

Meet the UNESCO Chair team: An account of challenges of girls' and women's education in Ethiopia

This is a full version of an interview with Turuwark Zalalam Warkineh, Assistant Professor in Adult Education and Community Development and PhD candidate at Bahir Dar University. Turuwark discusses her early experiences of education in Ethiopia, her mother's journey with adult literacy, how she became involved with the UNESCO Chair and ideas for future directions. This was told to Lauren Bouttell, PhD candidate at the University of East Anglia, for the UNESCO Chair in Adult Literacy and Learning for Social Transformation newsletter. There is some description of gender based violence.

1. What were some of your early experiences of education? Do you think things have changed for girls in Ethiopia since then?

To give a little background about female education in Ethiopia, the western style formal education itself is a recent development in Ethiopia. Until the introduction of modern education in the early 20th C, education in Ethiopia was dominantly provided by the two religious institutions (The Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church and Mosque/Islamic Institutions). Females were not allowed to go to such education; even when they got the chance, they were not allowed to go beyond basic reading and writing. Their fate was early marriage.

Even after the introduction of the modern education system, girls were left behind. Until the early 1990s, girls' participation rate was far lower than boys. But after this period, due to change in government and partly due to the international pressure to achieve EFA goals, Ethiopia started to promote girls' education. So, girls before my generation could hardly access education. I was lucky enough that accessing school was not an issue. But this doesn't mean that parents and the society were convinced about the importance of education and that girls had no barrier to access schools. Even if girls' education was encouraged by the government, the attitude of the society was a big challenge. This is why I said I was lucky. My parents didn't hold me back from accessing school.

But the challenge for me and for my fellow girls was not accessing the school, rather **staying in the school!** There were several challenges that force girls to leave school early or to stay in the school but not learn as much as they should. One of the challenges they face is related to societal gender-based stereotypes. The schools were unfriendly to females. Gender based harassments and abuses were very common. I never forget what happened when I was a grade 8 student. It was a day on which I saw the first menstrual cycle! It happened in the classroom and I was in a complete shock. I wished the earth would swallow me rather than to be seen messed up like that. I thought I became a sub-human, I became evil, I became impure... No one told me about it before, it was such a frustrating experience. I didn't want to inform my friends as well for fear of rejection. Then, I decided to leave the school compound after all the students have left and I was crying in the classroom alone. Then one guy came in and asked me what I was doing alone. He said I should leave the classroom immediately otherwise he would slap me in my face. My heartbeat doubled! I would gladly accept the slap rather than being seen as dirty, so I insisted. He then stretched my hand forcefully and then my elbow was dislocated...it was so painful (physically and psychologically). Glad he didn't rape

me! He gave me some punches and left the room. I didn't want to scream either because I didn't want anyone to see me like that. When I was asked, I told my parents that I had fallen down. Then, my mother took me to a traditional healer so that my elbow would get back to normal position... the treatment took more than two weeks. Finally, I covered my skirt with my shirt and left the school compound hiding my face with my exercise books as if I had stolen someone's property. For several months, until I made my own reusable sanitary pad and underwear, I used to go to school regularly but stayed outside the classroom to avoid similar experiences (hence, missed classes). I used to wash that sanitary pad in the evening, when everyone at home sleeps and put it under the bed until it was dried because I was afraid of my parents too. I thought I might be considered as a bad girl. This small incident tells how lack of reproductive health education and how gender-based violence impact girls' education. There were several other abuses I suffered from but cannot mention them all for the interest of space.

The other challenge for me was economic poverty! Due to change of property ownership policies and pro-rich investment policies in the country, my parents lost their vast land holdings and properties and they were impoverished. Unfortunately, I was 9th child in my family, born at the time when they start living a very destitute life. Until I reached grade 4, I used to use a single exercise book for all subjects and due to this I was afraid of taking notes. My teachers used to ask me to buy new ones. They used to insult/undermine me for using a single notebook for all subjects. They considered me as a lazy and careless student who did not want to take notes. But my parents were not in a position to fulfil these educational facilities for me and my siblings. There were several days we went to school with an empty stomach and simply sitting in the classroom unattentively and thinking about food (school meals are very recent phenomenon in Ethiopia, still very limited and confined to few urban areas). This is not to mention the worn-out shoes and clothes we had. My older sisters used to make and sell local beverages to support their schooling and my parents at the expense of their study time; hence, except one of them who made it to a college diploma, the other three were not fortunate enough to go beyond high school. Following in their footsteps, I had also been involved in some income generating activities such as making local beverages, making handcrafts for sale, making female hair braids etc. when I was a secondary school student.

Moreover, like my age mates, I was responsible for household chores, collecting firewood and fetching water from remote areas and taking care of the elders in the family starting from an early age. These were not only physically and psychologically tough but also time demanding. Due to this, I usually arrived late at school and barely did my homework which at that time led to physical punishments in the school. I used to get punished by teachers brutally until my skin was irritated for frequently being late and for not doing my homework.

In general, the reasons I mentioned earlier coupled with high demand for girls' early marriage, made my early school experience too difficult. Although I passed from one grade level to the other, I didn't get much out of my school stay.

Several things have changed for girls since then. More girls do have access to education than before and other barriers such as early marriage are decreasing. A considerable number of primary and secondary school have separate toilets for both sexes and sanitary pad change rooms for females, and anti-harassment

policies. The media has also been working to create awareness on gender issues. However, there are still several bottlenecks that hold the girls back from accessing and progressing well in their education.

2. Why did you move into the field of adult literacy?

As soon as I completed my undergraduate study in Pedagogical sciences, I got a chance to be employed in Bahir Dar University (where I studied) as a graduate assistant. Normally, students with highest CGPA (who graduate with great distinction) get such chance and I was one of them. When I got employed, I thought I would be assigned in psychology or educational planning and management departments. I had no idea about the existence of the adult education and community development department. I didn't even know that there is a field of study for such category of people. But then I was informed that the AECD department had no staff members as it was a newly established department in the education college and that I could work as an assistant graduate for a year or so and then pursue my master's degree in psychology fields or educational planning and management. With this promise, I accepted the assignment and started my job in the department of AECD in 2009.

Then, I was assigned to teach a course known as 'psychology of adult learners' to undergraduate students. That was the first opportunity I got to know about adult education in general and adult literacy in particular. The more I read about adult learning and adult education, I got interested to specialize in this field of study. Teaching this course helped me to reflect on how adult literacy/education impacted my own personal and family life.

Adult education in general and adult literacy in particular has impacted my life significantly. As I mentioned earlier, my parents had a very low income and even that money was due to an adult literacy program. My mother, the source of inspiration for me, had not been to school and was non-literate. Like her peers, she married early (when she was only 14 years old) forcefully. After giving birth to seven children, she got a chance to attend an adult literacy program (there was a decade long nation-wide mandatory literacy campaign in the 1980s). As she says, she was so eager to write her name and was very much interested to attend the literacy program although she had to face negative voices. She remembers the first day she went to the literacy center with her first-born son and how several people laughed at and made fun of her saying 'the father brought his child to school'. Resisting the challenges, she completed the literacy class and continued her primary education until grade six but was forced to interrupt it when she gave birth to another child. During that time, a local hospital announced they would recruit women who are able to read and write to work as janitors and laundress and my mother got the job as she had completed the adult literacy program. Although the job was laborious (they used to wash clothes manually) and paid little (used to be 48 ETB and later 127 ETB per month), it was empowering for my mother and for her children. After working as a laundress for several years, the hospital informed her either to have a grade 8th certificate or to quit the job. As a result, while working in the day time she went to the evening adult education program as a mother of 10 children, resumed her education and completed grade 8. She was able to secure her job due to the availability of the evening adult education program.

Due to her affiliation to the hospital, the whole family used to get free medical services. As my father got retired when I was very little, she was the one who covered most of the household expenses. Once, when I was first grade student, we were in shortage of food for several days and one day, I fainted at school out of hunger. When people brought me home, my mother gave me food and when I asked where she brought the food, she told me that she borrowed her salary and bought the food. I will never ever forget that day! She knows how humiliating it was to ask one's salary in advance (before the day) but she did it several times to save our life. She used to save a small amount of money each month and used to buy milk-cows for us. She was truly the backbone of the family. While wearing worn-out shoes herself, she used to support me financially throughout my university stay; without her support I wouldn't have completed my study with great distinction and wouldn't have got the chance to be employed in higher education.

Although economically poor, I grew up as a proud child for having a mother who works in that hospital; whenever I go to the hospital for medical purpose or to help her washing clothes, she used to introduce me with medical doctors and nurses and advise me to model them. I cannot mention enough the price that my mother paid in bringing me up, but I can strongly say that adult literacy/education had a great impact on my personal and family life! Teaching that course made me recognize the fact that adult education, if taken seriously, is a great tool to transform a society in several aspects of life. The moment I realized this, I got interested to specialize in this field of study and I studied my Master's degree in adult and lifelong learning. I also did a masters thesis entitled 'literacy skills for the hard-to-reach girls'. Shortly after I completed my postgraduate study, I met Professor Alan Rogers who inspired and supported me to read and research more into adult literacy field.

3. What do you think are the important issues/challenges in adult literacy and HE today?

There are several challenges in the areas of adult literacy in Ethiopia today. The major ones are: limited awareness about the what, how and why of adult literacy; limited finance for adult literacy; low commitment of government in supporting the field; low level of adult literacy facilitators' competence (who are mostly grade 10 completers) as they do not get training or even a proper induction.

4. What is your current role at the university?

I am a faculty member in the department of adult education and community development, college of education and behavioural sciences at Bahir Dar University. My main roles and responsibilities in the university include teaching and supervising students, conducting research and providing community and consultancy services. Currently, I am a PhD candidate in curriculum and instruction at Bahir Dar University. I am also coordinating the UEA UNESCO Chair in Adult Literacy and Learning for Social Transformation at Bahir Dar University. I am also serving as a reviewer for Bahir Dar Journal of Education.

5. How did you get involved with the UNESCO Chair initiative?

While attending a training on 'writing for publication' that was organized at Bahir Dar University by a volunteer faculty member, I asked how I can access articles and

books published by reputable publishers as many of them are inaccessible. The trainer advised me that I can directly contact authors and ask for their support. That day, I searched the email address of Professor Alan Rogers from the internet, a well-known author in the area of adult education whom I know during my postgraduate study, and sent him an email requesting for his publications. I was not sure whether he was alive when I sent him that email. Fortunately, he responded promptly and started sharing several of his books and articles since then. He assisted me in applying for and getting a scholarship to study at the University of East Anglia although without success due to IELTS test result requirement (I scored 6.5 but 7.00 was required). He also mentored me to conduct small scale qualitative studies and publish them with him on international journals. He also helped me to network with Professor Anna Robinson-Pant, Brian Street and several others. Due to Alan's networking, I met Professor Anna in person when she participated in the inception of the UNESCO-IFAD international research project back in 2013/14 at Adama, Ethiopia. With her recommendation (she wanted to make the national research team multi-disciplinary and gender responsive) I was able to participate in that project as a national research team member. Shortly after the completion of that research project, Professor Anna initiated the UNESCO Chair initiative and she asked me if I am interested to participate. I responded to Anna that I am so excited to participate and to contribute to the establishment of the UNESCO chair. That was how I got involved in this important initiative.

6. What do you feel you have gained from the partnership?

Personally, it helped me to network with like-minded people/professionals internationally. Participating in different workshops and working with world class professors, I have developed qualitative research skills. Due to the mentorship from the team, I was able to co-publish articles that contribute to the policy and practice of adult literacy programs in Ethiopia. Due to this partnership, I was also able to participate in international projects. I gained professional uplifting and visibility (nationally and internationally).

My team members, UNESCO Chair team members in Bahir Dar University, have also gained the same. The institution, Bahir Dar University in general and the AECD department in particular, have also been able to gain access to several resources (books, articles) that can assist the teaching-learning process. It has also gained national and international visibility due to the partnership and the projects.

7. Do you have any goals or aims for the future relating to the UNESCO Chair?

- Advocacy for a better attention, commitment and provision of adult literacy regionally, nationally and internationally, further capacity building for early career researchers in adult education (academia) as well as for adult literacy facilitators (based on availability of funding).
- Advocacy for gender responsive education and development at all levels of education
- Launching PhD in adult education and development here in BDU using the expertise of the UNESCO chair team internationally and contributing to the development of future generations of adult education professionals and researchers.
- Engaging more in professional activities: researching and publishing articles, book chapters and books and thereby making the voices of marginalized societies audible; engaging in projects; presenting in and attending international workshops, conferences and other events.