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JULY 2022

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# Addis POWERHOUSE

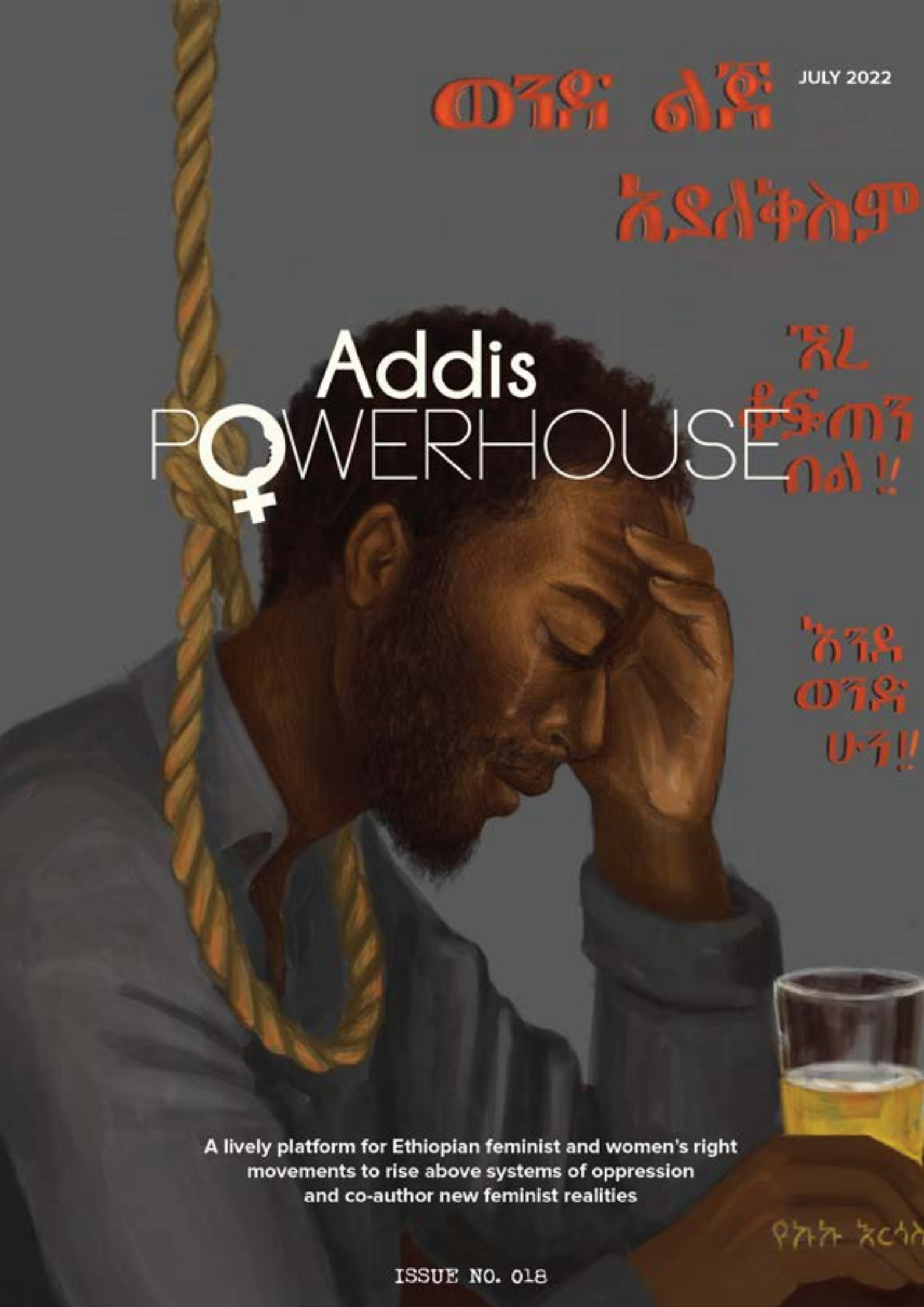
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A lively platform for Ethiopian feminist and women's right movements to rise above systems of oppression and co-author new feminist realities

ISSUE NO. 018

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Ask a Feminist

DR. AZEB ASAMINEW ALEMU

*(Psychiatrist / Assistant Professor  
of Psychiatry)*

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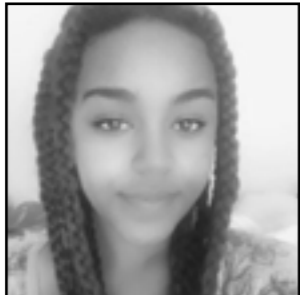
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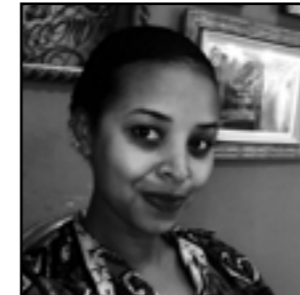
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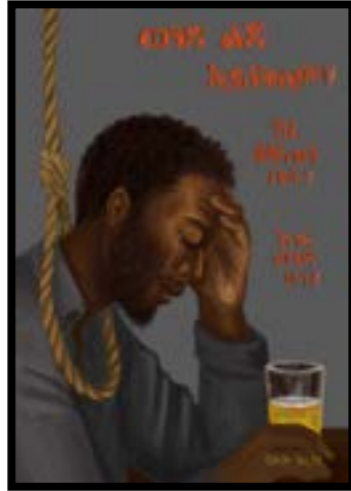
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# “ MENTAL HEALTH AND GENDER ”



May is mental health awareness month. So, it is fitting for us to explore the influence of patriarchy in driving toxic masculinity by punishing love and empathy out of little boys. With Father’s Day celebrated just a month after, in June, the topics of mental health, fatherhood (particularly in patriarchal parenting), and love, beg to be reunited in an Issue - and here we deliver.

In order to compensate for the lack of attention feminist thinkers give to male conditioning, and the negative impacts of patriarchy on men - lets examine the HATE, not the one perpetrators of violence exude, but the one women reserve for men. According to bell hooks, a black American feminsit writer, this is a decided fact reinforced by the notion that “one cannot love what one fears”, and women fear men. Some of that fear stems from a lack of understanding but its bulk also arises because of what we see, hear, and have experienced - abuse, exploitation, and murder. The data is there.

The attempt to understand why men do what they do is foreign to women, and the attempt to change it even more so. Bell hooks doesn’t blame men for rape or war, she blames patriarchy and the way we raise little boys as though they don’t deserve love but only power. This patriarchal power is not a man’s control over women, but a powerful man’s control over girls, boys, less powerful men, women, and other groups that we easily erase from our conversations.

If all this culture of hating men feels like Western talk to you, consider this Amharic proverb “እጅጅ አለ ሴቶች ባላቸውን ቀብረው ሲመለሱ”. We have normalized seeing men as threats, burdens, or devoid of love in the female sect. As kids (both boys and girls), most of us are raised by the patriarchal father who doesn’t hug

or is capable of showing loving emotions. A man who shows love and care by providing for the family and protecting them, leaving the mother to be the only source of affection and intimacy.

This parenting dynamic feels complementary, and as though little kids will miss nothing as one parent gives what the other falls short of. But in reality, love and the capacity to show intimacy will be carved out of boys in their attempt to be as “strong” as their father. This “strength” is demanded from them from society as well, with any act of intimacy considered to be feminine and weak. Bell hooks calls women out too, for continually picking men they consider to be most like their father and reinforcing the same culture of patriarchy.

In the world we live in, men are shamed out of talking about their feelings or seeking mental health services. In fact, actions that come out of men’s anger, rage and/ or sexual desire are more easily justified in our society than men’s expression of feelings. This is one of the reasons why the concept of Father’s Day feels fair, but forced, and exists because Mother’s Day does. Little boys want to be loved and to be shown affection, so something must’ve happened to them for them to turn into fathers who are unable to kiss, hug, and say “I love you”.

This Issue is in honor of Mental Health Awareness Month and Father’s Day, in the hopes that we get to examine what we are doing to little boys.

As always, we hope you enjoy this edition of our Powerhouse and leave us your comments [here](#).

# BACK STORY

Mental illnesses affect people of all ages, gender and socioeconomic status across the world based on a number of social factors and other stressors such as gender based violence, armed conflict and external migration. Specific risk factors such as gender based violence and childhood abuse put women at an increased risk of developing mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety disorder and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Whereas armed conflict followed by displacement is associated with an overall increase in developing PTSD in both women and men.

There are lots of stigma attached to mental health illness and open discussions about mental health is considered a ‘taboo’ in our community mainly due to lack of knowledge and accurate information. However, in recent years, people from all walks of life including prominent figures suffering from mental illnesses, have been very vocal not only about their day to day struggles but also about their slow journey to recovery using multiple platforms. Over the years, Social media has been quite instrumental in raising awareness on mental health, bringing lots of attention to the subject from the general public.

Access to comprehensive mental health services such as treatment and support including in hospital settings is limited in resource poor countries such as Ethiopia. This is especially the case for rural communities, adding to the multiple layers of systemic problems faced by people suffering from mental illnesses. In this month’s edition, Addis powerhouse sits down with Dr. Azeb Asaminew Alemu, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Addis Ababa University College of health sciences to discuss the tremendous yet overlooked impact of mental health in our community.



# FEMINISM 101

Photo: UNICEF Ethiopia/2017/Marta Tadesse

## CUSTOMARY FEMINISM IN OROMIA, ETHIOPIA

Indigenous feminism in local grassroots groups and movements based in Ethiopia is most visible in Hadhaa Siinqee, a sisterhood among married women in some parts of Oromia, Ethiopia. The group drives participation of women in spiritual, socioeconomic and political activities in the Gadaa governance system. With the “Siinqee”, a stick that characterizes a set of rights given to a woman upon marriage, women have the power to protect their own rights, and handle reparation demands from abusive husbands as peace offerings. The sisterhood exercises regulatory power in the customary judicial system that is accepted by the community, and is playing a major role in subsiding conflict in some parts of their vicinity.

The feminsit sisterhood in Hadhaa Siinqee actively advocates for women’s rights, particularly the protection of girls and women from SGBV, and promotes communal peacebuilding amongst the youth.

# NEWS AND OPINION

### Child marriages on the rise in Ethiopia as drought hits families

According to the United Nations Children’s Fund, the worst drought in 40 years is reversing decades of progress made in combating child marriage across swathes of Ethiopia. In the first four months of this year, child marriages nearly tripled in Ethiopia’s Somali region compared with the same period a year ago and, on average, more than doubled across three regions. Impoverished families are exchanging female children for dowries and because “it’s one less mouth to feed for the family,” Andy Brooks, Unicef’s child protection adviser for.

Girls as young as 12 are being forced to marry men five times their age and there is also an increase in female genital mutilation, which he said is a prerequisite for marriage.

[1]

### Ethiopia launch USD 30 million initiative to reduce maternal malnutrition

The Ethiopian government and partners have launched a new multi-sectoral nutrition initiative that envisages reducing maternal malnutrition, child wasting and stunting in the country.

The program will be implemented through a partnership agreement between the Ethiopian Ministry of Health, UNICEF, and Action Against Hunger. The UN Children’s Fund said the 30 million U.S. dollars program will reach at least one million pregnant women and three million children with vital health and nutrition services during its five years period.

The initiative is also expected to promote long-term improvements to the population’s nutrition as well as socio-economic indicators by making Ethiopia’s health and food systems more resilient and encouraging healthier, more productive communities.

[2]

### US Supreme Court Overturns Roe v. Wade

Anti-abortion ideologues on the US Supreme Court just explicitly overturned Roe v. Wade. Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113, was a landmark decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in which the Court ruled that the Constitution of the United States generally protects a pregnant woman’s liberty to choose to have an abortion in January 22, 1973.

The decision will have enormous consequences for pregnant women across many US states, who will now find it extremely difficult and in many cases impossible to get the care they want and need.

[3]

### Taliban Seek to Erase Women and Girls From Public Life

Delegates attending an urgent debate at the U.N. Human Rights Council on the status of women and girls in Afghanistan are urging the international community to exert maximum pressure on the Taliban.

Taliban is accused of systematic oppression and of the exclusion of women and girls from public life in Afghanistan.

Domestic violence and harassment have grown under Taliban rule, as have attacks against female human rights defenders, journalists, and lawyers. U.N. human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said that women can no longer find employment and that secondary schooling for more than a million girls has ended.

[4]

### El Salvadorian women jailed for miscarriage

An El Salvadorian woman was given a 30-year sentence for homicide over the death of an unborn child following an obstetric emergency.

Abortion is illegal in El Salvador, even in cases of rape and when the woman’s health is in danger. Rights observers say the law, which went into effect in 1998, is enforced to such an extent that women have been punished for having miscarriages, stillbirths, or other obstetric emergencies.

[5]



# YOURS TRULY

Photo from - Aleksandra Raluca Dragoi/The Guardian

## Yours truly

Throughout my many years of self discovery, one major question that dwelled in my mind was: “I wonder how the ‘dominating’ mass could constantly remind the ‘submissive part’ through abuse, belittlement and force, when they have embedded the very core of women’s inferiority in all of us through patriarchy”. From all its successful effects since the dawn of man’s quest to compete, you would think it was the way of the future and the way of eternal life. The world of men is hell bent on making women remain in its ways. It’s been told and thought in so many different paths of life, you would need to wonder why the constant need to put half the population down? What is so powerful about women that they need to be put in check in every aspect of their lives? I remember this saying as a child **“women have suffering built in them while men go out to seek pain and suffering”**.

Female subjugation or the idea of patriarchy was propagated in the sense that women were basically created to be the inferiors of men. They didn’t even have the chance to be equal. Their genetic makeup was and is conditioned for weakness and they couldn’t survive without men’s leadership. Men didn’t put this in place, survival did. That lie long ago when women’s lives couldn’t go past the lion in front of the cave trying to get in to eat her family, or the wild boar that could sustain her child’s belly if only it could be killed, or the survival of her children if only she could fight off the other woman and get the strongest male in the group, that lie paved a way to the greatest injustice told by human, that woman were less than. The idea that “you couldn’t survive without our protection, therefore you are less” was born.

As time and advancement of humans progressed the idea of patriarchy was born, Professor Yuval Noah Harari in his book The Brief History of Humankind wrote “Sapiens, unlike all their ancestors, came to dominate the world because they are the only animals that can cooperate flexibly in large groups and this ability arises from their unique capacity to believe in things existing purely in the imagination, such as gods, nations, money and rights”.

The above four lines hold the very reason for our suffering, women’s suffering. We are told motherhood is a natural path for a woman, while fatherhood is a learned behavior - when in fact giving birth is nature not maternity, or all the suffering and sacrifice that comes with it. Our subjugation under gods and religious scriptures written by man that stated those exact ideas of subjugation; our non-existence rights as human beings a curtsy given to slaves and animals before it was given to us; the endless barriers imposed upon us to get to leadership, money and ownership; those and many more are reason for our suffering and injustice. The reason is we needed to SURVIVE, not as women but as humans. We are the flexibility sapiens had to be blessed with in order to exist. The modern world was built on the back bones and the sacrifices of women. We did the dirty work while they imposed ways to get more control, we merged with their imaginary world to survive while **we paid for it with our rights.**

We have surpassed the idea of survival at present, through cognitive, agricultural unification and now scientific revolution. Women have constantly been left behind for

their sacrifice of building the world we now live in, the men in the world have used this sacrifice as weakness and instilled ideas of patriarchy to live an easy life. But the scientific revolution has given the world the chance to abolish this paradigm, through the value of knowledge and ideas over even money. For the first time in our lives, we know knowledge is power, we know knowledge is money and therefore, the need for basic survival struggle is over. Not only that, but the rise and empowerment of wide range of sexual orientations and paradigm of sexuality has weakened the strong hold of patriarchy and all its extremist ideologies.

Women, I believe, are the tools for this very stage of life. Their knowledge and experience of unification, devotion, sacrifice, resilience and nurturing instincts combined with the power of formal knowledge will put them on the same level of competence as men. It will restore the sacrifice given away and gain their power back.

Coming full circle to the beginning of my essay, the constant reminder and belittlement that men exude is because of this exact reason - that if we restore our power back and compete at the same level we will have the chance to be part of the greatest revolution of enlightenment and the greatest paradigm shift mankind has ever seen, **the rise of matriarchy.** Not only in women but in all of humankind because unlike the patriarchy, our maternal and nurturing instincts will be instilled in all human beings, and because matriarchy is about nurturing others through sacrificial guidance not through subjugation. We can observe the destructive nature of patriarchal force threatening our survival

once more. So, it is clear that this is a question of when not if, that is if we want to survive as humans. The capitalistic war mongering world of men is producing only suffering because competition doesn’t bring advancement, cooperation does.

**We fear the power of the womb.** See the value people put on lineage, men put a stamp on their children by imposing last names because they couldn’t birth or give life. We impose the power of marriage by taking a woman from her home and telling her that virginity is a virtue and a present to her man. We educate men to be handy, firm and cold to detach them from their maternal (feminine) attributes inherited from their mothers. Women are put down because they are powerful if not put down by society. The stories of witches, ancient doctors to voyagers that discovered the world, were torched and modern day education perpetuates the contribution of men in our luxurious lives. Everywhere you turn there is a constant message, never forget men built the world.

In closing, all I can add is that natural power can never compete with man-made power. The name is ironic isn’t it? For any woman reading this small article know **you are a naturally made Powerhouse**, whose figure has been worshiped and made into statues in former centuries, whose fertility defined agriculture and livestock, whose folklore and tradition revolved the earth. Your very existence is beyond man-made imaginary concepts like religion, culture and rules, and excuses to tell you “you are less than”. Only the powerful are imposed on to be less, not the weak.

**By:- Mahlet shimelis, MD**

YOURS TRULY



## ASK A FEMINIST DR. AZEB ASAMINEW ALEMU

(Psychiatrist / Assistant Professor  
of Psychiatry )

### 1. Can you please introduce yourself to our readers? Also tell us about how you become a psychiatrist?

My name is Dr. Azeb Asaminew Alemu. I am a Psychiatrist and currently work as an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Addis Ababa University, College of Health Sciences. Apart from teaching and getting involved in research, I supervise Medical Doctors specializing in Psychiatry working at the inpatient wards of Amanuel Specialized Mental Hospital. I decided to become a Psychiatrist from a very young age because of my fascination with people's behavior that was cultivated through my exposure to articles in local newsletters.

### 2. Mental health, including unmet mental health needs, and its socioeconomic impact on the lives of women and men, is not a topic we discuss freely in our society, mainly because the topic is considered to be taboo. Can you please elaborate on that for our readers and what are some of the factors that contribute to this?

I think, for most people in the world, the term health is often associated with physical health. In most cultures, mental illness and neurological illnesses were not considered part of health for a long time. So that is a big issue on its own as many people with mental health problems are stigmatized and ostracized from society. In addition, many people in our country are still not well aware of the availability of mental health care services and the effectiveness of the care provided. The services are also not accessible for many people as most of mental health care is in Addis Ababa and some major cities. All these and other reasons contribute to the problems.

### 3. What are some of the myths about mental illness?

In my experience, the most common way I encounter people's understanding of mentally ill people is as people who have poor mental capacity, and can not care for themselves or others. However, there are hundreds different types of mental illnesses with a wide range of symptoms and levels of impairment in day-to-day living. In reality, common mental health problems are depressive and anxiety disorders which

## Interview

do not severely affect mental capacity, care for themselves or others but often manifest as emotional changes and distress that can impact quality of life and effectiveness at tasks. Most people with these conditions often may find it difficult to share their distress with others out of fear that they may be misunderstood, dismissed, or stigmatized.

Another misconception is that people with mental illness don't recover. However, many people with mental illnesses recover especially if they are treated early. Most people will be able to continue to perform their work and social obligations when they receive mental healthcare. Mental health care includes psychological talk therapies and or prescription of medications when necessary. People can continue to function well while receiving these treatments. Some people are rightfully concerned about side effects of medications. However, medications are only provided when the clinician believes that the benefits outweigh any possible risks to that individual patient and provides dosage of medications with the lowest possible impact. Most people do not have concerning side effects and for most of those who do, the side effects can be managed by dose or medication adjustment. If medications are suggested by the treating clinician, I suggest that people ask clarifying questions about any concerns that they may have to be able to make informed decisions.

### 4. Is it safe to say that people's perception of mental health and their approach has changed over the years due to a number of social factors?

I believe that the increase in training of more professionals in mental health care and increased access to these services has allowed people to see the positive changes these services can have on people with mental health problems. More recently, I think it has become more common to discuss anxiety and depressive symptoms partly because of the large-scale mental health influences of COVID-19 and its restrictions as well as different stressful social and political events in our country affecting many people. I have heard people talking more openly about their mental health struggles and an increase in interest in the media to highlight these issues. I think it is a good sign, hopefully this will be consistent throughout the country. I also believe that we still have a long way to go in improving sensitivity the way we address it, as well as improving the adequacy

and variety of the discussions we are having.

### 5. It goes without saying that women and men face completely different but equally important challenges when it comes to mental health / illness. What are some of these challenges? And can you please discuss more on the specific mental health issues that are peculiar to each gender and the predisposing factors?

There are general differences between women and men on how we talk about mental health, the common symptoms of mental illness and on how we approach solving mental health challenges. These differences are influenced by biological factors such as expression of stress and sex hormones and social factors such as differences in gender roles, and economic independence. Generally, mental health problems are higher in women and this is often attributed to the inequality women face in society, the high rates of gender based violence and childhood sexual abuse etc. In women depression and anxiety disorders are more common while in men alcohol and drug addiction are more prevalent.

### 6. What is the role of religion and religious institutions in tackling the stigma associated with mental health?

I recently attended a meeting organized by the Ethiopian Mental Health Service Users' Association where religious leaders from different religious institutions discussed mental health. I was happy to hear that all of them agreed that mental health care is important, that it needs destigmatizing and that they are committed to help society in this regard. I suggest people watch the video of their discussion. [here](#).

Our department also provides collaborative services at different Holy Water and Religious sites through discussion with local religious leaders which was found to be a valuable model of service. For more info: [here](#).

### 7. What is your understanding of gender equality? And has this allowed you to see mental health needs from a gendered lens?

Women and men need to have equal resources and equal opportunities so that they can contribute to society with their full potential. I think there is still a lot of work remaining to achieve that. In my work, I see that there are inadequate services for women with mental health disorders, for example, in most setups there are less inpatient wards for women as compared to



## Interview

men. There are inadequate services for gender-based violence and trauma focused interventions that are important to address women's mental healthcare needs. There is also the issue of abuse of women in therapeutic relationships which calls for the improvement of safe spaces for women with mental health conditions and the increased training of women mental health professionals.

**8. Health is a state of physical, mental and social well being. Oftentimes, the mental and social aspect of health gets overlooked including by policy makers and health institutions. What is the role of feminist grassroots movements/ organizations in creating a healthy, functional society that gives as much value to the mental health needs of people?**

Non-governmental and grassroots organizations who work in the advancement of women's health and rights often focus on reproductive health and rights. That is an important area to work on, I also hope that these organizations can additionally work on other aspects of healthcare needs of women which includes mental health care needs. This is an area that is often overlooked, more so in women. This work can include using their networks and platforms to discuss mental health issues in order to create awareness and provide resources to access services. There is a lot of work to be done around reduction of social factors that increase stress and mental health problems in women. The advocacy work around that can have an indirect effect in improving mental health. Regarding mental health services, these organizations can help advocate for improved safety and accessibility of quality mental health care for women. Organizing peer support groups can have a significant effect in reducing stigma, creating a safe space, and in promoting knowledge transfer. I believe that there can also be other creative, local, and culturally contextualized support mechanisms that these organizations can provide

### 9. Any additional message for our readers

For people who would like to work on mental health advocacy, I suggest the readers can check out the Ethiopian Mental Health Service Users Association and collaborate with them. Their twitter: Mental Health Service Users' Association(Ethiopia); [@UsersMental](#)

For mental health care resources in Ethiopia check: [የአዕምሮ ህክምና በሚያስፈልግበት ጊዜ የሚጠቅሙ አድራሻዎች - የጤና ወግ \(yetenaweg.com\)](#)

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on the way !

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