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EUNET SEMINAR SERIES REPORT

'WE WANT FACTORIES': ARTICULATING WOMEN'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT FOR A POST-SOCIALIST ETHIOPIA

DR SERAWIT B. DEBELE
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The inaugural Ethiopian Women Researchers Network (EUNET) Seminar was delivered by Dr Serawit B. Debele on 15 April 2025 at Addis Ababa University's Institute for Peace and Security Studies' (IPSS) New Meeting Hall. Entitled *'We Want Factories': Articulating women's political engagement for a post-socialist Ethiopia*, the seminar examined the political lives of Ethiopian women who have been erased from public memory, highlighting how dominant discourses confine women to roles of motherhood and wifehood. Grounded in archival and ethnographic research, the talk interrogated the tension between presence and absence in historical narratives and called for more inclusive epistemological and political frameworks. The session concluded with a reflective mapping of the speaker's scholarly journey.

Opening remarks

The seminar began with welcoming remarks from Dalaya Ashenafi, Deputy Principal of EUNET. She introduced the network as a vital initiative working to amplify the voices and contributions of Ethiopian women scholars, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. In her address, Dalaya emphasized EUNET's broader mission to foster an inclusive, intergenerational research community that uplifts marginalized perspectives and bridges academic gaps. She underscored that the EUNET Seminar Series is one of the network's core platforms, designed to create a dynamic space for dialogue, knowledge sharing, and scholarly exchange. The seminars aim to bring critical attention to underrepresented political, social and historical narratives, particularly those involving women, and provide Ethiopian scholars with opportunities to engage in reflective, peer-to-peer conversations that shape national and regional research agendas. Dalaya also encouraged attendees, especially emerging researchers, to consider becoming active members of the network, highlighting that participation in EUNET opens doors to collaboration, improves visibility and provides ongoing intellectual support. She concluded her remarks by welcoming and introducing Dr Muna Abubeker as the moderator of the day's session, expressing confidence in the value and depth of the conversation to follow.

Following the opening remarks, Dr Muna took the stage as the moderator. She began by expressing how honoured she was to introduce her colleague and fellow scholar, Dr Serawit B. Debele. Dr Muna spoke with warmth and admiration, emphasizing Dr Serawit's significant intellectual contributions and the relevance of her work to contemporary political and gender discourses.

She proceeded to present Dr Serawit's professional background: a researcher based at the University of Bayreuth within the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence. Dr Serawit earned her PhD in Religious Studies in 2015, and her current research focuses on pleasure, desire and the formation of sexual subjectivities in periods of major political transformation, with a regional focus on Ethiopia, Tunisia, and Sudan. Among her published works is the influential book, *Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual*, published in 2019.

After sharing this overview, Dr Muna warmly welcomed Dr Serawit to the podium and invited her to reflect on her academic and personal journey as part of the day's engagement.

Key themes of the presentation

Dr Serawit B. Debele's presentation offered a critical reflection on the socio-political erasure of Ethiopian women's activism in the early post-socialist period, centring on a little-acknowledged demonstration held in 1993 against the proliferation of erotic and pornographic publications. Drawing from extensive ethnographic research and archival material collected since 2017, Dr Serawit analyzed how the liberalization of Ethiopia's media space in the early 1990s facilitated not only a sexualized public discourse but also a strategic reconfiguration of gendered subjectivities under emerging consumer capitalist logic.

At the heart of her presentation was an effort to recover and reframe the 1993 women-led protest not as a moral or maternal reaction, as it has often been depicted, but as a deliberate political intervention. Women, responding to the public commodification of the female body and the psychosocial, economic and cultural threats posed by these publications, mobilized autonomously to demand state accountability. Their slogans articulated a sophisticated critique that linked national identity, gender dignity and moral-political integrity. Dr Serawit emphasized that while religious and intellectual leaders also voiced opposition to the publications, it was overwhelmingly women—diverse in age, status and affiliation—who occupied the streets and took direct action.

A central concern raised in the talk was the systematic depoliticization of this feminist protest in Ethiopia's political memory. Despite the movement's resonance with broader national concerns, the protest was reframed as a women's issue, rendered secondary, emotional and private. The women's political agency was stripped of its strategic meaning and reduced to maternal protectiveness or moral panic. This, Dr Serawit argued, reflects a broader epistemological violence wherein women's collective actions are consistently sequestered from dominant narratives of political struggle and instead archived as marginal, sentimental episodes.

Her methodological approach, which she termed 'tracing', seeks to resist this erasure by reconstructing the historical and political significance of women's interventions through their vocabularies and frameworks. This allows for an alternative historiography, one that understands women's political claims not as adjuncts to male-dominated movements but as foundational acts of social critique, negotiation and transformation.

Ultimately, Dr Serawit's talk challenged the audience to reconsider what constitutes political memory and whose voices are sustained or silenced in that process. She called for a re-centring of women's activism as integral, not peripheral, to the making of post-socialist Ethiopia and urged the development of inclusive epistemological frameworks that render women's political labour both visible and legible in historical discourse.



The presentation was followed by a discussion segment, introduced by Dr Muna. She thanked Dr Serawit for her compelling and thought-provoking lecture and then invited Dr Frehiwot Sintayehu, a political science scholar from Addis Ababa University, to offer her reflections. Dr Frehiwot brought a research-based perspective grounded in gender, politics and migration, setting the tone for a nuanced and context-aware dialogue.

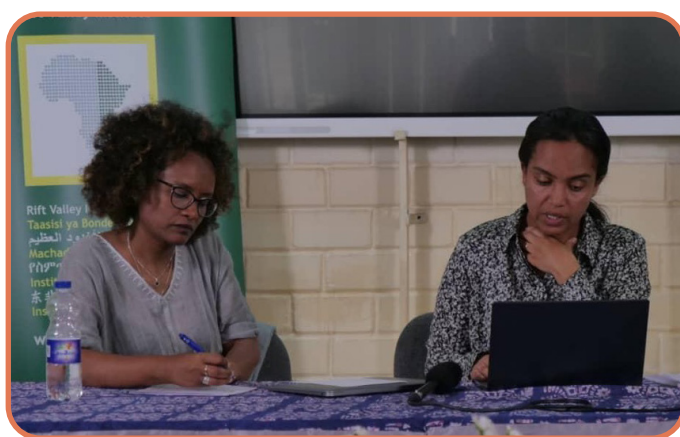
Dr Frehiwot opened her reflections by acknowledging Dr Serawit's presentation as a moment of listening and learning. She then raised three key points for discussion, each grounded in feminist inquiry and historical reflection.

Her **first point** focused on the concept of **intersectionality**, which she described using the Amharic expressions ትርጉሞች and ትርጉሞች to capture the layered oppressions Ethiopian women have historically faced. Based on Bahru Zewde's work, she emphasized how women in the student movement experienced triple marginalization: as members of the working class or peasantry, as women, and, for some, as members of marginalized nationalities. She highlighted that this complexity is often overlooked in mainstream political narratives and must be centred in our understanding of activism and resistance.

Her **second point** questioned how **power is defined and understood** in the Ethiopian context, especially regarding women. Rather than viewing power through a liberal lens, as positions or authority, Dr Frehiwot urged for a more nuanced, relational approach that considers social influence, agency and everyday acts of resistance. She asked how Ethiopian women both have exercised and been excluded from power across regimes, including within revolutionary movements like the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which paradoxically excluded feminist agendas despite its radical ideals.



L to R: Dr. Serawit and Dr Muna Abubeker during the presentation



L to R: Dr Serawit and Dr Frehiwot Sintayehu in discussion

Her **third point** addressed the **continuities and ruptures** in the marginalization of women across Ethiopia's political history. She noted how feminist issues are frequently treated as peripheral to broader political concerns, despite their fundamental importance. Referencing the co-optation of women's organizing by the Derg regime through the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association, she illustrated how state involvement often silenced independent feminist voices. Dr Frehiwot called for a re-evaluation of whose voices are amplified in historical and political discourse and for feminist struggles to be recognized as central to any genuine political transformation.

Q&A session

The presentation and discussion were followed by a rich and thoughtful Q&A session that further unpacked the intellectual and political questions raised throughout the seminar. Participants engaged Dr Serawit on several fronts, reflecting both personal curiosity and critical reflection.

One participant posed a question on the state's dissociation from public sexual discourse, noting how the matter was dismissed as a socio-economic or moral issue rather than a political one. This led to a broader question on the levels of political organization reflected in the 1993 women-led demonstration and how the state chose not to claim the issue as part of its jurisdiction.

Another attendee raised the comparative dimensions of the project, probing whether the analysis could be placed in a broader regional or global context. Dr Serawit responded by pointing out the benefits of a comparative approach and suggesting that the discursive developments in post-socialist Ethiopia could be situated in a global context, alongside post-Cold War Russia and Poland or post-apartheid South Africa.

A series of questions returned to the archival invisibility of the demonstration and similar moments of feminist resistance. Participants noted that despite the public scale of these actions, they remain largely absent from the

national archive, raising concerns about how gendered memory is constructed and institutionalized. The issue of double and triple oppression also re-emerged, reinforcing the earlier theme of intersectionality as central to understanding women's marginalization in Ethiopia.

There was also a brief discussion of the *Addis Zemen* newspaper, where Dr Serawit elaborated on the importance of engaging with state-controlled media archives to interrogate how women's activism was framed—or ignored—at the time.



L to R: Dr Serawit in conversation with Dr Netsanet Gebremichael

Conversation with Dr Netsanet Gebremichael

At around 4:30 p.m., the floor was handed over to Dr Netsanet Gebremichael, Principal of EWNET, to facilitate a conversation with Dr Serawit on her academic and personal journey. This segment offered attendees a more intimate insight into the life behind the research.

Dr Netsanet began by reflecting on Dr Serawit's remarkable scholarly productivity—20 publications over 5 years, including a book—and asked her to reflect on what it means to be both a woman and a researcher in this context. The conversation explored the delicate balance between the demands of academia and the realities of womanhood, especially for scholars who navigate professional expectations alongside societal norms.

The discussion also touched on the manoeuvres and negotiations required to succeed in academic spaces while maintaining one's integrity and commitment to social relevance. Dr Serawit shared personal insights, speaking to the challenges and joys of crafting a body of work that is not only methodologically rigorous but also deeply engaged with lived experience.

This reflective exchange offered a grounding moment for the audience, especially younger scholars, connecting the earlier theoretical discussions to the personal labour, resilience and discipline required to sustain a critical academic career.

Closing remarks

The seminar concluded with heartfelt closing remarks from **Dr Netsanet**, who reflected on her longstanding friendship and professional admiration for Dr Serawit. She praised her intellectual clarity, commitment to feminist scholarship and consistent engagement with questions that matter not only academically but also politically.

Emphasizing one of the key takeaways from the day, Dr Netsanet urged participants, especially emerging researchers, to embrace persistence and discipline in their scholarly paths. She captured this sentiment with a powerful and memorable directive inspired by Dr Serawit's example: **"Write, write, write."**

This statement, both personal and pedagogical, encapsulated the spirit of the seminar: a call to knowledge production as a form of resistance, survival, and transformation. With that, the seminar was officially closed, with an invitation for continued engagement through upcoming **EWNET seminars and panels**.



ABOUT EWNETH

This report was produced by the Ethiopian Women Researchers Network (EWNETH) within the Peace Research Facility (PRF).

EWNETH is dedicated to creating a vibrant and supportive network for Ethiopian women researchers in the social sciences and humanities. EWNETH uses platforms such as podcasts and seminar series to disseminate and amplify the voices, work and research journeys of Ethiopian women researchers. Check the EWNETH website for more information about the network and its activities: <https://ewnethub.net>

EWNETH is an initiative of Rift Valley Institute's Peace Research Facility. The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict-sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute and funded by the UK government. The Rift Valley Institute works in Eastern and Central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development.

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