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Gender Equality or Masculine Domination? Discourses on Gender and Religion among Religious Leaders and Lay People in Nadhi Gibe, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Gender equality is one of the global issues in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that UN members were called upon to formulate national plans to actualize it. This article aims at examining cultural and religious norms and practices nurturing masculine domination in the rural context of Ethiopia. It analyses how discourses on gender and religion among religious leaders and lay people are framed and communicated in cultural contexts in the case of Islam and Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Sixteen interviews, four focus group discussions, and ethnographic observations were employed to generate the necessary data. The study participants were purposively selected. Theoretically-informed thematic analysis was employed to understand the data and draw conclusions. Cultural and religious-based hegemonic masculine conducts and gendered power relations are identified. Religion-based gendered power relations and inequalities are evident in people's routine social interactions. Religious leaders and respective followers, including women, play a role in nurturing gender inequality due to deeply entrenched cultural influences. Cultural and religious rules and practices reinforce each other in shaping, justifying, and maintaining gender inequality prevailing in the community. Religious leaders and followers consider culture, not religion, to be the source of gender inequality. However, the study revealed that masculine domination is manifested in religious leaders and lay people's views and practices. Therefore, religion also nurtures gender inequality inculcating hegemonic masculinity deliberately or inadvertently. Religious rules, arrangements, and practices nurture culturally-informed men's collective and individual dominance over women. They also reinforce women's endorsement of their subordination in maintaining gender inequality.

Key words: /Culture/Gender equality/Gendered power relations/Hegemonic masculinity/Religion/

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1. Introduction

Gender equality refers to the absence of all forms of discrimination, violence, any harmful views, discourses and practices against women and girls. Women's full participation and equal access to opportunities of making decisions on matters that can affect their lives represent elements of gender equality (Adapted from UN-SDG 5, 2015, p.18).

Most religions are considered to be barriers to gender equality although the degree in which they endorse such inequality may not be the same in Islam and Christianity or different denominations within Christianity. Different studies reveal that claims against gender equality are made under religion including in Islam and Christianity (Raday, 2003). Seguino (2011) argues that all religions are gender inequitable and religiosity has effects on attitudes towards gender equality and on everyday behaviour. To Seguino, religiosity is strongly linked to gender inequitable attitudes across countries which in turn result in unequal outcomes for women. However, the effects of religion on gender equality cannot be fully understood without reflecting on the complex relationships between culture and religion that this article emphasizes on. The monotheistic religions recognize the full humanity of women; however, religious norms impose patriarchal regimes that disadvantage women.

According to Raday (2003), culture is a macro concept which subsumes religion as one of its aspects. Accordingly, gender is derived from culture and religion whereas religion itself is derived from culture and is an integral part and institutionalized aspect of culture. Therefore, culture and religion (within culture), are the sources of the gender construct. Gender identity is imposed on men and women by culture and religion. Yet, culture and religion are treated as different categories although they also have much in common and influence each other. For Raday, the dynamic intersection among religious norms, culture, and gender speaks patriarchy.

Ejim (2017) also argues that religion can be considered an integral part of culture; yet it can influence the other aspects of culture like values and norms. In this view, gender roles as part of culture relate with religion whereby they are given religious interpretation, gain moral status and thereby become part of the people's relationship with their divine being. In some cultures, gender roles and gender disparity are instilled with religious undertones and they are up scaled to divine mandate to give them legitimacy and ensure adherence to them. However, gender and religious ideologies are most of the times mixed up. Seguino (2011) further elaborates the two way relationships between religion and culture in shaping gender. For the author, formal religious institutions shape cultural norms, social rules, and behaviours, and impact the rigidity of gender roles and attitudes.

Furthermore, everyday behaviours and decision-making in religious institutions are also influenced by norms and stereotypes embedded in culture. Patriarchal values, norms, attitudes, and behaviours may manifest in religious institutional practices which may inculcate rigid gender roles. Seguino further argues that people who exhibit higher degrees of religiosity hold more gender inequitable attitudes and possibly results in inequitable outcomes. Therefore, religious norms that perpetuate and promote gender inequality may manifest in views held by those at the top of the religious structure. In support of this position, Winkel (2019) asserts that religious agents, be it leaders or followers, men or women, act in the religious sphere by reference to socio-cultural meaning and orientation.

For Connell (2005), gender is a social practice; the everyday conduct of life is organized in relation to the 'reproductive arena' and masculinity can be conceptualized as a configuration of practice organized in the structure of gender relations (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Scholarship on institutions of hegemonic masculinity in particular emphasizes how specific notions of masculinity and gender relations are made the norm (Connell, 1995).

Jeylan (2004) analysed how religious rules reinforce women's subordinate position in secular lives among the Oromo. He found that some Oromo proverbs trivialize women and reinforce their subordinate positions in the society. For example, a proverb "*Beerti qoonqoo tolchiti malee dubbii hin tolchitu* (women

make good dish, but not good speech)" (p.123) discourages women from speaking in public. Among proverbs that communicate male dominance in the culture, Jeylan presented the following. "*Dhalaafi ijoolleef uletu qoricha* (for women and children, the stick is matchless treatment)" (p.127) that communicates that women, like children, are corrected by physical punishment. Poluha (2004) also states that, in Ethiopia, women are not supposed to speak in public arenas when men are present and men make major economic decisions alone especially in rural areas. Government's weak enforcement capacity, limited urbanization, cultural, and religious values favouring patriarchal norms are among the contributing factors for the prevailing gender inequality (Muluemebet & Haukanes, 2019; Wright, 2020).

There is little research on how religion affects gender equality in Ethiopia, and topics intersecting culture, religion, and gender are very scanty. The dynamics and intersections between culture and religion in influencing gender equality are even nearly lacking. Gendered religious rituals, programs, and services that perpetuate the idea that some activities are 'natural' for women or men (Murthy, 1998) are less explored. Eresso and Bruzzi (2015) argue that religious rules reinforce cultural norms in Islam and Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and women are excluded from teaching/preaching, leading prayer, and religious healing practices.

In this regard, this article focuses on discourses on religious rules and practices nurturing gendered power relations and hegemonic masculinity. More specifically, the article dwells on what is happening within the religious settings and about relative roles of men and women in religious practices. The paper seeks to shed light on three aspects of religion and gender. First, it explores the significance of religions in people's socioeconomic lives. Second, it examines the role of religious institutions in perpetuating gender inequality and maintaining men dominance. Specifically, it analyses discourses of religious leaders and the lay people about the influence of religion on gender equality. Finally, it discusses the dynamics and intersections between religion and culture in shaping discourses about gender relations.

2. Methods

2.1 The study setting

Located in southwest parts of Oromia, Nadhi Gibe is one of the districts in Jimma Zone. Jimma Zone is one of the 21 zones in Oromia National Regional State of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and its administrative city, Jimma, is located at about 350 km in the south west of Addis Ababa. The district is situated in the Cushitic-language-speaking Oromo people among the Macha group who reside in what is historically called the five Gibe Oromo States. Nadhi Gibe had a total population of 142,065 with nearly equal sex proportion. About 96 percent, 92 percent, and 95 percent of its population are rural inhabitants, Muslims, and the ethnic Oromo respectively. Customary agriculture mixed with trading activities is the main source of livelihood of the people. Polygamous marriage is practised. The district is characterized by rampant youth unemployment and massive migration to Arab countries. Nadhi Gibe was selected because it is the least urbanized district and represents rural population better than many other districts. Moreover, the population of the district belong to diverse religious groups with relatively larger number of EOTC followers compared to other districts in a bid to compare and contrast the impact of different religious views and practices on gender equality. Lastly, the first author had prior exposure to the district during his visit to the area for other studies. Hence, he is relatively familiar with the context of the study area which eased entry into the community, build rapport and trust, and undertake ethnographic fieldwork.

2.2 Study approach and data collection methods

Interviews, ethnographic observations, and focus group discussions were used to collect the data. We collected the data from religious leaders, senior community members, men and women, married and unmarried, in and out of school young people, and representatives of government sector offices. To be more specific, 16 interviews with religious leaders and community members, and four FGDs with community members were conducted from July 2018 to December 2018, and ethnographic observations were undertaken from 2017-2019. Three Islamic and two EOTC religious leaders, all are adults, 11community members including representatives from different sector offices participated in the interviews. Two FGDs were conducted with young men, one with adult men, and women each. All participants were purposively selected.

Most interview and FGD data were collected at work places and homes. The first author conducted the interviews and FGDs with two research assistants recruited from the local community, an EOTC Christian male and a Muslim female. The first author also stayed in the community for a long time and undertook the ethnographic observation. The data collection time was a period of high political instability in the country and in the region in particular because of youth-led public protest against the government. Extended State of Emergency was declared to control the anti-government social movement. As a result, a new comer talking to people in person or group, to the young people in particular was not easy given that the purpose of the discussion could be misunderstood by the government agents and the community. Having permission letters, using public facilities, regularly communicating with local leaders, and establishing rapport were among the strategies used to smoothly run the fieldwork. Being flexible and responsive to new developments like adjusting schedules by changing interview or FGD sessions were important techniques used to safely undertake the fieldwork. Using the research assistants from the local area was an additional benefit to smoothen the interaction.

2.3 Data analysis

The interview and discussion guides were prepared in English and translated to Afan Oromo (Oromo language). The interviews and FGDs were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated verbatim by the first author. Making sense of the ethnographic observation data started during the fieldwork but most of the analysis was done post the fieldwork. Field notes from the ethnographic observation and the data obtained through interviews and FGDs were triangulated. Thematic analysis involving open, axial, and selective coding approaches was used. The research questions and emerging patterns guided theme formation. Typical quotations are included to hear from the 'horse's mouth'. Phone conversations with key informants in the study area were used to clarify vague points that emerged during the data analysis. Other people who are very familiar with the area but living in Jimma City, the residence area of the first author, were consulted when clarification was needed. The data analysis and interpretation was guided by hegemonic masculinity as a theoretical lens to understand and make sense of the data. Finally, a scholar who conducted another study in the area proofread the draft manuscript and his feedback was incorporated.

2.4 Research Ethics

All study participants were informed about objectives of the study and potential risks of participating in the study. Informants' willingness to participate in the study was sought through oral consent. The discussions were taped with informed consent of the informants. No personal names and identifiers are used in the analysis and write up. Rather informants are coded with sex, age, religious affiliation, social category, and status as needed. The study was ethically approved by Oromia State Health Bureau and endorsed by Addis Ababa University. All possible cautions were taken to avoid biases that may emanate from personal and religious background of the researchers.

3. Results

3.1 People's Religious Lives and Gender Perspectives

Ethnographic observations show that gender disparity is clearly observed in formal and informal institutional settings in the study area including in leadership and access to resources. Men are breadwinners, heads of the household, and most leaders of public sectors and nearly all school principals. Men are also community and religious leaders. Regardless of their engagement in agricultural activities which is the primary means of livelihood in the area, the field is considered men's domain whereby women have no or little power of decision making on economic matters. Women are culturally given only small portion of resources through inheritance and upon divorce even if state laws promote equal resource allocation in both cases. Women are also given assets of low economic values like utensils and small animals such as hens, sheep, and goats whereas large animals like oxen, mules, and fixed assets, for example, land are for men. Women also have limited employment opportunities given the available jobs require agriculture related and wage labour in construction projects which are considered men's domain.

People's engagement in religious matters and the effect of religion on their lives is deeper and extensive as seen through ethnographic observations. Religion touches every aspect of people's lives regardless of their socioeconomic statuses. The people's interactions in the religious settings have some gender implications and are drawn from cultural resources. The interactions could be within followers of the same religion and among those belong to different religions. The interactions may involve interpersonal, small or large groups, and can be consensual, or competitive or conflicting.

Evidences show that Islam and EOTC share many commonalities with regard to gender issues. Followers of both religions practise rituals on regular bases that demand them to physically avail themselves in the mosque/church. In both cases, there are publicly announced lengthy fasting practices and prayer time that any healthy adult members of the religion are expected to observe. Attending religious rituals and fasting are considered indicators of commitment among religious followers and leaders. They also encourage one another in observing these and other religious practices. Directly or indirectly, those who are reluctant in observing such pillar expectations about the religion are pressed to conform.

Religion also overtly or covertly affects many other aspects of personal and collective lives. The religious followers are expected to select their partners in marriage and establish marriage with members of the same religion although exceptional inter-religious marriages take place. In case of inter-marriage, couples with different religious backgrounds can negotiate either to continue following their previous religion or one of them can convert to the other's religion. Religion also strongly influences people's dressing styles. Wearing the hijab (head scarves) is common among Muslim women whereas the veil (head-to-toe covering) is practiced by only some of them. Orthodox Christian women and men usually wear secular clothing except on religious ritual days when followers of EOTC wear differently. However, Islam and EOTC religious leaders are identified with their religious costume. The lay male Muslims are identified with their beard and some by wearing shorter trousers but there are no clear markers for male and female Christians. Having a meal begins with prayer. As elsewhere in Ethiopia, Muslims and Christians can share food except food items made from meat.

Other social and economic lives like friendship, neighbourhood, and market relations are less affected by religious affiliations. The people daily gather for coffee ceremony at home, in the street or at workplace regardless of their religious backgrounds. Except in purely religious rituals, Muslims and Christians share social lives and attend events organized by the other side. For example, they interact in economic exchanges, marriage ceremonies, funeral, work places, schools, and share holiday festivities. Churches and mosques also serve as venues of social gatherings and communication centres. Sometimes, government or local leaders use the platform to pass public messages like campaigns for different development activities. Inter-personal communications involve pledging with religious terms like calling names of prophets, saints, angels, or

God/Allah as confirmation that the information is true or the promise will be kept. This type of pledging is also commonly used in formal settings as well like in courts. Therefore, religion and religious practices are very close to people's daily lives.

Religious leaders actively engage in public meetings organized by government or civil society organizations representing their religious communities. They are represented in many committees of special public missions like resource and community mobilization, inter-religious conflict resolution, and peace building. They mobilize their followers to contribute in cash or in kind for development and humanitarian service initiatives. Leaders and followers of both religions are responsive in helping people in trouble with material or financial contribution. They also actively engage in settling interpersonal disputes among family or community members. The role of religion in personal, family, and community healthcare is significant in terms of defining causes of health problems and treatment to be sought. Also, there are healing religious practices in both religions and treatment outcomes are associated with the will of God. Death is duly considered divine intervention regardless of its causes more commonly among Muslims. Successes and challenges in social and economic lives are associated with religion. Religion is central to fertility of human, animal, and agricultural plants.

In the present study, participants were asked about their views of gender equality: "*Are women equal with men*?" and the actual gender relations and masculine manifestations in interpersonal and institutional practices. Most study participants believe that gender inequality prevails in institutional settings and practices, and people's everyday interaction. They criticized that gender equality is more rhetorical than practical in the community and religious lives. An adult Christian male participant expressed, "*There is gender equality in paper but not on the ground*." This idea is shared among most study participants including young men and women. A young man explained it as follows:

> *There is no gender equality in the society but it is there in discourses of government officials. I do not think there is gender equality in the society in a practical sense. Gender inequality is practised at home and in the community. For example, men are considered as superior over [to] women and they are given better positions. Many parents believe that sons are more successful in education than daughters even if they send girls to school. Even sending girls to school started recently after parents got awareness about advantages of educating females. (*A Christian Youngman, Grade 10 student, Ako High school*)*

A key informant Christian adult woman from government sector also underscored that not only community's view favours men but also women legitimize men's dominance over women by endorsing the community's pro-men gender views and subordinating themselves:

> *The broader community view still undermines women's ability to do something valuable and women also accept the same view. There is no direct resistance against women by men as such but the internalized cultural norms by women pull them back from moving forward.*

An elderly Christian woman in her 60s expressed her perceived roles in the community as "*Waan golakoo qofan beeka*" (my knowledge is all about my inside home) when we asked her to tell us about gender relations in the community. When asked for her views about her versus her husband's roles in the family's economic activities, a young educated public employee Muslim woman expressed that her earning is extra given providing the household is the duty of men. Ethnographic observations also reveal that women endorse men's dominance in religious and non-religious lives. A Muslim young man stresses manifestations of gender inequality in the family context as follows:

> *Gender inequalities could be manifested at home in the family relations between a husband and a wife as well as among brothers and sisters. There is deep-rooted discrimination against young women. I have a sister and two brothers. While I am the last child in the family, my sister was the second child and the only daughter. Three of us* (sons) *have gone to school but she never went to school instead she was married when she was young. So, I do not see equality between men and women.*

Many similar cases with this story are evident in the study area showing that men are preferentially treated in different aspects of life.

3.2 The Intersectionality of Religion, Culture, and Gender

Religious leaders of Islam and EOTC in the study area explained that men and women are considered equal in their respective religions, and reportedly the same is conveyed in the local religious teachings. Key informants from Islam and EOTC link the basis of gender equality to the respective Holy Scriptures. However, they believe that gender equality does not prevail in men-women actual relations in the study communities due to mainly the influence of patriarchal culture. An EOTC religious leader marked the discrepancy between the provisions in the scriptures about gender equality and the practice on the ground as follows: "*I have lived for long time in this community. There are many saddening stories we hear regarding gender-based sexual violence in the community*." Let us discuss the views and practices of the two religions separately here under.

Islamic teachings and practices: gender discrimination or women protection? Islam religious leaders interviewed for this study claim that men and women are considered equal per the Sharia rules and they are equally addressed in Islamic teachings. The religious leaders boldly claim that Islamic teaching advocates for gender equality and they practise the same. They added that they even teach in favour of the women to some degree. A religious leader noted that historically the birth of Prophet Mohammed has changed the bad treatment of women and that they are in principle treated as equal. Hence, things done in relation to Islam, be it prescription or proscription, are all considered primarily for the protection of women's wellbeing rather than oppressing them. An Islamic religious leader explained it in the following way:

> *We strongly preach the equality of women and men. Even we favour women somehow. We strongly advise men to provide the necessary support and protection to women in all aspects of life. In the past, there were discriminations against women across the world, for instance, there had been killing of female infants in different parts of the world. However, after the birth of Prophet Mohammed, discrimination against women has been ruled out. Some raise Muslim women's dressing style or wearing hijab as an issue of gender inequality and argue that 'Islam does not allow women to dress as they wish.' But, we advise women to wear hijab for their own safety. It is in their best interest. To speak frankly, Islam promotes the rights of women; it does not undermine them. Hijab is just to protect women from different risks that may come to them from counterpart men.*

The central argument of the religious leader on the treatment of women is that Islam is essentially and historically not discriminatory against women. Accordingly, women are protected in the community by limiting their exposure to risks and hazards. 'Others or outsiders' may view this as discrimination against the women, but according to the religious leader, it is not. Hence, men do not allow women to travel alone long distance because women have no strength ("*gannootni fikiraa hin qaban")* to protect themselves from any danger they may face on the way. Due to this, the religious leaders advise husbands or relatives to accompany women whenever they travel far away from their residential places. The risks referred in this narration are gender-based violence mainly sexual abuse and abduction.

Generally, according to the key informants, Islam demands men to provide and protect women, not to dominate or oppress them. Furthermore, the religious leaders claim that the religion as practically preached in the local context of the study communities maintains this foundational principle of Islam. The religious leaders also pinpointed that women are possibly attacked by men in the community unless they are protected by other

men that implies frail or weak perception of women who need the necessary protection of men. It also implies that women are not expected to freely move outside home.

Islam religious leaders and their followers including women know and accept that women do not teach Quran in public, and do not lead religious organization and prayer because it is prohibited in the religious scriptures. Moreover, women should not stand in front of men during the prayer not to sexually tempt them which is also considered justifiable. Interestingly, informants do not consider all these ground rules of religion as gender inequality although they are from gender perspectives.

Another study participant however argued that there are rooms for Muslim women to engage in religious leadership and prestigious services like teaching. An adult Muslim study participant presented his unique thoughts about gender equality as well as his daughter's experience that emerges as an alternative discourse to the official and dominant one as follows.

> *Girls are different from boys only in their dressing as per the religion allows that they should respect. I have a daughter attending Theology College in Degree program in Addis Ababa but lack of women religious teachers in Tiro Afeta (i.*e Nadhi Gibe*) is that the religion itself is not well established in the area. They can learn and teach so long as they fulfil what the religion expects from them.*

His position is different from others including leaders and followers of Islam and EOTC that endorse women's exclusion as dogmatic and suggests that cultures or religious dogmas and guidelines are not fixed on a stone and that they could change through time. The participant added his practical observation of gender relationship among his own children and his own judgment about their education performance favouring girls as follows: "*My daughters and sons do not underestimate one another rather they compete with each other in schooling. I can say girls are better in education because they have better scores given girls are more responsive to advice and attentive than boys."*

EOTC teachings and practices: Gender discrimination or a divine will? Religious views and teachings in the EOTC are very similar with those of the Islam in that leaders of both religions claim that views of gender equality is embedded in the scriptures. The religious leaders consider differences in the gender-based role division in religious services whereby women do not lead prayer and preach, roles that are given in the scriptures, and a view that can be contested from gender perspectives. A key informant from EOTC boldly argues that men and women are equal referring to the Genesis in the Holy Bible. He explained that the EOTC provides religious education for its male and female followers in a way it promotes gender equality. The religious leader argues that church's marriage education for young men and women for instance incorporates the principle of gender equality. He claims that on Sunday School Program, women and men jointly receive gender and sex education. The key informant argued:

> *In the Bible, there is a verse which says 'a wife shall obey and respect her husband'. There is also another verse which explains that 'as Jesus loves the church, a husband should love his wife and heads the household'. Some people argue that this teaching puts women in a lower position. Nevertheless, it is not. If we take how Eve was created in the Bible, God moulded her from the Adam's left side flesh. Why did He not create her either from Adam's head or leg? Why did God mould her from the middle body of the Adam? It is to ensure equality between both sexes. If she was created from the head, she would have been superior to man, and if she was from the lower body part like leg, she would have been subordinate to man. She was formed from the middle body part which indicates equality of both sexes. This is how we teach the equality of men and women in the church.*

Like the Muslim leader presented earlier, this study participant is aware about concerns of gender inequality hidden in religious arrangement and attempted to neutralize the issue. The key informant underscores that explicit views of gender equality are well expressed in the church's scripture and its subsequent teachings. Another key informant from EOTC also argues against views that 'women are undermined in Christianity'

reciting from the Bible. According to him, some verses in the Bible are misunderstood or misinterpreted by those who think that Christianity is pro-men. The key informant also believes that the unequal relations in the study area deviates from the church's normative expectations and has to do mainly with the patriarchal nature of the society.

Like in Islam, some level of gender segregation is manifested in EOTC; for example, women are not allowed to teach in congregations. The key informants tended to defend the women's exclusion from preaching as doctrinal provision rather than gender inequality. The ethnographic observation, interviews, and FGDs show that it is culturally believed/claimed that men are more knowledgeable than women. The doctrine and the practice also reinforce the cultural view that women should not speak in public. A key informant explains the church's doctrine as follows:

> *Women, unlike men, cannot teach members of the congregations. Except this, there are different programs in which females can participate in the church. For instance, women can provide counselling services. Other programs in which they serve are Sunday program and church choirs. In my church, there are three women who actively participate in different church services and structures. Nevertheless, they cannot preach the Bible to the mass-church attendants; this is religiously prohibited for women.*

Hence, he boldly identified preaching the Bible as gender-based church service which is exclusively reserved for men. The key informant recited that in the Bible itself St. Paul directed that women are not allowed to take a stage/podium and preach the Bible to the followers. He reminded that the church has not yet received any complain from women on this matter, that is, he believes that the principle is endorsed by female followers. Similar views of role assignment, justifications, and practices are there in Islam as reflected by the Islam religious leaders; women do not teach the Quran or lead the prayer. The interviews and ethnographic observations show that followers of both religions including women do not see those gender-based role divisions in their respective religions as gendered power relations and manifestations of hegemonic masculinity. Rather they attempt to justify the rules or ignore to discuss about it or declare that they do not have adequate knowledge of the scriptures to judge.

Is culture to blame for gender inequality? In the study context, gender, cultural, and religious perceptions and practices are intimately intertwined in a manner where one cannot be meaningfully understood without reference to the other. For example, religious and cultural marriage rules and rituals are very similar and reinforce each other. Roles of men and women in religious settings are influenced by cultural prescriptions and proscriptions of the role of men and women in the familial and community lives. Yet, the religious leaders insist that it is culture and not religion that upholds gender discrimination. There are also notable overlaps between Islam and Orthodox Christianity.

Religious leaders in the study communities not only defend against the view that religion nurtures gender inequality, they also attribute the sources of inequality to culture other than religious rules and practices. By culture the religious leaders mean non-religious elements that are not directly provided in religious scriptures but commonly believed and practised in everyday lives. The religious leaders thus claim that the cultural views and practices dominate over the religious rules and teachings, and culture keeps the women in subordinate positions in several dimensions of lives. An EOTC leader described it as follows:

> *Our church teaches equality of men and women, but the people remain under cultural influences. Cultural factors external to the church favour men over women. For instance, even though the church treats both sexes equally in teachings of the reproductive health issues, pregnancy and childcare are culturally considered as the sole roles of women in the community.*

Likewise, the Islam religious leaders attribute the gender inequality to cultural expectations that demand women's subordinate positions to men. A Muslim religious leader pointed out that a few men attempt to translate the teachings into practice presenting his experience as a reference. He said:

> *Even though most men dominate over women in the society, a few men including me exceptionally treat their wives as equal. Personally, I discuss all family matters with my wife and we make decisions jointly. But I know that men dominate over women in our culture.*

Attributing gender inequality to individual differences with the religious and cultural contexts, another Muslim religious leader shared his democratic and egalitarian approach in marital relations as follows:

> *I have no adequate information about relationships between spouses in our community. What I can tell you from my family's experience is that we discuss everything together. I don't decide alone. I and my wife discuss every issue together and we also make decisions jointly. I don't know the practice of other families, but from my side, there is no such power difference between me and my* wife.

A Muslim religious leader defended that "*the idea that Islam oppresses women is defamation against the religion because of its followers' failure not to live up to the expectation of the religion in giving respect for women; the religion is not to blame*". However, he also stated his own gendered view that "*Men, not women, are responsible to fulfil economic needs of the family*".

The FGD participant young men in Dimtu agree that men and women are not considered equal in their communities that begin with preferential welcoming of a newly born baby boy and baby girl. Recalling that in delivery cultural ceremony, people ululate joyfully five times for a baby boy and only three times for a baby girl. Alternatively, the number of ululation could be seven and five respectively. For the participants, doing this shows that different values are attached to boys and girls. The informants argue that the society and the family are not considering young men and young women equal. They refer to distinctions between what men and women should do as indicators of gender inequality like mostly women work in the kitchen and men outside.

Although many study participants attribute the major sources of gender inequality to cultural influences, some are critical that religious rules and practices also reinforce gendered cultural elements. Women's limited participation in public events is shaped by religious and cultural forces. A key informant from district Youth and Sport Office reported that there are some limitations with regards to gender relations and participation. According to him, fewer young women participate in public meetings compared to their men counterpart. There is also a tendency of excluding unmarried young women from such participation based on the view that Sharia rules out. That is, there is a view of keeping young unmarried women from participating in public meetings and giving opinion. Hence, both culturally and religiously, there is a tendency of keeping women at home.

Islam and EOTC at least impart in their religious followers that there are some religious practices that only men can do but not the other way round. The religious leaders normalize the exclusion and segregation by reciting scriptures and giving logical explanations at times whereas the lay people tend to endorse the religious leaders' views. Leaders of both religions attribute women's less representations at local level in services acceptable for both sexes to women's lack of preparation to qualify for the positions like passing through lengthy theological study. An EOTC religious leader, for example, argued that there is no doctrinal rule that prohibit women from taking church leadership at higher positions reminding there are such women at central offices. He noted that there are few women in higher leadership positions at Addis Ababa while reemphasizing that women cannot teach in congregation which is doctrinal. Exceptionally, a Muslim study participant remarked a possibility for women to become religious teachers if they fulfil the requirements. He mentioned that his daughter was studying at theological college in Addis Ababa.

Religious leaders from both religions strongly believe that the respective religions are pro-gender equality and claim they actually teach their followers about that. EOTC in particular has programs and structures that deal with this. But they tend to defend religious rules and practices excluding women from roles that only men are supposed to perform. Overall, the religious leaders expressed their own personal convictions

of gender equality and their experiences of reportedly observing the rules in their own marital lives indicates change towards gender equality is in the making.

4. Discussion

Two religious settings were examined in this article with emphasis on identifying unequal gender-based relations (Kronsell, 2005), and how the institutions impart masculine hegemonic norms and practices in the study setting. Many study participants' rhetoric responses to the question 'Are women equal to men' is in favour of gender equality. They speak that men and women are essentially equal. However, what is happening on the ground including in religious settings contradicts with the rhetoric suggesting that there is a difference between what people say they do and what they actually do. For example, Muslim religious leaders believe that women are weak and insecure hence they should seek protection of men. Men are presented as protector and provider on the one hand, and abuser and controller on the other, all features of hegemonic masculinity. Likewise, EOTC religious leaders justify that women are not allowed to preach the word of God to the congregation. The stand points of the religious leaders in the study communities clearly manifest gendered power relations and hegemonic masculinity at work in the religious settings.

Women are also excluded from leading prayer in Islam and EOTC whereby both teaching in public and leadership are culturally considered men's domain. In line with the findings of this study, Eresso and Bruzzi (2015) found that religions in Ethiopia contribute to fostering gender ideologies that are linked to cultural heritage, political and moral values, forms of authority and hierarchy. They pointed out that ritual practices are divided along the gender lines whereby men dominate the formal ritual practices and women are marginalized in the liturgy of the EOTC. Women can participate in church choirs or other service programs like counselling but do not preach the Bible in the church which is Biblical ordinance according to the key informants of this study.

Findings of the present study concur with the existing literature such as (Raday, 2003; Seguino, 2011; Eresso & Bruzzi, 2015) that men are culturally viewed as superior to women in the religious and community settings, a view also shared by many women themselves. Religious leaders and followers, men and women play roles in maintaining gendered power relations and hegemonic masculinity through shared religious norms and living them in their daily practices.

Kronsell (2005) holds that norms of masculinity become apparent by studying everyday practices in different sites of institutions. Although military, defence and security institutions are the bases and primary sites for such scholarship on gendered institutions (Connell, 1995; Barrett, 1996; Kronsell, 2005), the theoretical perspective is also useful to understand gendered-relations in religious settings.

Gender roles -the apportioning of certain roles to a particular sex by society, are understood as tools of gender disparity that promotes the ideology of gender inequality (Ejim, 2017). Although leaders from Islam and EOTC claim to have egalitarian men-women relations in their respective religions citing religious verses from the scriptures, men practically dominate over women not only in the non-religious spheres of life but also in religious practices. Religious leaders' particularly Muslim leaders' perception of gender equality is based on an understanding of women as "weaker" who need protection from men. This view stresses that women are insecure and vulnerable hence they require men's support and protection implying that men are stronger, self-reliant, provider, protector, and abuser. From the hegemonic masculinity perspective, however, exclusion of women from leading religious organization and practices mean keeping them in subordinate position whereby they are denied to exercise leadership roles.

Riley (2011) argues that hegemony is not just a form of intellectual and moral leadership or a political dictatorship in general; it is also a rational form inconceivable without pluralism and democracy. It is also evident that women's acceptance of men's dominance over their lives and silence about gendered power relations prevailing in the religious settings contribute to the continuation of women's segregation from some

religious services and practices. Jeylan (2004) analysed how some Oromo proverbs trivialize women and reinforce subordinate positions given to them in the society.

We can grasp three points from discourses of religious leaders about gender inequality. First, they endorse the official discourse through politically correct expressions or socially desirable responses that gender inequality prevail in the community hence intervention is needed. Second, they present their religion and themselves as pro-gender equality yet they create parallel discourses that tend to justify elements of gender inequality manifested in the religious rules and practices (Blystad *et al*., 2020). Third, they attribute gender inequality to culture and personal failure to observe religious teachings. Their attribution of gender inequality to culture and non-specified community members excluding themselves is political correctness and externalization.

While significant agency is yet to emerge to progress toward creating a more gender equal society, modern education is considered as a potential driver of changes. Some young men tend to be more critical against women's deep-rooted subordination and they hope that education is a powerful tool to ensure gender equality. There are also a few women who have different perception about gender equality in the community and who believe that there should not be distinct jobs for women and men. They believe that men and women can work equally whether it is a household chores or farm activities. However, young men's and women's agency that can translate the progressive views into action is not sufficiently in place.

5. Conclusion

How do religious norms and practices perpetuate gender inequality? In what ways culture and religion intersect in shaping gender inequality?

We found that religion and culture reinforce each other towards promoting gender bias through their shared values like discouraging women from taking leadership roles and talking in public. While the gender bias is directly linked to patriarchal rules from the cultural perspective, religious leaders see them as divine rules not allowed in the Holy Quran/ Holy Bible implying that it is unlikely to change. Practically, both promote women's caring roles and passive representation in public, and men's active public leading roles. Such arguments sound to be less flexible given the religious leaders and the lay people lack courage to question or challenge those biased religious-based assumptions, values, and practices. The religious leaders are reactive to views that condemn the religions to be discriminatory and try to discredit the condemnation.

The fact that religious leaders leave no room for searching elements of gender discrimination and men dominance over women in the religious views, practices, and organization implies that they tend to defend gender inequality. At times, religious leaders take ambiguous personal positions as members of the society and religious leaders. Therefore, engaging them in promoting gender equality through reinterpretation of religious rules and practices need to be considered.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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