcome at church.**

The study strives to find a middle ground between these two views within the existing indigenous socio-religious units.

> **While educated women in urban areas of the country have better opportunities to express themselves and network, women in rural areas, who make up the largest percentage of the population, do not have such exposure, making these religious gatherings their only safe space.**

These gatherings reach the vast majority of the population across ethnic, age, economic, and educational status and have been embedded in the Ethiopian communities for ages and yet remain unexplored as spaces for empowerment. Further, the lack of sufficient literature on religion and gender, especially from an indigenous perspective, makes the need for this study apparent. Hence, this study makes a cautious move towards linking issues of religion and gender and narrowing the divide.

1.3 Research Purpose

The study assesses whether gender empowerment is possible within the fabric of religious gatherings. In doing so, it will observe and report elements of economic and psycho-social empowerment in religious-based gatherings of Ethiopian women from the Ethiopian Orthodox, Islam, and Protestant religions. It does, however, avoid discussion on issues of religion neither in the form of doctrines nor its institutions by deliberate design. While respecting the primary religious aim of these gatherings, the non-religious benefits of members will be explored in view of gender empowerment.

The grand aim of this study is to bring new dialogue between both sides of the religion/gender divide, advocate for a more inclusive, indigenous, and contextually fit approach to achieving gender empowerment in Ethiopia. And lastly, as an exploratory research, it will also contribute to the literature in the area of indigenous practices in the movement for gender empowerment and showcase the Ethiopian experience.

Chapter Two: Methodology

2.1 Overview of the Methodology

Qualitative methods such as focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and in-depth interviews are best suited when the research question requires 'factual data' and for answering non-numerical questions of experience, opinion, and perspective from a participant's point of view (K. Hammarberg, M. Kirkman, & S. de Lacey, 2016). **As such, this research followed qualitative methodology and design for data collection and analysis.**

Interviewing was the primary data collection method; semi-structured and structured interviews, as well as focus group discussions, were used to gather relevant data for the research purpose. Similar methods were used in previous studies of qualitative nature such as The Grace of Motherhood: Disabled Women Contending with Societal Denial of Intimacy, Pregnancy, and Motherhood in Ethiopia (Tefera, Marloes Van Engen, Jac Van der Klink, & Schippers , 2017) and Religious Mahbär in Ethiopia: Ritual Elements, Dynamics, and Challenges (Flemmen & Zenebe, 2016).

The state of emergency declared by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the subsequent legislation enacted to counter and control the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its impact had prohibited the conduct of religious gatherings at the time of data collection (Council of Ministers Regulation No.466/2020, 2020). However, where the research team found Mahbärs that had maintained their monthly meetings even during the Covid-19 lock-downs, such gatherings were observed. Such observations helped triangulate data from interviews.

2.2 Participants

During the first phase of data collection,

Box 0.8

55 individual interviews were conducted.
The sample group for the interview was selected using purposive sampling. The use of purposive sampling in qualitative studies allows for a sample selection that purposively generates a rich depth of information required (Palinkas, et al., 2015).

The above 6 criteria were cumulatively used as the sample selection criteria.

Box 0.9

The use of the above sampling strategy resulted in three homogeneous sample sets:

Sample Set A: members of Tsïwwa Mahbär's from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Christianity religion.

Sample Set B: members of female university student Jumu'ah from Islam religion.

Sample Set C: members of female prayer groups from the Ethiopian Evangelical Christianity religion.

The use of homogeneous grouping allows for narrowing of variations by the exclusion of outlier cases and focuses on similarities for analysis (Palinkas, et al., 2015).

The table below briefly illustrates the criterion used for sample selection.

TABLE 0.1

No.	Criterion	Criterion Explained
1.	Gender 	As per the scope of the research, which focuses on female religious gatherings, gender as a criterion of selection is applied uniformly across all sample sets.
2.	Age 	The age group of 20 to 75 as a selection criterion is applied across all sample sets. However, for Sample Set B, which by its scope is limited to university students, the age group of 18 to 35 is used.

No	Criterion	Criterion Explained
3.	**Religion** 	The three sample sets are selected based on the following religions: Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Christianity, Islam, and Ethiopian Evangelical Christianity, which constitute 97.9% of Ethiopia's religious demographic (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020).
4.	**Availability and willingness of sample units** 	The restriction imposed by the FDRE government on religious gatherings and additional stay-home measures at the time of data gathering restricted the selection of participants on the availability and willingness of individuals (Council of Ministers Regulation No.466/2020, 2020).
5.	Geographical markers and distribution 	Geographical religious inclination was used to divide each Sample Set into four sample sub-sets. Based on the religious inclination of the regional states in Ethiopia, sample sub-sets were selected from Addis Ababa, Oromia Region, Sidama Region, and Amhara Region.

After the initial round of interviews were conducted, a second round of data collection was done via focus group discussions with stakeholders in gender and religious issues. The same methodology was used in previous studies such as Tefera, Van Engen, & Schippers (2018) titled The Experiences of Children with Disabilities and Primary Caregivers on the Social Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Ethiopia. **The first meeting was held with seven representatives of organizations working on gender and rights issues at the Harmony Hotel in Addis Ababa while the second meeting was held with eight prominent representatives of the religious communities under study at the same venue.** The purpose of these meetings was to collect additional data and simultaneously validate the data collected during the initial rounds.

2.3 Methods

2.3.1 Data Collection

Interviews, both semi-structured and structured, were the primary tools used for data collection. Ryan, Coughlan & Corin (2009) argue that interviews, as qualitative data collection tools, are used to gather specified information from participants of relevance to the research question. During the first phase of the interviews, five interviewers, including the researcher, the research assistant, and three other interviewers with Islamic background conducted 55 individual interviews, including one focus group discussion and two participant observations of Tsïwwa Mahbär's in Selale Fiche and Debrezeith, Oromia Region. Given the relatively large size of the sample group and the unique religious background of each sample set, it was believed to be necessary to involve interviewers from each religion under study.

The first round of interviews included semi-structured and structured interview questions. For interviews conducted by data collectors other than the researcher, structured interview questions where "same-worded questions posed in the same order" were prepared to ensure the uniformity of data collected by all data collectors and mitigate interviewer bias (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2009 , p. 310). For interviews conducted by the researcher, semi-structured interviews were used as a way to validate data collected by structured interviews. "Interviewing is a performance that requires skill and forethought" (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2009 , p. 313). As such, a detailed data collection guideline and

protocol was prepared, disseminated, and data collection training given to all data collectors prior to the commencement of data collection to optimize the quality of data collected. The guideline used can be made accessible upon request to the author.

Box 10

Interview questions were pre-thematized into sections that addressed three key areas in accordance with the research objective:

1. Economic significance of gatherings

2. Social significance of the gatherings

3. Psychological significance of the gatherings.

The sequence of interview questions consisted of an introduction to the research; verification of consent; introductory questions; factual questions; and sensitive questions towards the end such as those that were suggested by Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin (2009).

Prior to actual data collection, interview test-runs were conducted by data collectors, after which changes in form, language, and structure of interview questions were introduced based on the feedback provided by the interviewees and interviewers. This final version was used by all data collectors for the remainder of the interviews. All interviews were conducted in Amharic, the native language of both the interviewers and the interviewees. Consequently, all interviews, in-person and by telephone, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the data collectors. During the second round of data collection, semi-structured interviews designed to find broader meaning and experience were used to collect additional data and validate data from the initial round. Both focus group discussions were live video-reordered and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3.2 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" was the analysis methodology followed for this research (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017, p. 2). The six-phase thematic analysis procedure provided by Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules (2017) and the 14 stages of analyzing interview transcripts as provided by Burnard (1991) were used in conjunction to analyze the data.

Exhaustively and precisely disclosing the method of analysis used by researchers allows the reader to determine the trustworthiness of the analysis (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). As such, the following narrative provides details on data analysis steps taken for this study:

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the data collectors prior to the commencement to analysis. Given the involvement of several data collectors and various forms of data such as audio transcriptions and videos, the first step in analysis was data management. The large set of raw data was categorized and logged into a log sheet for ease of management. As stipulated by both Burnard (1991) and Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules (2017), the researcher was immersed in the data collected prior to coding. All the data was read and listened to once to get the general gist.

> **This research employed a hybrid of inductive and deductive thematic coding, where a prior code was assigned from the themes of the interview questions themselves, and other subsequent codes were allowed to emerge from the transcripts along the way (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006) and Blair (2015)).**

Coding for sample groups A and B was done by the researcher while the research assistant coded for Sample Set C, allowing for triangulation.

Once all transcripts were coded, a comparison was made between codes, and a total of 20 codes were collapsed to create 6 overarching themes. (See annex 3 for the list of codes and themes.) Transcripts were cut out and compiled together under each theme. At this stage, the researcher prepared a summary Word table of

each set and theme in English to present findings and proceed with the write-up. All original transcripts and audios were maintained and referred back to for context.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

All interview participants were informed of the research objective and purposes when contacted initially for the interview. Data collectors also informed potential interviewees that interviews were going to be audio-recorded. Time was given between the initial contact and actual interview in order to allow for interviewees to withdraw consent if uncomfortable. Out of 18 interviewees initially contacted for Sample Set B3 (members of Muslim student Jumu'ah in Wollo University), 13 declined to take part in the interview due to their discomfort at being recorded. Data collectors re-confirmed consent for recording during the actual interview and reiterated the interview objective and general research purpose. All collected data is logged and kept confidential from general public access. Further, the identity of the interviewees will remain anonymous, instead identifying codes have been used when reporting findings in this study.

Chapter Three: Findings

3.1 Overview of Findings

Box 11

The section below presents two major findings across the sample groups studied:

1. Economic contributions, benefits and support of members within Tsïwwa Mahbär's, University Jumu'ah's and female prayer groups

2. Social support and psychological effects experienced by members of Tsïwwa Mahbär's, University Jumu'ah's, and female prayer groups.

While the study found an inter-religious link of similar values and experiences between the samples from each religious group, there was also uniqueness to each sample group. As such, due attention will be given to each group studied based on the economic-psychological parameters set for the presentation of the findings below.

3.2 Sharing Burdens: Economic Contributions and Support of Members in Religious Gatherings of Women

3.2.1 Tsïwwa Mahbär's[2]

There are varying trends within Tsïwwa's studied as to the nature and amount of economic contributions from members. Some Tsïwwa's such as the Mariyam Mahbär in Selale Fiche Oromia Region and the Medhanialem Mahbär in Addis Ababa had fixed monthly contributions from their members while others such as the Kidane Mehret and Kuskuam Maryam Tsïwwa's in Bishoftu, Debre Zeyit, Oromia Region did not.

According to an interviewee from the Mariyam Mahbär in Selale Fiche, members contribute ETB 20 per month. Half of the collected amount is given to the next host to help with the expense related to hosting the Mahbär, while the other half is saved to be used in times of weddings, child birth, funeral, or sickness of members. However, at the time when the research team had observed the Mahbär in late July, the total collected amount for that month was given to the host for that month, as she was struggling financially. Similarly, the Medhanialem Mahbär in Addis Ababa also collects a fixed monthly amount from members that is kept at a joint bank account. This Mahbär had internal rules on what amount can be spent for each instance of social support and for social outreach activities. Members also monitor the financial activity of their Mahbär to make sure their resources aren't depleted. Where they find the Mahbär had spent a large amount, they make additional re-contributions to stabilize their account.

2 The terms Tsïwwa and Mahbär are used interchangeably to refer to voluntary associations of Orthodox women in Ethiopia to honor saints on the day of the saint each month with a rotating host providing food and drinks for the guests.

An interviewee from the Kuskuam Maryam Tsïwwa in Bishoftu, Debre Zeyit, indicated the small number of members as a reason for choosing to forgo monthly contributions. She did, however, explain that members made irregular contributions of any amount where the need arises. Given that there are members that struggle financially, they try and accommodate these members in some other way so they don't also feel neglected. For instance,

Interviewee A (3)

> ***When the Mahbär was helping with the rebuilding of their local church, some members contributed money to buy chairs while others helped with physical delivery of the chairs to the church on behalf of their Mahbär***

The Tsïwwa's use the collected amount to support members and social outreach activities. Tsïwwa's that do not collect monthly contributions such as the Kidane Meheret Tsïwwa in Bishoftu, Debre Zeyit, serve the food and drinks to the church clergy, the beggars, and anyone who wanted to come and share in the blessings. In other cases of social outreach, interviewees from the Kuskuam Maryam Tsïwwa in Bishoftu, Debre Zeyit, the Medhanialem Mahbär in Addis Ababa, and the Mariyam Mahbär in Selale Fiche all reported they support churches that are struggling financially by raising money amongst themselves, their friends, and family, and additionally, by contributing clothing items for the clergy and buying chairs. The Medhanialem Mahbär in Addis Ababa also visits homes of the elderly and supply soaps and other items that can be useful.

In terms of financial support to members, aside from the Kidane Meheret Tsïwwa in Bishoftu, Debre Zeyit, which members interviewed labeled as "weak", all other Mahbär's studied provide financial assistance to their members in times of social needs such as weddings, graduations, childbirths, sickness, and death. Moreover, an interviewee from the Medhanialem Mahbär in Addis Ababa expressed how their gatherings help women who need money as follows:

Interviewee A (4)

When a member needs money urgently, for example, when someone is sick, instead of lending her money directly, we start an Equb, a traditional rotating savings and credit association so she can take the collected amount first and the rest of us can also save money.

She also said their Mahbär saves money to buy expensive items such as traditional dresses:

We also save money to buy matching traditional dresses that we can wear for social events. So far, we have three such dresses each. The last one was the one we had saved up for and brought when my son graduated a couple of years ago.

Interviewee A (3)

An interviewee from the Kuskuam Maryam Tsïwwa in Bishoftu, Debre Zeyit, shared an experience where she had helped a member of her group:

A member had gone to another region in Ethiopia for her daughter's graduation and, as she was coming home, she ran out of money, so she called and asked for my help. I gladly sent her the money. She has yet to repay me but I am not holding a grudge; after all, she is my sister. Soon after, her daughter got married and I cheerfully went to help her out.

Even in less structured Tsïwwa's such as the ones in universities, members support each other financially. In one occasion where a member of a Tsïwwa was expelled from Yirgalem University, the members raised money and got her enrolled in a private college so they could all graduate together. (Participant in Focus Group Discussion, September 7, 2020)

Thus, the studied Tsïwwa gatherings presented economic support internally within members and externally towards their communities at large.

While the extent of economic support and engagement varies from group to group, the feature is one uniformly observed, even in Tsïwwa's considered weak by their members. The very setting of the ritual allows for social outreach. The local community is welcome to eat the food provided and, as such, it is considered a blessing to both the hosts and the guests. As Flemmen & Zenebe (2016) say, Mahbär gatherings allow people to come together and organize to help feed the needy in the name of a saint, regardless of ethnicity or reciprocity.

According to a scholar of the religion, these economic features are, however, recent additions that came as a result of the need to adapt to economic realities (a participant in a Focus Group Discussion, September 29, 2020), but Flemmen & Zenebe (2016) indicate the economic burden of organizing a Mahbär as one of the reasons for the declining support for religious Mahbär's. This study found that gatherings observed responded to the financial burdens of hosting Mahbär's by collecting a certain amount each month to contribute towards expenses. In some other cases, members limited the food that can be served to just Qolo - roasted barley - and water. Other groups paired two members together so they could host together and share the expenses. Members have found ways to ensure the survival of these gatherings and the economic support observed above.

> **In conclusion, it is important for the reader to understand that economic support and outreach is the outcome of the religious foundations of these gatherings. These elements of support neither attract nor drive these gatherings but are by-products of the same.**

3.2.2 Female University Student Jumu'ah's

All three of the university Jumu'ah's studied collected monthly contributions from their members. The Fetwaul Zahra Jumu'ah of St. Paul Medical College collects Ethiopian Birr (ETB) 10-20 every month from its members. The current leader reported that such contributions were made mandatory just last year; prior to that, it was done on voluntary basis (Interviewee B1(1)). Similarly, the Shemsiya Selfiya Jumu'ah of Wollo University also has

a monthly collection of ETB10 from its members. Interviewees have confirmed that the Jumu'ah had planned to make wooden bookshelves for the religious books in the Masjid and sell them to make money but were unable to do so as universities were shut down when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out.

The experience of the Haramaya University Female Jumu'ah is unique in its extensive nature of economic engagement and capacity. While the Jumu'ah collects money from its members at different levels, including the once-in-a-semester contribution across different batches and departments (Interviewee B2(8)), it has also set up additional methods of generating income for the Jumu'ah in the following ways: having additional collection of ETB 50 per month within the members of the Charity Sector; putting boxes during Jumu'ah events for members to voluntarily contribute money; and making Jumu'ah members fry and sell potato chips, tea, and coffee. Previous Jumu'ah members had set up a shop called 'RCC Shop" and a stationery including the recent opening of a clothing store named Sumiyaa Boutique, all of which generate revenue for the Jumu'ah and its different activities. Interviewees have added that the Jumu'ah has further plans for generating income such as providing shower, laundry, and Wi-Fi services and setting up a bakery. According to Interviewee B2 (5), the female Jumu'ah is very active in its economic activities, out-performing the male Jumu'ah. All the revenue collected from different sources is kept at a joint Jumu'ah bank account and administered by the Jumu'ah's finance sector.

Box 12

The study found that Jumu'ah's use the money collected for three purposes:

1. To fund Jumu'ah activities such as organizing welcome events and graduation events.

2. To support social outreach activities.

3. To financially support their members.

Each of the above will be briefly discussed below.

Social Outreach: The Fetwel Zahra Jumu'ah's Experience

All interviewees indicated that their Jumu'ah engages in various charitable community outreach activities. These activities include celebrating Ramadan with orphans (giving them clothes and food as gifts), and visiting elders and patients.

Interviewee B1(4)

In explaining how the collected funds are mobilized, Interviewee B1(4) said the following:

When we organize charity events, we post it on our social media and we encourage members to attend. Further, we also help patients at the St. Paul Hospital that don't have money to buy medication or transportation after discussion with the Jumu'ah and by collecting additional money, if necessary. The Jumu'ah collects clothes and buys food items to help orphans and elders. We also celebrate Ramadan with Muslim patients in the hospital.

Interviewee B1(10)

Further elaborating their activities, Interviewee B1(10) said:

We help out the Muslim community during Ramadan; we collect money and buy food to break-fast with them; we also collaborated with another Jumu'ah last year to cook food for breaking-fast.

Given that the amount of monthly collection is small, the Jumu'ah also raise funds from other Masjid goers to engage in such activities.

Social Outreach: the Haramaya University Jumu'ah's Experience

Given the economic strength of the Haramaya female Jumu'ah, it is involved in various community outreach activities. For instance, the female Jumu'ah played a major role in the building of a local Masjid, even auctioning a T-shirt for ETB 39,000. Once the local Masjid was set up, the Jumu'ah also contributed towards the decoration and sound set-up of the Masjid, and, to this day, covers for Masjid expenses such as water and electricity (Interviewees B2 (2) and B2 (8)).

The Jumu'ah has a sector dedicated to social outreach. According to Interviewee B2 (9), even members that aren't active in other sectors are actively engaged in charity. The Jumu'ah graciously supports local orphanage centers, the blind, and the elderly by providing them with clothes, pens, and exercise books. Members also celebrate Eid and Ramadan holidays with the local Muslim communities in need.

Economic Support of Members: The Fetwel Zahra Jumu'ah

The current leader stated that the Jumu'ah is willing to help out members in financial need but so far it has not openly received such requests. She also said that the Jumu'ah lends some of the collected money to members in urgent need who can pay back later. However, as the data shows, members are not aware of these arrangements for financial support; 6 of the 10 interviewees answered "No" to the question of whether the Jumu'ah supports its members in financial need. Similarly, 5 out of 10 interviewees answered "No" to the question of whether the Jumu'ah lends money to its members. There are not clear indications of the economic status of the members but 9 out of 10 interviewees answered that they believed the Jumu'ah members are students who are dependent on their family and seemed to be economically well off.

Economic Support of Members: The Haramaya University Jumu'ah

According to interviewees from the Haramya Female Jumu'ah, while it is hard to identify members in financial need, the Jumu'ah tries to make observations of members that need support and provide such persons

with a monthly money allowance. It also provides female sanitary pads monthly, and soap and copying services to members in need for free. Interviewees have shared the following instances of economic support:

Interviewee B2 (9)

> ***When the University closed due to the Covid-19 outbreak and we had to go home, there were members that didn't have money to travel back to their home. When we heard of such members, we collected money for them and later I heard they got home safely. Members do not come out and say they are in need and don't even want others to know, so help within the Jumu'ah is done informally.***

Another interviewee expressed the informal nature of economic support as described below:

Interviewee B2 (9)

> ***A lot of the time, members aren't supported officially because it could harm them psychologically. Support is usually given informally through close friends. However, when members ask to be supported officially, the Jumu'ah is always willing to help. Sometimes, it provides transport money to members when they go on semester breaks.***

There is an apparent leading culture within the Jumu'ah that all 10 interviewees were aware of. While the Jumu'ah does not lend money upfront, it provides services in its shops for free, and members can pay it back when they have the money. Members also lend money to each other informally as friends.

Economic Support of Members: The Shemsiya Selfiya Jumu'ah

Similar to the other Jumu'ah's, the Wollo University female Jumu'ah also financially supports its members and even non-member Muslims. The Jumu'ah provides money for copying handouts, and buying sanitary pads and religious books for members that cannot afford to do so for themselves.

An interviewee reported that, while members are all dependent on family for money, they still share the money to contribute towards the Jumu'ah and help other members in need. She further revealed that the Jumu'ah is open to members of all economic status because religion is the main factor for their gathering (Interviewee B3 (4)). Another interviewee said that members lend each other money informally and also help each other in kind (e.g. giving clothes).

Box 13

In conclusion, all the three university Jumu'ah's exhibited strong economic engagement of their members, both internally towards the support of their members (some directly and others more subtly) and externally towards their local community. The women of the Haramya University Jumu'ah in particular took great pride in how they have managed to support their members and give back to their community as dutiful Muslims.

3.2.3 Female Prayer Groups

The study found different practices in regards to economic contributions and support in the case of female prayer groups observed. The first prayer group studied was Sisters-in-Christ, a prayer group of young women centered in Addis Ababa.

Focus Group Discussion 0.3

The founders said that

There is no formal monthly economic contribution; the cost to run the program is covered by the coordinators. According to the founders, they didn't want to impose the economic burden on members as most members are students in their early 20's and still dependent on their families. Further, the group's basic aim was to create intimate relationships between members in small numbers so that if they need financial help, it can be done at that level.

When asked the reason they did not focus on economic support of their members, they said that

The first need expressed in the assessment they conducted showed a need for social support, not for financial support. Thus, as a pilot project, they focused on creating an intimate sisterhood after which economic support can be done easily. Similarly, founders reported that community outreach was done at small group levels. For instance, a group visited an orphanage last year as part of its bonding activity between members.

(August 21, 2020).

On the other hand, the Aba Sena prayer group makes a monthly contribution of ETB 10, which is collected and kept in a bank. The money is used to buy gifts during weddings, births, graduations, and funerals. In addition to the monthly contributions, members also collect additional money when there is the need to do so. Interviewees answered that most them were retirees and had good lives so they did not have to think about financial support from members. Further, all the 6 interviewees of the group said that there was no lending or borrowing money within their group, with some even offended by the question. However, the group uses the collected money for social outreach such as buying books and uniforms for orphans and providing prisoners with soap.

In the study of three prayer groups for women in Hawassa, the capital of the Sidama Region in Ethiopia, members of all the three made a monthly contribution of varying amounts. Members in these groups were from varying economic backgrounds. Some are housewives; some are government empowerees while some others ran their own businesses. A member in one of the groups studied reported that members made handicrafts and auctioned them at their church to generate income (Interviewee C3 (1)). A member in another group said that they used the collected money to engage in social outreach by spending Christmas with orphans and street children. The group also supports prisoners by providing them with clothing items (Interviewee C3 (9)).

Interviewee C3 (3)

> ***There was a widowed woman with four kids. We went to celebrate Christmas with her. When we went to her home, she didn't have electricity or chairs to sit on. Our group supported the woman and when the woman died of breast cancer, we continued to support her children as much as we could.***

Another interviewee reported that when she was in Addis Ababa taking care of a sick family member, members of her prayer group took care of her children back in Hawassa and gave her money for the trip back and forth (Interviewee C3(4)). Further, some groups also help members struggling financially by arranging job opportunities for them in member-owned businesses such as hotels. As one participant in a focus group discussion narrated:

Focus Group Discussion 0.4

Supporting members economically in studied prayer groups is not as evident as it is in other gathering, these groups do not view economic support as their main goal, but they do informally share the economic burden of their members motivated by the intimacy between members and their Christian values (September 29, 2020).

3.3 A Sense of Belonging and Social Identity:

3.3.1 Psychosocial Interactions and Support of Members in Religious Gatherings of Women

Maslow (1954), in his famous work on the hierarchy of needs, puts the need for a sense of belonging and acceptance among social groups as an intrinsic human need. While his work has been subjected to rigorous criticisms and revisions in the decades since, the basic understanding of humans as social animals still stands as demonstrated by numerous studies.

> **Different studies support the inherently social nature of humans from evolutional, neurobiological, and social standpoints (Tomasello , 2014) (Young, 2008) and (Vignieri, 2020). Thus, as social beings, the need to belong is recognized as "an important determinant of psychological and physical well-being" (Kitchen, Williams, & Gallina , 2015).**

Given the social nature of humans, the need to belong is one that has been theorized by Baumeister & Leary (1995) in that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships".

> **Further, frequent religious participation and strong religious social identity have been linked to a stronger psychological wellbeing (Greenfield & Marks, 2007).**

These social groupings of women with other women who share the same religion, hence the same values and worldviews, is an expression of the above basic human need.

> **By creating a social support system, members of these gatherings fulfill their basic innate needs. As the discussion below demonstrates, these groups serve their members as protective shields from stress and hardships and as therapeutic safe-space, which helps relieve anxiety, depression and other emotional problems.**

The findings presented below should be understood within this framework of social interaction and sense of belonging as necessary foundations for psychological wellbeing and stability. While each sample studied exhibited peculiarities, the study found that all sample groups provided their members with a social support system of women who innately and intimately understood each other. Interviewees expressed great passion when describing what these gatherings meant to them and how they viewed members. Their stories are presented below.

3.3.2 Sisters of the Pot[3]: Intimacy of Tsïwwa Mahbär's

As mentioned in the introductory section, Tsïwwa gatherings have tremendous religious underpinnings, where members are seen as sisters and members of one family. Consequently, social support is a necessary result of their interactions.

Focus Group Discussion 0.5

A participant in a focus group discussion said that members view these gatherings as a fulfillment of religious obligations. Thus, they support one another without the "give-and-take" expected in ordinary social interactions. At the Mariam Mahbär observed, members referred lovingly to each other as sisters. As an interviewee said, members share everything. They don't hold grudges and their gathering is based on mutual love and respect for one another. The research team also observed a friendly atmosphere, where members interacted freely and with love. At the Medhanialem Mahbär in Addis Ababa, members were also close neighbors that have lived together for over two decades. A member of this Mahbär said that they talk about anything at their gatherings including their private lives, their children, their marriage, their country, etc. There is no topic that is off-limits.

3 It is considered a symbol of unity to drink from the same pot, the ts'iwa. (Please refer to Footnote 1 for more details).

In their study of similar Mahbär's, Flemmen & Zenebe (2016) found similar intimate interactions. They reported social networking, entertainment, and social insurance as factors that ensured the popularity of these gatherings. Members are expected to support one another during good times and bad. They also found that, as opposed to Mahbär's with male members, female gatherings socialized and talked to one another to a greater extent, discussed personal issues outside Mahbär meetings, and shared activities. The participants in their study showed a similar passion for their meetings as those in the current study, with some confirming that they eagerly anticipate the monthly meetings exhibiting a playful and homely environment.

An interviewee from the Qusquam Mariam Mahbär in Bishoftu, Debre Zeyit, stated that while they did not deliberately talk about politics, they made it their priority to pray about peace and unity of their country. She passionately expressed below what her Mahbär meant to her and the closeness among the members:

Interviewee A3 (3)

Sometimes you go to these meetings with so much stress from your home, but once you get there, you forget about all of that and you laugh, talk, pray, eat, and drink. So, you look forward to these meetings. I don't know how to tell you about the sense of relief I feel; sometime I go there so burdened with things in my family but when I come home, I come feeling lighter. I get so excited to go there; I don't miss it unless I absolutely have to. I drop whatever I am doing to go there. Even my kids know not to bother me on Mahbär day.

She went on to say:

Members regularly check up on one another. For instance, when I go out to town, I drop by a member's home just to see how she is doing, and other members do the same when they pass by my house. If a member isn't picking up her phone, we go to her house to see if she is okay.

Members support one another through weddings, childbirth, graduation and any other social event. When describing their support to one another, interviewees referred to these events as their own events in a very intimate tone. As one interviewee said:

Interviewee

> ***When one of our members has a social event, it feels like your own so you go there with a sense of responsibility. We go to her house, get into her kitchen, and take it upon ourselves to fill in any need we see.***

Not all Mahbär's have the same level of closeness, though. As an interviewee from the Kidane Mehret Mahbär in Bishoftu said, they lacked unity and cohesion, which could be due to the large number of members or lack of coordination by the leaders. She stated that, aside from getting together once a month at the church compound, the Mahbär is weak (Interviewee A3 (2)).

In regards to psychological support and benefits, when asked how they felt when attending, all interviewees said that they felt "*love, joy, support and satisfaction*". Interviewees expressed their feelings in regards to their Mahbär with intense emotion and a sense of pride, as in the narrative provided by one interviewee below:

Interviewee A3 (3)

> ***I don't know how to express the Psychological benefits. You go there and you come back satisfied because you share things with each other you wouldn't tell anyone else. Even if you get no solution, you still feel better; you feel a sense of hope. Before I started attending, I wasn't okay. I was dealing with a lot of private stuff but when I started going there and interacting with people from different backgrounds, it gave me perspective on my own life and helped me to strengthen my relationship with God.***

In conclusion, the study found that the intimacy of Mahbär's served to meet the social needs of their members as indigenous therapeutic platforms, with members reporting relief from emotional strains such as depression and stress.

3.3.3 Female University Student Jumu'ah's

Coping with the Stress of Medical School: The Fetwel Zahra Jumu'ah

Studies by Hill, Goicochea, & Merlo (2018), Nechita, Nechita, Pirlog, & Rogoveanu (2014), as well as numerous others acknowledge the demanding nature of medical education and the resulting stress of medical students as "anonymously present phenomenon." Medical students are prone to stress-related depression, burnout, poor academic performance, and, in severe cases, suicidal tendencies.

In response to such contextual demands, activities of the Fetwel Zahra Jumu'ah of the Saint Paul's Millennium Medical College focus on providing academic support to its members. Such support includes familiarizing new students with the new academic environment; sharing books, videos, reading materials, previous exam questions and personal notes; studying together; supporting with assignments; and sharing their previous experiences with certain subjects and teachers. The current Amira (leader) provided:

Interviewee B1 (1)

> ***One of the things that the Jumu'ah purposely works on is academic support. When new students arrive at the school, we look for students and resources that can provide needed information. We get prepared even before new students join the university. After they have arrived, we provide them with previous exams after collecting them from seniors. We also arrange for senior students to tutor their juniors on topics of their agreement. Members can freely ask for books or other resources they need.***

Further, the Jumu'ah also serves as a place to escape the demands of their academic lives. Below are interview excerpts of students sharing how the Jumu'ah helped them cope with the stressful environment of Medical School:

Interviewee B1 (1), B1 (3), B1 (9) and B1 (10)

> ***Because I was struggling with Medical School, I went to the Jumu'ah; I felt a sense of calm. Getting away from the stress of school at least once a week calms you down. (B1 (1))***
>
> ***I feel a sense of support. When you are a medical student, a lot of things are tough. When we talk about this stuff, it relieves your stress. (B1 (3))***
>
> ***It is that sense of sisterhood, the sense of belonging, the mental peace that helps you cope with the new stressful environment and the separation from your family. It's also where you get guidance and share your experiences as to how to overcome the challenges of Medical School. (B1 (9) and B1 (10))***

According to all the 10 interviewees, a bulk of the discussions held when members meet are about academics, given the challenging nature of their medical studies. Issues such as dorm life, social life, family and personal life are discussed in smaller groups of close friends within the Jumu'ah. 7 out of 10 interviewees said that they confide private matters to their members; some issues they discuss include challenges in dorm life; failing exams and coping with the effect; and academic, financial, and family issues.

Interviewee B1 (3)

> ***As you know, with Medical School the main problem is stress and anxiety, so when someone confides in you on such matters, you try to comfort and support that person.***

Another interviewee said:

Interviewee B1 (4)

> ***To be honest, we don't discuss personal issues in the general Jumu'ah meeting; rather, we bring up private matters such as family and academic issues among ourselves in small groups. For instance, when there are issues related to relationships and social life, we give one another advice and try to help out. If that isn't possible, we also try and involve other seniors that can better help the members.***

The level of closeness within the Jumu'ah varies from people that are distant to people that are very close. Most interviewees described their relations to one another as "sisterly".

Interviewees expressed their views on the level of closeness among members as follows:

Interviewee B1 (4) and B1 (5)

> ***Personally, I think we are very close. When we meet, we greet one another with smiles and joy. We look forward to seeing one another. Our meetings are very fun and I consider this Jumu'ah to be one of the opportunities where I created the best relationships over the last 5 years from which I have benefited greatly. The relationships I had with some of the members that are no longer in the school are still some of the happiest I have made. (B1 (4))***
>
> ***We are very close. There isn't a time that we don't hug when we run into one another in the compound. Maybe it's because we are small in number and everyone knows everyone else. Sometimes we even hug one another twice or three times in one day. The relationship is very close. (B1 (5))***

In regards to social support outside of academic life, all interviewees, even those that were not active participants, agreed that members attend funerals, graduations, weddings and childbirth. Announcements for such occasions are made to all members and they are encouraged to attend.

The section on the St. Paul Jumu'ah will conclude with a narration from an interviewee who summed up her view of the Jumu'ah in regards to psychological support of its members as follows:

Interviewee B1 (4)

> ***I believe that having unity with people that understand me and having built such a community has had a huge psychological impact on me. I feel like I am part of something bigger than myself. Further, when such a community is religious, it gives you a sense of security. Being accepted by people like yourself creates a good feeling and a sense of support. I am free to ask religious questions I wouldn't be comfortable asking other people. Knowing there are members with better religious knowledge, I feel confident I will get appropriate answers.***

Jumu'ah Sisterhood during the Time of Ethic-Clashes in Haramaya University

The ethnic federalist basis of political administration in Ethiopia has over the years led to tensions and conflicts among different ethnic groups over issues of self-administration, allocation of resources, and claims of political suppression. These tensions have inevitably spilled over to the country's universities, resulting in student protests and clashes. According to Adamu (2013), there is an increasing concern that universities have become "the major battlefields for ethnic conflict in Ethiopia", owing to the diverse make-up of students from all over the country.

The Haramya University was established in 1954 in Harar, eastern Ethiopia. Located in predominately Oromo speaking Muslim population, the University was one such center for conflicts from

as far back as 2014, when students protested the government's plans to expand the capital city into surrounding farmlands, and the 2017 clashes erupted over student demands for withdrawal of military forces from campus (Ashine, 2019).

Within such a context, the Jumu'ah provided a physical as well as emotional safe space for its members.

Interviewee B2 (6)

> ***There were a lot of ethic-based clashes at Haramaya and when such clashes happened in the University compound, Jumu'ah members were the first people that reached out to check on us and help us if there was anything. During times of unrest, we stayed with one another.***

This support of members during a politically tense environment was the striking character of the Haramaya female Jumu'ah. As an interviewee reported:

Interviewee B2 (1) and B2 (4)

> ***Given the rampant ethnic strife at Haramaya, we tried and talked about matters of peace, unity, and a better future for the country. When I was at Haramaya, it was a time of unrest all over the country so we talked about how we would lead this country if we were leaders. We talked about how ethnic politics could be removed. We were very concerned about peace at the time. (B2 (1))***

Other interviewees added:

> ***Since the Jumu'ah was made of people from different ethnicities and the Jumu'ah was located in the Oromia region, we talked about how we could live in tolerance and in unity. We talked about how to retain the old Ethiopian value system; we talk about how-to live-in tolerance with different religions and how to solve intra-religions clashes. (B2 (4))***

Interviewee B2 (1)

> ***Jumu'ah members are from different ethnic backgrounds in Ethiopia but because we shared one religion, we live in harmony; we are tolerant, and we respect one another and one another's culture. I have learned to be tolerant towards other ethnic groups and their culture.***

Interviewees repeatedly stressed the Jumma's role in helping them cope with politically tense times at the University and confirmed that they have developed a culture of tolerance and unity.

As one member stated, when there were fires, police shootings, and student uprisings, members stayed with one another and encouraged other members to stay on campus.

Aside from protecting their friends during political tensions, the female Jumu'ah members also talked about a range of topics including marriage, politics, economy, psychology, and sexual assaults. Interviewees asserted that they encourage members to talk about all matters including children, entering the work force, and being economically dependent. Members also share their personal experiences and challenges.

Box 14

As Interviewees B2 (3) and B2 (7) reported, members are given personal development trainings. Other members, however stated that the political tension made it awkward to discuss political issues as they are made up of different ethnicities. In describing the relationship among members, interviewees enthusiastically called one another "**sisters**" while one interviewee called the Jumu'ah her "**life**".

Others revealed that the relationship varied across the group depending on how close one felt with each person. When asked if they had ever shared personal matters or if someone had confided in them on private matters, all 10 interviewees answered 'Yes'. In some cases, interviewees also said the relationship among members lasted even after members had graduated and left Haramaya.

An interviewee provided the following heartfelt description of the relationship with members:

Interviewee B2 (1)

> ***We are sisters. If your sister was starving, you would share your food with her. The Jumu'ah is made up of people from all over Ethiopia; we have members from different ethnic backgrounds but we are still like a family. If something were to happen to me, they would still help me out like we were related by blood, and I would do the same.***

The social interaction of members is not limited to Jumu'ah settings as members have witnessed. They basically live all their lives together, studying and relaxing together. Members support one another through happy or hard times such as weddings, graduations and funerals. When asked how interviewees felt when they spent time with the Jumu'ah members, they expressed strong feelings of spiritual and emotional satisfaction. One interviewee said:

Interviewee

> ***If I was feeling frustrated due to lack of money or if I was feeling sad because I had low grades, when I met with the Jumu'ah I would feel joy. It just relieves your mental stress.***

Another member mentioned that the Jumu'ah helped her cope with the separation from her family and the feeling of loneliness. The excerpt below of a member describing the sense of

personal growth and empowerment summarizes the overall psychological impact of the Jumu'ah:

Interviewee B2 (4)

> ***There is a difference between how you feel when you are alone and when you are in a team. When you are with the members of the Jumu'ah, they make you feel like you can do things you didn't think you could do. Because you have to read and participate at the meetings, it helps you develop public speaking abilities.***

3.3.4 Female Prayer Groups

Britannica defines prayer as an act of communication by humans with the sacred or God, the gods, the transcendent realm, or supernatural powers. The act of prayer, whether in groups or in private, is one common to all religions. So much so that "it's said to be to religion what rational thought is to philosophy" (Hamman, 2020).

The widespread practice of prayer has given rise to scientific investigations which found positive links between prayer and psychological wellbeing.

Kiyani, Mohammadi, & Pourahmad (2011) studied two groups of students - those were committed to prayers and those who were not. The results showed a meaningful difference in their general health. The study found that relying on beliefs and religious activities helped the students to control exciting stresses and physical inconveniences. In another study by McCulloch & Parks-Stamm (2018), participants were randomly assigned to pray or think about a personal problem and then report their emotional management and cognitive understanding of the problem. In both experiments, those in the prayer condition reported having greater perspective and more emotional acceptance. It is, however, important to note that since prayer is largely a matter of faith, which, by the very definition of faith, is not empirically measurable, the above studies are not without scientific limitations.

Nonetheless, this study recognizes the psychological effects that prayer groups offer to their members as interviewees reported a sense of "spiritual satisfaction" in their communal prayers. Hence, in presenting the results on female prayer groups, aside from the social interaction and support which are disclosed below, the corporate act of prayer also contributes to the mental stability of members.

Aside from these psychological effects of prayer, gatherings like these also act as social support communities. The experience of each group studied is described below.

A Sisterhood of Young Christian Women: Sisters-in-Christ

As founders of the group stipulated, the vision in creating the group was "to empower and create a holistically equipped, excellent young Christian women."

Their core purpose was to create a free platform for their members to discuss their challenges, provide a support system, and empower young Christian women. The group, by design, focused on social support, and thus founders believe this was the group's most effective feature. To such an end, the group breaks its members into small groups of 4 or 5 every month so members can develop close relationships within their groups.

The main group meetings focus on religious content. Other topics such as politics, family, and relationship issues are discussed within the small group settings. When asked how the meetings went, interviewees answered their meetings were "fun and lively", and members were very active in their participation. Their meetings take about 3 hours on Saturday afternoons, and organizers say they try and make the best out of the three hours. Members have expressed their desire to meet even more frequently, and some stay behind for coffee after official meetings are over. According to the interviewees, even members that are normally socially awkward are very active in the group. One of the participants in the focus group discussions expressed her experience organizing their prayer group as follows:

Focus Group Discussion 0.6

For instance, in my first small group, we met for coffee once, and gradually, we opened up and started sharing even our personal challenges. In another small group, we went to visit Unity Park together. We laughed and had fun, and even after changing small groups, we still keep in touch. By creating authentic friendships, we encourage the discussion of all sorts of topics, not just religious matters. We also try and include various topics in our monthly meetings. We have seen married couples sharing their experiences with us, and we had planned to bring over successful Christian women and engage our members before the Pandemic.

(August 21, 2020)

Members refer to one another as 'sisters' and support one another through social events. Overall, the group has created a closely-knit social support platform for its members. The founders summed up the work they had done in their pilot project as follows:

Interviewee

Our biggest accomplishment is creating that intimate environment in such a short time. After assessing the result of our pilot programs, we will adjust to other needs and formulate a better program for the next batch.

Prayer Warriors of the Aba Sena Prayer Group

Members of the Aba Sena mother's prayer group are very close to one another as they have lived together for over 20 years. An interviewee said that they were like a big family that lived together for many years. All interviewees referred to members as 'sisters. Aside from their weekly prayers, they also meet and go to church

together, have coffee with one another, or just go to see how they are doing. Social support among members is very close; not only are they a part of the same group, they are also a part of the same Edir - a local burial association. Hence, over the past 20 years, they have been by one another through deaths, births, graduations, sicknesses, and weddings. A member of the group says:

Interviewee C2(2)

> ***"I don't know how to express it. I have seen a lot of social groups but the support in Aba Sena is different. We are there no matter what; we are very supportive."***

According to the interviewees, a lot their discussions are about their children and social life. They give thanks to the Lord for their children and pray when there is trouble. While they did not talk about politics, they prayed about their country and any current issues as they felt it was their duty to do so. Members shared strong feelings of sisterhood within their group. A member said:

Interviewee C2(2)

> ***"I forget that we are even unrelated; they are my sisters. When I am in need, I go to them; we discuss matters and we visit one another."***

Chapter Four: Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This study set out to explore the existence of economic and psycho-social empowerment within religious gatherings of Ethiopian women. Data was gathered from members of these socio-religious units from across the country and analyzed using 'pre-thematized' interview questions and subsequent themes that arose during coding. The results identified the existence of economic support of members internally, engagement in social outreach activities, social support between members, strong emotional attachment, and a deep sense of belonging among group members.

A repeated question that came up during focus group discussions and personal interviews was whether evident elements of support identified in these gatherings could be considered as 'empowerment'.

The following sections discuss the findings in relation to the question of empowerment that the study sought out to answer and provide a way forward for the implementation of the results uncovered.

4.2 The Need to Contextualize Empowerment

Varying understandings of empowerment arise from different application and interactions of the four operations of "power". For instance, the UN Women in its definition of empowerment takes into account the three dimensions of "power". There have been actions by international agencies to establish uniform measures of empowerment such as the 1995 UNDP Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The GEM was developed to measure gender equality across the globe. It measures gender inequality in three basic dimensions of empowerment: economic participation and decision-making, political participation and decision-making, and power over economic resources (UNDP, 2004, p. 207).

Studies have debated the usefulness of the GEM in addressing varying socio-cultural realties of women. Syed (2010) identifies at least four biases in the Eurocentric construction of the GEM. Of particular importance to the current study are the capitalist bias, the elite bias, and the secular bias. The GEM is based on a capitalist notion of economic activity with focus on formal and professional employment sectors. It also focuses on participation of women in national parliaments, capturing only upper class/elite women with access to scarce education and political or economic networks. And finally, as with popular western thought, the GEM is also based on secularist realities.

Syed (2010) argues that in order for the GEM to be relevant to the contextual possibilities of people of faith, it is important that religion be treated as a matter of value choice and a context-sensitive understanding of empowerment be adopted rather than the static Eurocentric paradigm.

Such contextualization of empowerment allows for more effective empowerment strategies that allow the women in each

particular socio-cultural reality to determine how and to what extent they would like to pursue empowerment (Syed, 2010, p. 292).

This contextual approach to understanding empowerment in a given society is one that is taken by this study in the discussion of the results.

Focus Group Discussion 0.7

As one participant in a focus group discussion explained, these gatherings do not give the typical picture of gender empowerment one expects to find from a western perspective. These groups do not discuss democracy or human rights; they do not even use the term empowerment despite the evident outcome. Yet, they are closer to the average Ethiopian women than civil society organizations, human rights advocates, gender equality activists or the government. Thus, these gatherings have evolved to meet non-religious needs of their members, giving rise to a unique Ethiopian experience of psychosocial and economic empowerment the details of which are discussed below.

4.3 "Power With" and "Power Within": Psychosocial and Economic Empowerment

4.3.1 Power With

Key Word

Power with: (According to Rowlands (1997))

Is the capability to achieve with others what one could not achieve alone. It requires collective action to bring about change at household, community and wider levels.

This study found that religious gatherings of women served as collaborative platforms towards a common goal, apart from their primary religious purposes. Each group set a common goal unique to its needs.

> **In some cases, that common goal was to give back to communities as part of a religious obligation, and such goal was pursued by engaging in social outreach and local community engagement activities. For other groups, a common goal was spiritual learning and free conversations, which was achieved by setting up safe spaces for members to ask questions and discuss their challenges. And for some other groups, a common goal was ensuring a community of close friends to help each other through major life events and such a goal was achieved through a collaborative group effort.**

An important feature of these gatherings is the wide range of flexibility in accommodating the needs of each group of women to achieve a common goal. While the study of Mahbär's by Flemmen & Zenebe (2016) viewed the ritual as a cultural toolbox in which laypeople have great flexibly in adjusting it according to their needs, this study found flexibility to be a feature in University Jumu'ah and female prayers groups as well (Flemmen & Zenebe, 2016, p. 21).

Each group studied served to meet the unique need of its members. For instance, within the three female university Jumu'ah's studied, while groups exhibited similar religious structures and activities, each group responded to different needs and towards a different goal. The St. Paul female Jumu'ah focused on assisting its members in an academically challenging environment as that had been the most outstanding need of its members. The Haramaya University Jumu'ah focused on providing a safe space for tolerance and unity for its members, as the University had been dealing with ethnic-based uprisings and unrest. On the other hand, the Wollo University Jumu'ah focused on religious education of its female members, as that had been the imminent need.

The same can be said about prayer groups and Mahbär's studied. The Aba Sena prayer group, which is made up of women in their late 60s, focused on meeting the social support needs. Members were mothers who had married off their children, welcomed the birth of their grandchildren, and faced health

issues. As a result, the group catered to these social needs. On the other hand, the Sisters-in-Christ female prayer group, which was made up of women in their early 20's, focused on creating an idea/experience-sharing platform. This group allows its young members a free space to discuss their issues and share their experiences and tries to model the young lives. In university dormitory-based Mahbär's, the conversations between its young members focused on their academic lives whereas in Mahbär's made up of married women, conversations stirred towards the marital life and its challenges.

These religious gatherings of women, while similar in their religious function, differ greatly in their areas of non-religious goals. Group dynamics are uniquely determined by their collective needs. This flexibility allows the platforms to continue to serve and empower alternating needs of their members. Hence, while the level and nature of empowerment of each group depends on its members, their shared interest, and the resulting engagements, each gathering of women exercises "power with" their members towards their common goal.

4.3.2 Power Within

"Empowerment starts internally before it can manifest externally," (participant in focus group discussion September 7, 2020).

Key Word

Power Within:

Can be understood as the internal development of intangible assets such as self-esteem, self-confidence, self-awareness and assertiveness (Nikkhah, Redzuan , & Abu-Samah , 2012).

(Rowlands (1997)) has defined 'power-within' as the spiritual strength and uniqueness that exists in each one of us and makes us truthfully human.

Power within operates in a way that self-acceptance and self-respect lead to respect for and acceptance of others as equals. In light of the above understating of internal components of empowerment, not only do these religious gatherings empower members to exercise collaborative power in meeting their social and economic needs, they also change and/or challenge members internally in a process of self-awareness, self-development and self-fulfillment. Such is done in one or both of two ways:

1. Through the development of strong religious social identity

As studies have shown, frequent religious participation leads to a stronger sense of religious social identity as attendees identify with that group closely, hence reporting higher levels of subjective psychological well-being (Greenfield & Marks, 2007; Levin & Chatters, 1998).

Box 15

A deep sense of satisfaction was expressed by members of these gatherings interviewed, with reports of feeling joy, inspiration, peace, relief, encouragement, freedom, feeling whole, feeling more confident and feeling secure in a sense of community from attending these gatherings. The sense of spiritual and moral satisfaction from the act of prayer itself and communion with members leads to a sense of internal fulfillment, strong sense of identity, self-acceptance and eventually confidence in what amounts to an inner sense of empowerment.

2. Through psychosocial interactions with members

Members of these gatherings frequently refer to one another as 'sisters. This closeness is in part the result of the religious/spiritual nature of the gatherings themselves and also the by-product of the religious/spiritual nature of these gatherings.

Given this sense of intimacy they share with women of the same value, these platforms also allow for personal growth by way of psychosocial interactions. Members understand each other without judgment as they share a value system derived from their common religion.

Box 16

For instance, in the different groups studied, members reported to learning public speaking, group leading, and communication skills. Skills they will not only apply in the religious settings but also elsewhere. Others reported learning saving skills, time management skills, and life skills from women that have walked the same path before them and even simple acts such as sharing cooking skills or possible business ideas. Understanding the power of religion in shaping personal values and physic of believers is the key to appreciating the complex and far-reaching spiritual and psychosocial satisfaction members report to have experienced in these gatherings. Hence, these gatherings also contribute towards the increased individual consciousness, self-confidence and acceptance of the women that attended the gatherings.

4.4 Relevance and Threat of Extinction

While the above sections have explored the dynamics of empowerment within the findings of the studied religious gatherings, this last section will address the question of relevance of these groups to the "modern women".

When interviewees in this study were asked what they believed would happen to such religious gatherings in the future, some expressed their concern as their children hadn't shown interest to join these groups. Others expressed a sense of bold security in the continuing appeal of these groups. One interviewee pointed out the continuing significance of religion throughout history as a guarantee to the continuing significance of religion in the future, and hence the continuing appeal of religious gatherings to women.

This study found, however, that, to ensure the continuing appeal, work needs to be done by members in ensuring relevant discussions that appeal to the needs of each generation. These groups also need to be accommodating of members with diverse views and those that do not conform to the norms of the religion.

Focus Group Discussion 0.8

As one interviewee pointed out, while she had wanted to join a Jumu'ah in her university, she and her friend had been shunned as "outcasts", as they did not fit into the traditional image of "hijab-wearing Muslims" (Focus Group participant, September 29, 2020).

Thus, making these gatherings more open and inclusive to women of all opinions ensures its appeal and survival.

This study has found that these groups appeal to women of all ages for different reasons. For a woman in her early years, these groups might be attractive as platforms for discussion and mentorship while for women in their late years, these groups continue to be appealing because of the social support and stability they provide. In light of the above, this author is of the opinion that, as long as the human need to socialize and belong continues to exist and as long as the need for religion and a form of spirituality exists, so will the appeal of these groups to women of all ages.

4.5 Limitation and Strengths of the Study

The design decision to exclude discussions on religious doctrines and institutions has limited the effect of the study in addressing the religious-gender divide at its very core. This study exclusively focuses on analysis of the socio-religious units themselves, barring review of the three different religious doctrines or their institutions. Addressing the above would have made a more

comprehensive analysis. However, it was taking into account the novelty of this approach in seeking tenets of empowerment within the framework of religion that these socio-religious units were taken as starting points.

The outstanding strength of this study is the scope of its sample and depth of data that was gathered from different groups across Ethiopia. Aside from the religious units themselves and their members, the opinions of individuals from both extremes of the gender-religion debate were also included and analyzed. In doing so, it grants a general understanding of the previously unexplored religious units and a new lens to appreciate indigenous concepts. Moreover, it lays the foundation for more tailored, more in-depth and more influential research on the subject. The study set out to pave a new road, and it hopefully did.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The study investigated religious gatherings of Ethiopian women in light of the empowerment question, in particular exploring the possibility of economic and psychosocial empowerment. The backdrop to these questions was the gender-religion debate and an intention to find a middle ground.

The religious gatherings observed showcased practices of economic support among members internally. This support was the result of social intimacy and religious obligations towards one another, and not a purposive goal these women set to achieve. Unexpectedly, the study also found women mobilizing economic resources for external acts of social engagement. This too was built on religious obligations. But Perhaps the most important and evident finding of the study was the psychosocial effects these group had on their members. These gatherings not only provided emotional, informational and social support but also helped members with their overall psychological well-being.

Box 17

While the study found that women obtained social and economic support from these gatherings, it struggled to fit such findings into the conventional understanding of empowerment as an overt challenge to existing power structures. Thus, the study had to contextually deconstruct empowerment in order to appreciate these gatherings and their peculiar expressions of empowerment.
As Knibbe & Bartelink (2019) point out, "the assumption that the emancipation of women requires their exiting from religion is not only simplistic, but creates new forms of exclusion, and does not recognize women's agency and the ways in which religious traditions enable women to shape their lives and their relationships." The study discussed how Ethiopian women used these religious platforms to empower themselves without demanding such women to abandon their religion in quest of gender equality. It respects the rights of women to pursue empowerment within their subjective realities without forcing an external notion of empowerment. Thus, key to appreciating the study are two understandings:

1. Understanding that spirituality is at the very essence of these gatherings. hence all and any outcomes presented find root in religious values; and
2. Understanding the need to contextualize empowerment as a self-attainable goal the parameters of which are set individually by each group of women.

In conclusion, the study argues for the re-evaluation of preconceptions from both ends of the religious-gender spectrum. On one end, the religious community needs to de-politicize the concept of empowering women. On the gender end, instead of the blank categorization of religion as oppressive, the study calls for a post-secularist, contextual, and inclusive approach to the issue of religion and gender in research, activism and policy making. The right to religious expression and the pursuit of gender equality should not be at the expense of either; rather, this study suggests working towards, treading a middle ground.

The Way Forward: Implications of the Research Findings

The preceding sections have presented and analyzed the results of economic and psychosocial empowerment within the religious societies of Ethiopian women. This brief section will put forth implications of the study for various stakeholders.

Creating Awareness and Appreciation for the Flexible and Unique Nature and Use of These Gatherings

> **The first, and perhaps the most important, implication of the findings of this study is brining attention to the previously unexplored socio-religious entities.**

As the study found, the women of these gatherings are not themselves aware of the significance of their meetings. Interviewees were shocked when the research team asked them if they believed they had been empowered through their meetings even after they had clearly described all the benefits of their gatherings. Not only the women but the religious institutions these gatherings are under are also unaware and unappreciative of the rich values of these gatherings aside from the religious contributions. Further, private and public stakeholders in gender and empowerment issues have also neglected religious women, limiting their audience to the 'educated', 'elite', 'city' women. In contextual research such as this, the stories and experiences narrated allow the women themselves, their religious institutions, and other stakeholders to understand these already exiting social units anew.

> **These gatherings are not only important platforms for issues of gender but also serve as therapeutic associations of mental well-being for members and important agents working on social cohesion, tolerance, and community building. As a participant in a focus group discussion expressed, gatherings such as this are what have built and sustained the Ethiopian community and mirror Ethiopian values of tolerance and unity.**

Supporting These Gatherings for Better Social and Community Empowerment

The second implication of the study is highlighting the need for supporting and mobilizing these gatherings for their impact on gender and social issues.

It is important to note that the religious nature of the groups might limit how far government and private entities can interfere with the engagement of these gatherings. Nonetheless, the support can start from acknowledgment.

Interviewees stated that they believed religious institutions are weak in terms of empowering their women.

There is a general misconception within the religious community about empowering women, as a politically exploited concept, even though the reality is that women of faith do help and support one another. One way to change that perception is to show the practical usage of such groups and encourage the same.

These groups give their members a lot freedom to grow and express themselves. Thus, they should be given the same, if not more, importance by the religious institutions. Further, given how the government, civil societies, and aid agencies are all individually working on empowering women, an integrated and collaborative effort with religious institutions and these gatherings allows for greater impact.

Below are ways of support and collaboration put forth by the participants of this study:

- **Sharing experience and giving/receiving trainings with other gatherings;**
- **Getting support from religious leaders and teachers (e.g. giving reading resources and guidelines);**
- **Giving educational support and short courses on management skills, leadership skills, etc.;**

- **Giving financial support, internally and externally, to enable the women of these gatherings to collectively engage in economically beneficial activities;**
- **Getting recognition from the government as places where women are equipped and supported; similar recognition can be obtained from local communities, universities, churches and mosques for the community outreach contributions; and**
- **Working towards setting up an inter- or intra-religious overseeing organization for these gatherings.**

In light of the implications discussed above, the research team, in addition to the publication of the study in several languages, will also will also organize a workshop to disseminate the findings and engage stakeholders from both the religious communities and public-private stakeholders in gender issues towards a collaborative way forward.

Recommendation for Further Research

While the study examined indigenous religious gatherings of Ethiopian women and found unique practices of economic and psychosocial empowerment, it has also found that these gatherings are complex and far-reaching in their social-cultural impact. The current study only tapped into a fraction of rich indigenous knowledge these gatherings had to offer. As such, the author calls for diversified research exploring different angles of these socio-cultural stockpiles. Researchers can study the emotional and health benefits of these gatherings or expound on the contributions these gatherings make to peace, stability, tolerance and community building.

Acknowledgments

I would like to take the opportunity to express my gratitude to the people and organizations that have been instrumental in the successful completion of this study. My appreciation goes to the Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD) and Werdwet Fellowship for this wonderful opportunity to promote indigenous knowledge to fight inequality and look for ways of protecting the rights for minorities and vulnerable groups. My sincere thanks go to the entire CARD staff for their hospitality and cooperation, which made the development of this study timely and enjoyable.

I would like to thank all data collectors and Oliyada Abera (Research Assistant) for all their help during the development of the study. I would also like to express my gratitude to Animaw Anteneh (Ph.D.) for his support in the editorial and translation tasks. A heartfelt thanks also goes to Belaynesh Tefera (Ph.D.), research advisor, for her technical supervision and the passion, enthusiasm and mentorship she so warmly provided. I thank her for the wonderful introduction into the world of qualitative studies. Her professionalism, integrity, and character have impacted me in more ways than I can say, it was truly a great pleasure working with her.

And lastly, I would like to thank all the interviewees that took part in the research, for the candid emotions and stories they shared are what made the study possible. I only hope to have done them justice!

References

Abbink, J. (1998). An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity. *Journal of African Cultural Studies, Vol. 11, No. 2*, 109-124.

Adamu, Y. A. (2013). Causes of Ethnic Tension and Conflict among University Students in Ethiopia. *ATINER CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES No: EDU2013-0644*. Athens, Greece : Athens Institute for Education and Research.

Ashine, Y. (2019). *Universities as Contested Terrain; Making Sense of Violent Conflicts in Ethiopian Universities* . Addis Ababa: CARD and NED.

Baumeister, R., & Leary, M. (1995). The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation. *Psychological Bulletin; the American Psychological Association 117(3)*, 497-529.

Blair, E. (2015). A Reflexive Exploration of Two Qualitative Data Coding Techniques. *Journal of Methods and Measurement in the Social Sciences,Vol.6, No. 1*, 14-29.

Burnard, P. (1991). A method of analysing interview transcripts in qualitative research . *Nurse Educatron Today*, 11 , 461-466.

CEDAW, U. (2019, 03 14). *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. Retrieved from United Nations: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3801130?ln=en

Central Intelligence Agency. (2020). *Central Intelligence Agency: The World Factbook*. Retrieved from https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html

Council of Ministers Regulation No.466/2020. (2020, April 20). *A Regulation Iuused to Implement the State of Emergency Proclmation No.3/2020 Enacted to Counter and Control the Spread of Covid-19 and Mitigate its Impact*. Retrieved from http://www.moh.gov.et/ejcc/sites/default/files/2020-04/negarit.pdf

Diamant, J. (2017, 11 28). *Ethiopia is an outlier in the Orthodox Christian world*. Retrieved from Pew Research Center: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/28/ethiopia-is-an-outlier-in-the-orthodox-christian-world/#:~:text=Orthodox%20Ethiopians%20are%20more%20likely,religious%20symbols%20(93%25%20vs.&text=Orthodox%20Christians%20do%20not%20make,Protestant%20and%2

FDRE Population Census Commission. (2008, 12). *Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census Results*. Retrieved from https://www.ethiopianreview.com/pdf/001/Cen2007_firstdraft(1).pdf

Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods 5(1)*, 80-92.

Flemmen, A., & Zenebe, M. (2016). Religious Mahbär in Ethiopia: Ritual Elements,Dynamics, and Challenges. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 3-31.

Frankenberry, N. (2018). Feminist Philosophy of Religion. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* .

Greenfield , E., & Marks, N. (2007). Religious Social Identity as an Explanatory Factor for Associations between More Frequent Formal Religious Participation and Psychological Well-Being. *Int J Psychol Relig.; 17(3)*, 245–259.

Habele Selassie, S. (2003). *The Ethiopian Ortodox Tewahedo Church Faith and Order* . Retrieved from The Ethiopian Ortodox Tewahedo Church Faith and Order : https://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/ethiopian/prechristian.html

Hamman, A. (2020, May 18). *Prayer*. Retrieved from Britannica: https://www.britannica.com/topic/prayer

Hammerschmidt, E. (1963). A Brief History of German Contributions to the Study of Ethiopia. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies V 1. No.2*, 30-48.

Harvard University. (2020). *Harvard University: The Pluralisim Project*. Retrieved from Harvard University: https://pluralism.org/jum%E2%80%99ah-the-friday-prayer

Haustein, J. (2014). Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Ethiopia:A Historical Introduction to a Largely Unexplored Movement. *Multidisciplinary Views on the Horn of Africa;Hatem Elliesie (ed.)*, 109–127.

Hill, M., Goicochea, S., & Merlo, L. (2018). In their own words: Stressors Facing Medical Students in the Millennial Generation. *Med Educ Online. 23(1)*.

Hussain , M. (2012). *The Five Pillars of Islam: Laying the Foundations of Divine Love and Service to Humanity.* Kube Publishing Ltd.

Jensen, M. (2019). Why are women more religious than men? *Research Gate* .

K. Hammarberg, M. Kirkman, & S. de Lacey. (2016). Qualitative research methods: when to use them and how to judge them. *Human Reproduction 31(3)*, 498-501.

Kirkley, E. (2000). Rational mothers and infidel gentlemen: Gender and American atheism,. *Syracuse University Press*.

Kitchen, P., Williams, A., & Gallina , M. (2015). Sense of belonging to local community in small-to-medium sized Canadian urban areas: a comparison of immigrant and Canadian-born residents. *BMC Psychology 3(18)*.

Kiyani, R., Mohammadi, A., & Pourahmad, E. (2011). Investigating the effect of prayer in increasing the mental health of college students. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 30 (2011),* 1875 – 1877.

Knibbe, K., & Bartelink, B. (2019). Religion, Secularism, and Women's Empowerment. *Religion and European Society: A Primer,* (pp. 125–141).

Levin, J., & Chatters, L. (1998). Religion, Health, and Psychological Well-Being in Older Adults: Findings from Three National Surveys. *Sage Journals 10(4),* 504-531.

Maslow, A. (1954). *Motivation and Personality.* Harper & Row,Publishers, Inc.

McCulloch, K., & Parks-Stamm, E. (2018). Reaching Resolution: The Effect of Prayer on Psychological Perspective and Emotional Acceptance. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* .

McElroy, W. (2005). Religion and American Feminism. *Society, 42*, 28-31.

Merriam-Webster. (2020, 11 26). *Merriam-Webster; Empowerment* . Retrieved from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empowerment: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empowerment

Nechita , F., Nechita , D., Pirlog , M.-C., & Rogoveanu , I. (2014). Stress in medical students . *Romanian Journal of Morphology & Embryology 55(3),* 1263–1266.

Nikkhah, H., Redzuan , M., & Abu-Samah , A. (2012). Development of 'Power within' among the Women: A Road to Empowerment. *Asian Social Science 8(1).*

Nowell, L., Norris, J., White, D., & Moules, N. (2017). Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods Volume,* 16: 1–13.

Omar, A. M. (2017, December). *Praying Towards Al-Aqsa Mosque: A Study on Mulsim Classical Sources*. Retrieved from ResearchGate: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327986081_Praying_towards_al-Aqsa_Mosque_A_Study_on_Muslim_Classical_Sources#fullTextFileContent

Oppong, S. (2013). Religion and Identity. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research 3(6).*

Oxaal, Z., & Baden, S. (1997, october). *BRIDGE;Development-Gender Institute of Development Studies University of Sussex.* Retrieved from Gender and empowerment: definitions, approaches and implications for policy Briefing prepared for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida): https://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/reports/re40c.pdf

Oxford English Dictionary . (2020). *Psychosocial.* Retrieved from Oxford English Dictionary: https://www.oed.com/

Palinkas, L., Horwitz, S., Green, C., Wisdom, J., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis. *Adm Policy Ment Health, ,* 1-2 September ; 42(5): 533–544. doi:10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y.

Pew Research Center. (2012, 08 09). Retrieved from Pew Research Center: https://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-1-religious-affiliation/#identity

Pew Research Center. (2016, March). *The Gender Gap in Religion Around the World*. Retrieved from Pew Research Center: https://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/

Pew Research Center. (2017, 11 8). *Orthodox Christians are highly religious in Ethiopia, much less so in the former Soviet Union*. Retrieved from Pew Research Center: https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christians-are-highly-religious-in-ethiopia-much-less-so-in-former-soviet-union/

Pew Research Center. (2018, June 13). *Why do levels of religious observance vary by age and country?* Retrieved from Pew Research Center : https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/why-do-levels-of-religious-observance-vary-by-age-and-country/

Rivers, J. (2007). Law, Religion and Gender Equality. *The Ecclesiastical Law Society,* 25-52

Rowlands, J. (1997). *Questioning Empowerment Working with Women in Honduras*. Oxfam.

Ryan, F., Coughlan, M., & Cronin, P. (2009). Interviewing in Qualitative Research: The One-to-One Interview. *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation,* 16(6)309-314 DOI: 10.12968/ijtr.2009.16.6.42433.

Statista. (2020, 07 22). *Ethiopia: Total population from 2009 to 2019, by gender.* Retrieved from Statista: https://www.statista.com/statistics/967834/total-population-of-ethiopia-by-gender/#:~:text=Total%20population%20of%20Ethiopia%202019%2C%20by%20gender&text=This%20statistic%20shows%20the%20total,to%20approximately%2056.07%20million%20inhabitants.

Stinson, R., Goodman, K., Bermingham, C., & Ali, S. (2013). Do Atheism and Feminism Go Hand-in-Hand?:A Qualitative Investigation of Atheist Men's Perspectives about Gender Equality. *Secularism and Nonreligion, 2,*, 39-60.

Syed, J. (2008). A context-specific perspective of equal employment opportunity in Islamic societies. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management, 25(1),* 135-151.

Syed, J. (2010). Reconstructing gender empowerment. *Women's Studies International Forum 33,* 283–294.

Tefera, B., Marloes Van Engen, Jac Van der Klink, & Schippers , A. (2017). The Grace of Motherhood: Disabled Women Contending with Societal Denial of Intimacy, Pregnancy, and Motherhood in Ethiopia. *Disability & Society 32:10,* 1511-1532.

Tefera, B., Van Engen, M., & Schippers, A. (December 2018). The Experiences of Children With Disabilities and Primary Caregivers On The Social Inclusion of Children With Disabilities In Ethiopia. *International Journal of Child Youth and Family Studies 9(4),* 146-167.

Trading Economics. (2020). Retrieved from Trading Economics: https://tradingeconomics.com/ethiopia/population-female-percent-of-total-wb-data.html#:~:text=Population%2C%20female%20(%25%20of%20total%20population)%20in%20Ethiopia%20was%20reported,compiled%20from%20officially%20recognized%20sources.

Tomasello, M. (2014). The ultra-social animal. *European Journal of Social Psychology, Eur. J. Soc. Psychol. 44,* 187–194.

UNDP (2004). *Human Development Report: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse*. New York Oxford University Press.

UNPO (2020). Retrieved from Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization : https://unpo.org/article/21787

UN Women. (2020). *UN Women*. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/pdf/factsheet2.pdf

Vignieri, S. (2020). Social Animals Need Connection. *Science 368(6493),* 840-842.

World Economic Forum. (2020). *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*. Retrieved from World Economic Forum: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf

Young, S. (2008). The Neurobiology of Human Social Behaviour: An Important But Neglected Topic. *Journal of Psychiatry & Neuroscience; 33(5),* 391–392.

Appendices

Annex 1: Sample Group Breakdown

SAMPLE SET A **Tsïwwa Mahbär**	SAMPLE SET B **University Jumu'ah**	SAMPLE SET C **Prayer Group**
Sample Sub-Set A1: Mariam Tsïwwa Mahbär in Selale,Oromia Region **Data Collector:** Lead Researcher **Data Collection Method:** Observation and in-person interview	**Sample Sub-Set B1** Saint Paul's Millennium Medical College Female Muslim Student Jumu'ah **Data Collector:** Data Collector 1 **Data Collection Method:** Telephone interview	**Sample Sub-Set C1** Sisters-in-Christ Female Prayer Group **Data Collector:** Lead Researcher **Data Collection Method:** Focus Group Discussions
Sample Sub-Set A2 Mariam Tsïwwa Mahbär in Wollo, Amhara Region **Data Collector:** Lead Researcher **Data Collection Method:** Telephone interview	**Sample Sub-Set B2** Haramaya University Female Muslim Student Jumu'ah **Data Collector:** Data Collector 2 **Data Collection Method:** Telephone interview	**Sample Sub-Set C2** Aba Sena Female Prayer Group in Addis Ababa **Data Collector:** Research Assistant **Data Collection Method:** In-person interview
Sample Sub-Set A3 Tsïwwa Mahbär's in Debre Zeyit, Oromia Region **Data Collector:** Lead Researcher **Data Collection Method:** Observation and in-person interviews	**Sample Sub-Set B3** Wollo University Female Muslim Student Jumu'ah **Data Collector:** Data Collector 3 **Data Collection Method:** Telephone interviews	**Sample Sub-Set C3** Female Prayer Groups in Hawassa **Data Collector:** Research Assistant **Data Collection Method:** Telephone interview
Sample Sub-Set A4 In-depth interview of a member of Medhanialem Tsïwwa Mahbär in Addis Ababa **Data Collector:** Lead Researcher	**Sample Sub-Set B4** In-depth interview of a member of a student Jumu'ah in Wollo **Data Collector:** Lead Researcher	**Sample Sub-Set C4** In-depth interview of member of a female prayer group in Addis Ababa **Data Collector:** Lead Researcher

Annex 2: Interview Questions

2.1 Individual Interview Questions [4]

Introduction

First of all, thank you for agreeing to do this interview. Today's interview is going to be used as an input for a research study regarding female religious gatherings. The aim of the study is to investigate the social and economic benefits of female religious gatherings and support these gatherings as a means for female encouragement and empowerment. The following questions are prepared for the study.

Section 1

Opening Question: Before we start the interview, please introduce yourself.

If the following questions are not answered directly by the interviewee, please ask the following probing questions directly.

a. In which age group are you? 20-35; 35-50; 50-75

b. Where do you live?

c. Which university do/did you go to? (For interviewees from University Jumu'ah's)

Section 2

Opening Question: Please tell me about the Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / Prayer group you are a member of.

a. When did you join the Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / Prayer group?

b. How many members does the Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group have?

c. When does the Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group gather?

4 Interview questions were originally in Amharic, the native language of both the interviewees and the interviewers. The questions provided below are English translation made after the fact.

d. How long do you spend when the Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group gathers?

e. Have you ever missed a gathering of the Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group? If yes, what were some of the reasons?

Section 3

Opening Question: Please tell me about economic contributions and support (if any) in your Tsïwwa Mahbär's/ University Jumu'ah / prayer group.

a. Consulting with members, have you ever helped, in cash or in kind, people outside of the Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group? If yes, in what ways?

b. Are there monetary contributions inside the Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group? If yes, how much?

c. How is the collected money spent? Have you ever been the beneficiary from the contributions? If yes, in what ways?

d. Who administers the collected money? Are there similar divisions of work inside the Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group? If yes, what are the divisions? What are the criteria used in the selection of these people?

e. What is the economic status of the women in your Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group? How do you support members with financial needs?

f. Do you have a habit of borrowing or lending money for personal and work reasons in your Tsïwwa Mahbär/ University Jumu'ah / prayer group?

g. What do you think should be done in your Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group to strengthen the economic capacity of members?

Section 4

Opening Question 4.1: What topics do you discuss with members of your Tsïwwa Mahbär/ University Jumu'ah / prayer group) besides religious ones?

a. Do you discuss family and marriage topics with members of your Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group?

b. Do you discuss political and national topics with members of your Tsïwwa Mahbär/ University Jumu'ah / prayer group?

c. What is the habit of discussing personal matters like among the members of your Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group?

d. Has any member of your Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group confided a personal matter to you for advice? If yes, can you tell me one incident?

Opening Question 4.2: How close are you with members of your Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group?

a. How would you describe your closeness with the members of your Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group? Sisterly? Friendly? Or distant? Is there any member of the Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group that you consider to be a close friend?

b. Do you meet with members of your Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group outside the religious gatherings? If yes, what are the reasons?

c. What is the support system like with the members of your Tsïwwa Mahbär/ University Jumu'ah / prayer group during happy and sad incidents?

d. Do you academically support each other? If yes, in what ways? (For members of a university Jumu'ah only)

e. How do you feel when you are with the members of your Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group?

f. What psychological benefits have you obtained by becoming a member of the Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group?

Section 5
Concluding Questions

a. In conclusion, what are the non-religious benefits you obtained by becoming a member of your Tsïwwa Mahbär / University Jumu'ah / prayer group? How do you think other women would benefit from being a member?

b. Finally, what do you suggest should be done to encourage Tsïwwa Mahbär's / University Jumu'ah's / prayer groups?

2.2 Focus Group Discussions: Questions for stakeholders in Gender and Rights Issues

Discussion Point 1: Reflection on the Research Idea

a. Are the research questions appropriate?

b. What could be the possible benefits of this study?

c. What could be the possible challenges of this study?

d. Is this research relevant? How can it be useful?

Discussion Point 2: Reflection on Tsïwwa Mahbär's / University Jumu'ah's / Prayer groups

a. Are you/anyone you know a member of a Tsïwwa Mahbär / a University Jumu'ah / a prayer group? If so, what is your opinion of such gatherings?

b. What do you think are non-religious benefits of such gatherings?

c. What is empowerment to you?

d. Are such gatherings platforms for empowerment?

e. Is such empowerment possible within a religious framework?

Discussion Point 3: Religion and Gender Issues

a. Are religion and gender empowerment exclusive of each other?

b. Does religion enforce patriarchy?

c. Can you believe in gender empowerment and still be religious?

d. From your experience, is religion an obstacle or an opportunity for the empowerment of women?

Discussion Point 4: The Way Forward

How can the result of this research be used by the government, civil society organizations, religious institutions, and members of such gatherings?

2.3 Focus Group Discussions: Questions for Representatives of the Religious Communities under Study

Discussion Point 1: Reflection on the Research Idea

a. Are the research questions appropriate?

b. What could be the possible benefits of this study?

c. What could be the possible challenges of this study?

Discussion Point 2: Tsïwwa Mahbär's / University Jumu'ah's / Prayer groups

a. Are you or anyone you know a member of these gatherings? Please share your experience of such gatherings?

b. What are internal structures you have observed?

c. Do such gatherings allow for economic empowerment?

d. Do such gatherings allow for psychosocial empowerment?

e. What is the relationship between these gatherings and the religious institutions they are under?

f. What would you change or improve about such gatherings?

g. Is empowerment possible within these gatherings?

h. Are such gatherings relevant to "modern women"?

Discussion Point 3: The Way Forward

a. What do you recommend should be done to recognize and empower these gatherings?

b. How can the results of this research be useful?

Annex 3: Table of Codes and Themes Used for Analysis

Themes and Codes
Theme 1: Interviewee Details
Code 1.1 Personal Details
Code 1.2 Membership Details and Reasons for Joining
Code 1.3 Commitment
Code 1.4 Family Response to Membership
Theme 2: Tsïwwa Mahbär's / University Jumu'ah's / Prayer Groups (Details)
Code 2.1 Meeting Days
Code 2.2 Activities
Code 2.3 Internal Structure and Criteria for Selection
Code 2.4 Relationship between the Male and Female Jumu'ah's (for university Jumu'ah's only)
Theme 3: Economic Contributions, Support and Benefits
Code 3.1 Economic Contributions and Support to Members
Code 3.2 Economic Status of Members
Code 3.3 Economic/Social Outreach
Code 3.4 Recommendations on How to Improve the Economic Status of the Members
Theme 4: Social Interactions and Support
Code 4.1 Topics Discussed at Meetings
Code 4.2 Closeness Between Members
Code 4.3 Social Support Between Members
Code 4.4 Academic Support (for university Jumu'ah's only)
Theme 5: Psychological Effect and Benefits
Code 5.1 Psychological Effect on Members
Code 5.2 Psychological Benefits Obtained by Membership
Theme 6: Conclusions and Recommendations
Code 6.1 Summary of Non-religious Benefits Obtained as "Women"
Code 6.2 Recommendations on How to Better Strengthen These Gatherings

CARD
የመብቶችና ዲሞክራሲ ዕድገት ማዕከል
Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy

The thematic inspiration for this study is Yeqaqe Werdwet, a woman who lived 160 years ago in the 19th century and fought for equal rights in marriage in the then traditional Guraghe community in Ethiopia. Consequently, this present research is also a continuation of this theme in that it explores religion-based female gatherings in Ethiopia. It reports qualitative narratives of how Ethiopian women use religion-based periodic gatherings as indigenous platforms for economic and psychosocial empowerment, albeit with a necessary contextualization of empowerment.

Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD)
@CARDEthiopia
Email: info@cardeth.org
P.O.Box: 30174
www.cardeth.org
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Printed by: ELDEL Printing 0960437353 Book Design: Armen 0938352532

CARD
የመብቶችና ዲሞክራሲ ዕድገት ማዕከል
Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy

The thematic inspiration for this study is Yeqaqe Werdwet, a woman who lived 160 years ago in the 19th century and fought for equal rights in marriage in the then traditional Guraghe community in Ethiopia. Consequently, this present research is also a continuation of this theme in that it explores religion-based female gatherings in Ethiopia. It reports qualitative narratives of how Ethiopian women use religion-based periodic gatherings as indigenous platforms for economic and psychosocial empowerment, albeit with a necessary contextualization of empowerment.

Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD)
@CARDEthiopia
Email: info@cardeth.org
P.O.Box: 30174
www.cardeth.org
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Printed by: ELDEL Printing 0960437353

Psychosocial and Economic Empowerment within Periodic Religious Gatherings of Women

EXPLORING THE ETHIOPIAN EXPERIENCE

Eyerusalem Belay
2020 CARD werdwet fellow

Belaynesh Tefera (Ph.D.)
Research Advisor