Cornell University
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School
DigitalCommons@ILR

GLADNET Collection

Gladnet

January 2003

Doing Business in Addis Ababa: Case Studies of Women Entrepreneurs with Disabilities in Ethiopia

International Labour Organization

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/gladnetcollect

DigitalCommons@ILR is celebrating its 10th anniversary!
Please share your DigitalCommons@ILR story!

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Gladnet at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in GLADNET Collection by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact hlmdigital@cornell.edu.

Doing Business in Addis Ababa: Case Studies of Women Entrepreneurs with Disabilities in Ethiopia

Abstract
[From Preface] The ILO Technical Cooperation Project, "Developing Entrepreneurship among Women with Disabilities", is being implemented in Ethiopia by the Ethiopian Federation of Persons with Disabilities (EFPD) and the Tigray Disabled Veterans Association (TDVA).

The project represents a new approach to technical cooperation by the ILO in the field of disability, an approach that is innovative and flexible, based on partnership with local non-governmental organizations of persons with disabilities, and designed and implemented in close consultation with training providers, micro-finance institutions, and national and local government authorities. The ultimate goal is the development of an effective strategy by which women with disabilities can optimise their incomeearning potential and escape from poverty.

Keywords
women, entrepreneurs, disabilities, Ethiopia, business, Addis Ababa, case studies, training, skill, national, local

Comments
http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/gladnetcollect/189/

This article is available at DigitalCommons@ILR: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/gladnetcollect/189

Doing Business in Addis Ababa:

Case Studies of Women Entrepreneurs With Disabilities in Ethiopia

Copyright © International Labour Organization 2003

Publications of the International Labour Office enjoy copyright under Protocol 2 of the Universal Copyright Convention. Nevertheless, short excerpts from them may be reproduced without authorization, on condition that the source is indicated. For rights of reproduction or translation, application should be made to the Publications Bureau (Rights and Permissions), International Labour Office, CH-1211 Geneva 22, Switzerland. The International Labour Office welcomes such applications.
Libraries, institutions and other users registered in the United Kingdom with the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 4LP [Fax: (+44) (0)20 7631 5500; email: cla@cla.co.uk], in the United States with the Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923 [Fax: (+1) (978) 750 4470; email: info@copyright.com] or in other countries with associated Reproduction Rights Organizations, may make photocopies in accordance with the licences issued to them for this purpose.

ISBN 92-2-113632-9.

First published 2003

The designations employed in ILO publications, which are in conformity with United Nations practice, and the presentation of material therein do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the International Labour Office concerning the legal status of any country, area or territory or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers.
The responsibility for opinions expressed in signed articles, studies and other contributions rests solely with their authors, and publication does not constitute an endorsement by the International Labour Office of the opinions expressed in them.
Reference to names of firms and commercial products and processes does not imply their endorsement by the International Labour Office, and any failure to mention a particular firm, commercial product or process is not a sign of disapproval.
ILO publications can be obtained through major booksellers or ILO local offices in many countries, or direct from ILO Publications, International Labour Office, CH-1211 Geneva 22, Switzerland. Catalogues or lists of new publications are available free of charge from the above address, or by email: pubvente@ilo.org
Visit our website: www.ilo.org/publns

Printed in Ethiopia

Doing Business in Addis Ababa
Case Studies of Women Entrepreneurs with Disabilities in Ethiopia

By
International Labour Organization(ILO)

Contents

Preface.....2

WOMEN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

Introduction.....3
Ayinaddis Wondimneh.....4
Gete Dessalegn.....6
Dejyitnu Bisetegn.....7
Sinkinesh H/Wold.....9
Genet Ketema 10

WOMEN WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS

Introduction.....12
Hiwot Beyene.....13
Fantu Tafese.....15
Tiruwork Hussen.....16
Genet Walelgn.....17
Etaferahu Mamo.....18

WOMEN WITH MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS

Introduction.....20
Ayelu Basha Bedasa.....21

Shamsiya Hiyar.....23
Emebet Deribe Abebe.....25
Roza Gesesse 26
Amakelech Goshu Degifu.....27

WOMEN WHO HAVE HAD LEPROSY

Introduction.....28
Ageritu Ayalew.....29
Tiruwork Mengistu.....31
Yeshareg Meshesha.....33
Zewditu Belay 35
Zemzem Shifa.....36

MOTHERS OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Introduction.....38
Mame Alemu.....39
Mare Zewde Ashgari.....41

Preface

The ILO Technical Cooperation Project, "Developing Entrepreneurship among Women with Disabilities", is being implemented in Ethiopia by the Ethiopian Federation of Persons with Disabilities (EFPD) and the Tigray Disabled Veterans Association (TDVA).

Funded by the Government of Ireland, the objective of the project is to devise a strategy for developing entrepreneurship among women with disabilities in an urban area - the city of Addis Ababa, and a rural area - Tigray Region, in Ethiopia, which can be replicated in other regions of the country and in other countries of the world. The project aims to promote economic empowerment among women with disabilities and women with disabled dependants, by providing training in micro-enterprise skills, arranging access to vocational skills training opportunities and credit, and supporting the women in starting a business activity or developing an existing one. It also seeks to increase the capacity of the EFPD and the TDVA to manage and sustain the new programme of training and support for its disabled women members.

The project represents a new approach to technical cooperation by the ILO in the field of disability, an approach that is innovative and flexible, based on partnership with local non-governmental organizations of persons with disabilities, and designed and implemented in close consultation with training providers, micro-finance institutions, and national and local government authorities. The ultimate goal is the development of an effective strategy by which women with disabilities can optimise their income-earning potential and escape from poverty.

In preparation for the project, women with disabilities, members of the EFDP and TDVA, compiled case studies of disabled women who were already engaged in small enterprise in Addis Ababa and Tigray Region. The descriptive information which they contain complements the profile which emerged from the exploratory survey of potential participants in the project, which is the subject of a separate publication. In many ways, though, the Case Studies speak for themselves, using the women's own words, and provide a vivid testimony of their situation.

For more information, contact:
ILO Disability Programme
Skills Development Department (IFP/Skills)
International Labour Organisation,
4, Route des Morillons
Geneva, Switzerland.
Tel: +41 22 799 8276, Fax: +41 22 799 6310
e-mail: disability@ilo.org

CASE STUDIES: ADDIS ABABA

WOMEN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

Introduction

All of the visually impaired women who tell their stories below are over forty years old, of itself a considerable achievement in a country in which life expectancy for women was estimated at 45.5 years in 2002. All have been visually impaired since childhood. They each worked in the home or at other jobs for a long time before turning to their current occupations. Their stories, especially those of Gete Dessalegn, Dejyitnu Bisetegn and Sinkinesh H/Wold, illustrate the necessity for resourcefulness when life does not go as planned in Ethiopia. The most successful of the women is practicing traditional massage, a highly prized skill. The others are mainly involved in petty trade, in which they face a lot of competition from others. Their blindness makes them vulnerable to fraud and can lay them open to others' prejudices, as their stories show. Because they have no mobility training or mobility aids, the two peddlers are restricted as to where they can go and are less independent and more reliant on others than they would wish to be. Sinkinesh H/Wold is particularly concerned about this. The women who work from home are far more secure.

Those women who were in touch with NGOs had mixed experiences. Gete Dessalegn worked for a foreign NGO for 26 years but does cannot read Braille and does not own a white stick. Sinkinesh H/Wold had to enlist the help of the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association to win the right to a pension after 21 years with another NGO. She also is illiterate and wants to have mobility training.Despite their considerable difficulties the women are optimistic. They are proud of their achievements in a country in which begging is still the main occupation of many visually impaired people. Managing their savings and loans, taking on the role of breadwinner in their later years and guarding their dignity, the women continue to dream of the better life they could have with more opportunity and support.

Ayinaddis Wondimneh

Now in her mid-fifties, Ayinaddis Wondimneh supports eight people on her monthly income of over 700 birr. She does this through her work as a midwife, bonesetter and practitioner of traditional massage. Her journey to this achievement was long and complex. Originally from Dejen in the Amhara region of Ethiopia, north of Addis Ababa, Ayinaddis became visually impaired as a young girl during an epidemic of a tropical disease which hit the area. "As a girl from the countryside who had lost her eyesight I was considered to be good for nothing", says Ayinaddis, "so I decided to leave all earthly things behind and to go to Addis Ababa to become a nun." However, on the way to Addis she met a smuggler, and the potential novice became a carrier in the smuggling trade instead.

This marked the beginning of a smuggling career. Ayinaddis saved 4000 birr from the money she was paid for carrying smuggled goods through customs checkpoints.She put half aside and with the rest she began her own smuggling business, dealing in second-hand clothes which she brought to Addis from Harar, taking berbere and teff on the return journey. For this Ayinaddis was paid in silver coins, which she then sold to jewellers in Gore, near the Sudanese border, where the silver trade was lucrative.

Ayinaddis was not comfortable with her life, though. "It was just as they say", she comments. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions. I left my home to become a nun, and became a smuggler instead. At first this shadowy world seemed like a godsend to me. I was a young woman who had left her home alone for a place about which she knew nothing, and who was now making good money. But deep inside I was neither secure nor satisfied. The illegal nature of my business played on my mind. I began to look for an opportunity to get out."

Eventually Ayinaddis discovered that there was a good market for food and tela (Ethiopian barley beer) in her neighbourhood. She began preparing food and brewing local beer in her home and soon was selling one barrel of tela a day. "Once I stopped smuggling I started using all the skills I had learnt as a child", Ayinaddis comments. "I began breeding sheep and poultry on a plot behind my house. Ten years ago I also started doing traditional massage that my grandfather had taught me years before. Then I stopped keeping livestock due to lack of space. Traditional massage became my lucky trade. I even met my late husband through traditional massage!" Now, apart from orders for local beer for weddings and other special occasions, Ayinaddis concentrates on traditional massage. Ayinaddis says she can cure anything from a dislocation to a serious injury using her skills in traditional massage. "Once a Canadian man came to see me", Ayinaddis recalls. "Professional physiotherapists had told him that his hand would have to be amputated. My skills cured him! I performed a miracle! The story was in the newspapers. I became very well known. On top of that, the Canadian gave me 15,000 birr and I used that to change my life."

Such is Ayinaddis' reputation that now she treats at least 20 people a day, from all walks of life, levels of society and parts of Ethiopia. "I get clients by word of mouth", Ayinaddis explains. "My clients are both rich and poor. If people can't pay, I don't charge them. On the other hand, sometimes rich people don't come here to see me. They send a car to take me to their houses. I charge people what they can afford to pay".

The system that Ayinaddis operates is attractive in Ethiopia, where medical services are inadequate. "My service is available and accessible", says Ayinaddis. "People appreciate what I am offering and call me 'our honourable mother'. Other healers send me their patients when they can't cure them. I don't fail in my work. I give it lots of attention."

Much of Ayinaddis' life has been very hard. Her husband and one of her sons were soldiers and died in the civil war. Of the 12 children to whom she gave birth, only four are still alive. Three are married and the fourth, a boy who has a hearing impairment, is still in education and lives at home. "My remaining children, and my grandchildren, are a compensation for my lack of eyesight", says Ayinaddis. "Words cannot describe my love for them."

Ayinaddis' income is enabling her to support her son to build a house. She buys new clothes and schoolbooks for the son who is still living at home. Ayinaddis herself lives in a two-roomed publicly-owned house and practises her massage in a small dark corridor at its entrance. Her clients sit in a chair there, or lie on a sofa in her living room. "If I could get a better premises, I would like to have beds and treat people as inpatients", Ayinaddis says. "That way I could treat people who are too unwell to come to me as outpatients." She has ruled out taking out a loan to help her to achieve this goal, though, as she believes that "God will punish me if I use credit".

Ayinaddis has had a little contact with disability support services. "At one time I participated in a movement to advance the human rights of blind people. I can't remember much now, but once I had a Braille lesson", she recalls.Getting support is not high on Ayinaddis' agenda. Her main concern is teach her skills to others. "I tried to teach my son", she says, "but he did not like to be at home all the time. If could get the co-operation of the Government, I would teach other people. I want to do what I can to prevent disability by treating people who cannot afford to pay. I also want to earn more money so that I can save more for my old age. I am getting old and tired now. But until my dream to help my country and my people by using my skill is fully realized, I will have no rest."

Gete Dessalegn

Gete Dessalegn, now in her early 50s, has been blind since she was about eight years old. She was born in a rural part of South Shoa but when she lost her eyesight her aunt brought her to Addis Ababa. Here she trained in handicrafts at a centre run by a German church organisation. She met her husband at the centre and they continued to work there for the next 26 years. It closed unexpectedly and Gete's monthly salary of 245 birr was discontinued.

Gete and her husband own their own house, built through a housing co-operative, so their unemployment did not affect their accommodation, but their savings were quickly depleted. When they were down to their last 250 birr, Gete decided to act. "I bought 50 kilos of barley", says Gete, "mixed it with a certain amount of nuts, rubbed it with a mixture of bird's-eye chilis and other spices and packed it in plastic bags. This is kollo, a snack food popular in Ethiopia. It was sold in a short time!"

Although triggered by desperation, making kollo turned out to be lucrative for her, says Gete. "Customers phone with rush orders all the time", she says. "I get them one after the other.

Often I don't have time to complete one order before I have to start another. Custom is increasing all the time and I am now making an average of 400 birr a month."

Gete herself is illiterate but her improved income has enabled her and her husband to educate their children. One of their daughters completed secondary school and is now helping in the business, while one of their sons has finished secondary school and is now doing a vocational training course. Their other two children are still at school, in grades 7 and 9.

If things continue to go well, Gete plans to build another house in her compound and to expand her business. The kollo trade is not without problems, however. "What bothers me a lot is the fluctuation of prices in the market. When the price of barley, nuts, oil and fuel goes up my profits are affected", Gete says.

Gete doesn't receive any support services with regard to her disability. "I would like to have a white stick", she says, "and I would also like to learn Braille". Counselling and further vocational training are also of interest to her.

Dejyitnu Bisetegn

Dejyitnu Bisetegn is well-known in the area of Addis Ababa in which she lives. "Go to the place where wood is sold for fuel, near the Gerji taxi station, and ask to be taken to the house where the blind woman sells berbere, spices and shuro. Anyone can tell you where I live", says Dejyitnu. Dejyitnu is about 50 years old. She was born in a rural part of Wollo and became visually impaired at the age of 15, when a splinter flew off a block of wood that she was chopping with an axe and entered her eye.

She was taken immediately to the hospital at Dessie and received treatment. She was told to come back for more treatment but her parents did not approve of modern medicine. They took her back to their home village to be cured by holy water instead.

The traditional treament did not work and, exacerbated by the hard rural life, Dejyitnu's health deteriorated. She left her four children and went to Addis Ababa, never to return to her home village. Her eyesight was not saved."Compared with my home village life in Addis Ababa is easy, even for poor people", says Dejyitnu. "I do not have to go a long way to fetch water or buy food. At first, though, I found everything here very strange - the clothes, the hairstyles, the food, the way people do things. But I stayed with my aunt and helped her and learned how to cook the Addis way. Later I married a man who was my aunt's lodger, and had four more children."

Dejyitnu found life good. Her husband worked and she took care of the children and the house. She brought her first four children from her home village and they all lived together in a house that she built through a housing co-operative, using some of the monthly housekeeping money that her husband gave her. "Ours was a happy family, with mutual understanding", she recalls.

After 25 years of this contented life, things suddenly became far more difficult. Dejyitnu's husband was laid off from his job as an unskilled worker. Undaunted, Dejyitnu took 100 birr from their savings and prepared berbere and shuro, "just to give it a try", Dejyitnu says. "I was encouraged when what I prepared sold out straight away. I continued to work hard and now my product is distributed to shops in several parts of Addis. I earn 300 birr a month and support my family. My products are carefully prepared and competitively priced so my customers are increasing. In the past my husband was the breadwinner for the family. Now I am really satisfied by playing that role."

Dejyitnu has never received any disability support services. "I would like to learn Braille and also learn arithmetic, as they would be useful in my business. I would like to build another house in my compound and also open a shop selling traditional Ethiopian foods. I think that blind women can be successful in business and can become self-sufficient if they have courage.

There are opportunities for them in brush-making and also in selling kerosene." Dejyitnu's business is enabling her to give her children a better life than she has had. Three of her children have completed their secondary education and are in vocational training. Another daughter is married. "Two of my children died", she says. "I am happy to see the success of my other children. Now I would like to get training and help in order to earn more and live better."

Sinkinesh H/Wold

Sinkinesh H/Wold, blinded by smallpox at the age of 12, makes a precarious living for herself and her family by walking through the streets of Addis Ababa all day, every day, working as a peddler. Now 45, she came to Addis from her home village hoping for improved medical care and a better life. At first she did well. "I took a three-day course in carpet making and was then employed at 65 birr a month at a kind of sheltered workshop called the National Handicrafts Centre", Sinkinesh explains.

After working there for 21 years Sinkinesh had a minor disagreement with the centre. She was let go without compensation. "I immediately got a pad of lottery tickets on credit and went out to sell them. I was determined to keep my dignity and not to beg for alms", she says. With the help of the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association Sinkinesh fought for her pension rights and won. "I will collect a monthly pension when I reach retirement age", she explains.

Meanwhile, Sinkinesh borrowed 1000 birr from her kebele and expanded her activities to include selling chewing gum, magazines, newspapers and books. "I get a lot of encouragement from my customers", says Sinkinesh. "Some of them buy from me even when they do not intend to. This is because they are impressed by my courage. The people from whom I buy the goods I sell are also good to me. It was they who advised me to sell up-to-date magazines and books which make a good profit. They do not give me things that might not sell well." When she has the time Sinkinesh also prepares and sells berbere and shuro. "For a while I sold smuggled clothes and perfumes but I stopped doing that because it was illegal", she says.

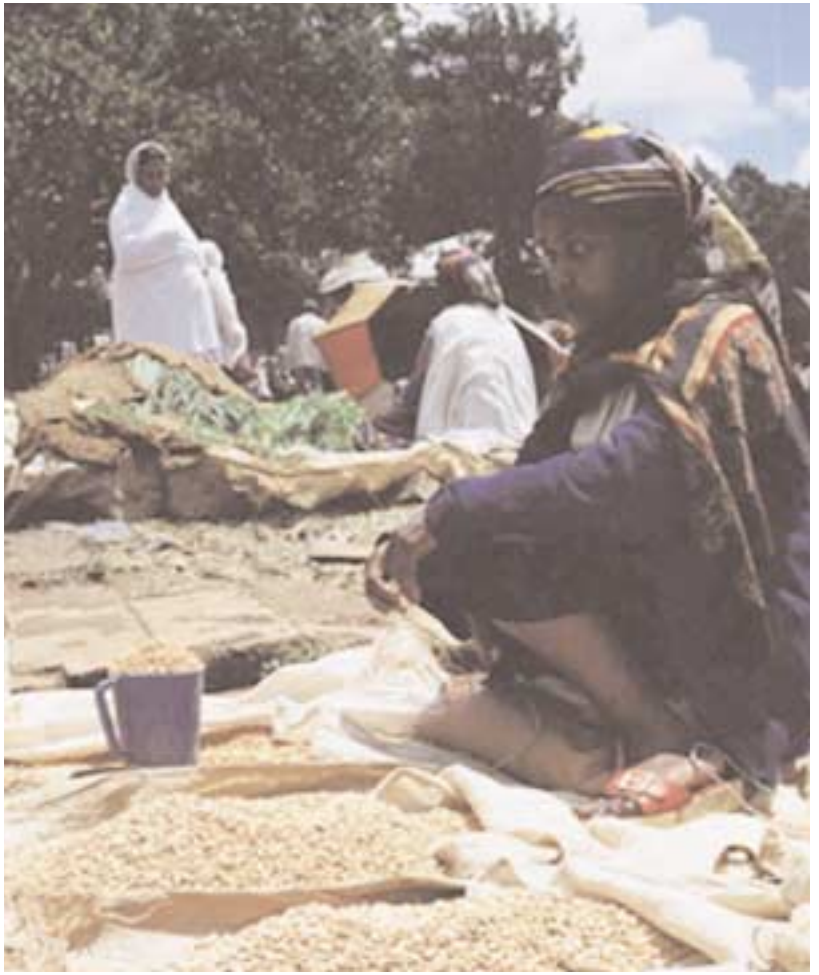
Sinkinesh's basic trade was sufficiently successful for her to pay back her loan. "The kebele evaluated my work and lent me another 1500 birr. In four months time this loan too will be repaid. Even though some bar owners will not let me onto their premises to sell I make 250 birr a month", she says.

"My income allows me, a divorced woman, to support my son and four of my relatives."

Her 13 year old son and her other young relatives serve as her guides when they are not in school. "I am not comfortable with this", says Sinkinesh. "It reduces the children's study time. I am illiterate myself but I think that education is very important."

Sinkinesh would like to receive training herself. "I would like to have mobility lessons so that I could be more independent and not have to rely on others", she says. "I am also thinking about changing my trade to something that does not require so much mobility. Not only that, but I want to improve my income. It is hard to change your life if you are living from hand to mouth."

Genet Ketema



Genet Ketema is also a peddler, selling wheat and other cereals, beans, soap, matches and other goods. She displays them on a piece of cloth at the side of the road in the areas she frequents, and sits beside them under an umbrella. Her husband is also a peddler and her daughter helps her too. Her trade gives her an income of 100-150 birr a month. "I am dissatisfied with the income I am earning now", says Genet, "because it is low compared with the effort I have to put in. On the other hand I am happy to be able to support my husband and four children without being dependent on others. I have not lost my dignity."

Genet is about 40 years old and has lived in Addis Ababa all her life. Her parents were devastated when she lost her sight when still a very young baby. "When I was 10 my brother took me to Wolaita Blind School, outside Addis. I was in primary school there. It was a delightful time for me. I had no worries and I was happy to get an education", recalls Genet.

When she completed her education Genet returned to Addis, receiving a monthly allowance of 60 birr from the Ethiopian National Association of the Blind. Her life became more difficult. Her mother died and her allowance was stopped because she failed her final school exams. "Everything was so confusing that I almost decided to commit suicide", Genet says. Instead she asked her aunt for help. Her aunt gave her 60 birr which she used to start in the lottery trade. "The lottery sales were good", says Genet, "and I was encouraged to know that I had saved myself from begging, like so many blind people have to."Genet's luck did not last long. Her customers seemed to think that they would have more luck if they bought their lottery tickets from someone else. "I also had problems with people taking the tickets and running away without paying", says Genet, "so I switched to selling packaged milk. That paid better but also had its problems. The police forbade me to sell milk because they said I did not have a sanitary place in which to store it. So I had to think again, and four years ago I began my present trade."

Genet buys her supplies from the market every 2-4 weeks and stores them in her bedroom. She repacks the goods to sell in small quantities. "Most of my many competitors have more capital and lower prices than I do", says Genet. "Price is very important to my customers. I do best at the end of each month, when people get paid." In an attempt to change her life Genet took her final school exams again and improved her grades. She then enrolled in Kotebe Teachers' College. "I found it hard to combine education with my trade so I dropped out of college after a year", says Genet. "Now I dream of owning a supermarket. If I could only get a better place to work, some vocational training and some working capital I could do a lot better. I could really improve my life."Genet is very optimistic. "People encourage me", she says. "Given the right kind of back-up and financial support blind women can help themselves and society. I know the future will be bright for me."

WOMEN WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS

Introduction

It is notable that the hearing impaired women whose stories appear below are mostly involved in creative activities - tailoring, hair plaiting, pottery and art work. As a group they are better supported and educated and their average income is higher than some others in this survey. Not surprisingly, the most successful among them are those who received the best education and training.

The women all report that they are well integrated into the wider community in Addis Ababa. Hiwot Beyene, the eldest and, as a tailor, the most successful of them, sees her achievements as unusual, while Fantu Tefese, a 21-year-old brewer, regards all people, hearing impaired or not, as equal. The women socialise with both deaf and hearing people. They see their problems as related to their situations, not their impairment.

All of the women became deaf in childhood. They were all taken by their families to holy water famed for its curative properties and some report that this had a beneficial effect, generally on their speech rather than their hearing impairments. All except Genet Walelgn,

a potter, also attended special schools or hospitals. Perhaps related to this, Genet Walelgn also appears to be the person in the most precarious position. By contrast, Tiruwork Hussen, an artist, is the only woman in the group to have lived in institutions for most of her life. She reports, however, that her living situation places restrictions on her economic activity.

Hiwot Beyene

Born in Addis Ababa about 50 years ago, Hiwot Beyene is well-known as a dressmaker, especially of bridal wear. Working from home, she also creates decorations for bridal cars, curtains, cushions and traditional and Western-style women's clothes. "I succeed because I satisfy my customers", says Hiwot. "I am respected because I love and respect my work."

Hiwot has been deaf since she was a baby. "My parents took me to the hospital for a minor complaint when I was eight months old. I came back with hearing and speech difficulties", says Hiwot. "My parents did their best to find a cure. They took me to hospitals and also to many places where the holy water was known to have miraculous healing power. The holy water helped me to make some sounds but I did not get a permanent cure."

Hiwot's parents enrolled her as one of the first students in the Mekanisa school for deaf children. She completed her primary education there. At the time there was no secondary education for deaf children so Hiwot went to a vocational school to learn sewing and dressmaking. She gained a diploma in curtain-making and sewing. However, because her primary education was through the medium of English Hiwot has difficulty in reading and writing Amharic.

After finishing her education Hiwot taught sewing. It did not satisfy her as a career. "I did not earn enough as a teacher", Hiwot says, "and I wanted to create clothes. So over 15 years ago I started making clothes, first for one person, then for another. Others followed. I diversified into home furnishings as well."Hiwot takes her work seriously. "My sewing machine is old but I keep it in good condition", she says. "If customers place a rush order I will work all day and up to 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning to deliver their clothes on time.

I always do my best to understand my customers' needs and to satisfy them diligently. That is how I get new customers."

Hiwot sees design and quality as the main strengths of her products. Her customers are mostly middle-income women aged between 20 and 70, some of whom are Ethiopians living abroad. "There are times when I have made five different items of clothing in different designs for the same customer", says Hiwot. "Some come as often as four times a year. Mostly my customers bring their own material. I charge 200 birr for tailoring only. The least I earn in a month is 700 birr. With this I can support my children and two other relatives."

Hiwot mostly works alone. She hires help when she is particularly busy, especially during the wedding season. Her son, one of her five children, used to help her with her designs, but he died recently.

When she is not working, Hiwot likes to decorate her house. She has been happily married for 28 years and has five children. Her retired husband and her son are artists and their work is also displayed in the house. "I don't go out much because I can't hear", says Hiwot. "However, I am actively involved in the women's idir in my neighbourhood.

I was one of the founding members of the women's section of the Ethiopian National Association of the Deaf."

Hiwot's income has enabled her to save money. She has also been able to send her children to college. One of her sons went to Russia and a daughter has been to America.

Hiwot sees her achievements as unusual, especially for a disabled woman of her age. "When I was young society had a very bad attitude to people with disabilities", she recalls. "There was a very low level of awareness of disability, much worse than today."

Hiwot would like to improve her working environment. Though well-lit and ventilated, her work space is small and she feels that her house is hard for customers to find. "I would like to rent premises in a more central location", Hiwot explains, "but places to rent are hard to find and are often expensive. These things make me dissatisfied but I am patient. I will move my business to a central location as soon as I can."

Fantu Tafese

At around 21 years old Fantu Tafese has responsibility for her two children and her two younger siblings. She has provided for them for the last four years with her income from home brewing. "After my father's death, six years ago, my mother supported the family by brewing and selling liquor at home", Fantu explains. "When she died two years later I was the oldest child at home, so I took over her responsibilities and her work. As I came to know and like it, I began to work hard."

The third child of five, Fantu was born in Addis Ababa. She was the only one to have a hearing impairment. Her parents took her to hospitals and also to be cured by holy water, but nothing worked. She went to school until grade 6 and left when she became pregnant. Fantu works from home, from early in the morning until 11pm. Customers come from 6pm onwards. "I earn about 240 birr a month from my trade", says Fantu. "I use this to buy food, clothes for the children and other necessities. My biggest problems are customers who go off without paying or who do not settle their debts. If possible, I would like to expand my business and run it more effectively." In her spare time Fantu meets her friends from the neighbourhood. "To me, people with hearing impairments and people who can hear are equal", she says. "We all work. My hearing impairment doesn't bother me at all. I have no communication problems."

Tiruwork Hussen

Born in Addis Ababa, Tiruwork Hussen has lived in institutions since her parents died when she was five years old. "I was born with both hearing and speech impairments. Holy water cured my speech impairment", she says. "I was the third of seven children. Because I am deaf, when my parents died I was taken to the Ziway children's home."

Tiruwork stayed at school there until grade 10. She was not happy. "I was the only deaf child in the school", she explains, "and the teachers did not take account of my special needs. I had a lot of communication problems. I had a hard time there. Later I transferred to Minilik II school, where there are classes for children with special needs. I still had communication difficulties, though, so I left."

Tiruwork began to paint and also to make figurines using casts. An Italian development aid agency accepted her as a trainee in painting and making figurines. Her course lasted for just over a year, and then she began her present business.

"I can make 25 figurines a day", says Tiruwork, "although I cannot sell so many. I live in a government institution which has many restrictions. Whenever there is a bazaar, I take my figurines and sell them. I have friends who shine shoes for a living. They help me by taking my products and displaying them where they work, by the side of the road. They tell me that students and foreigners buy my work."

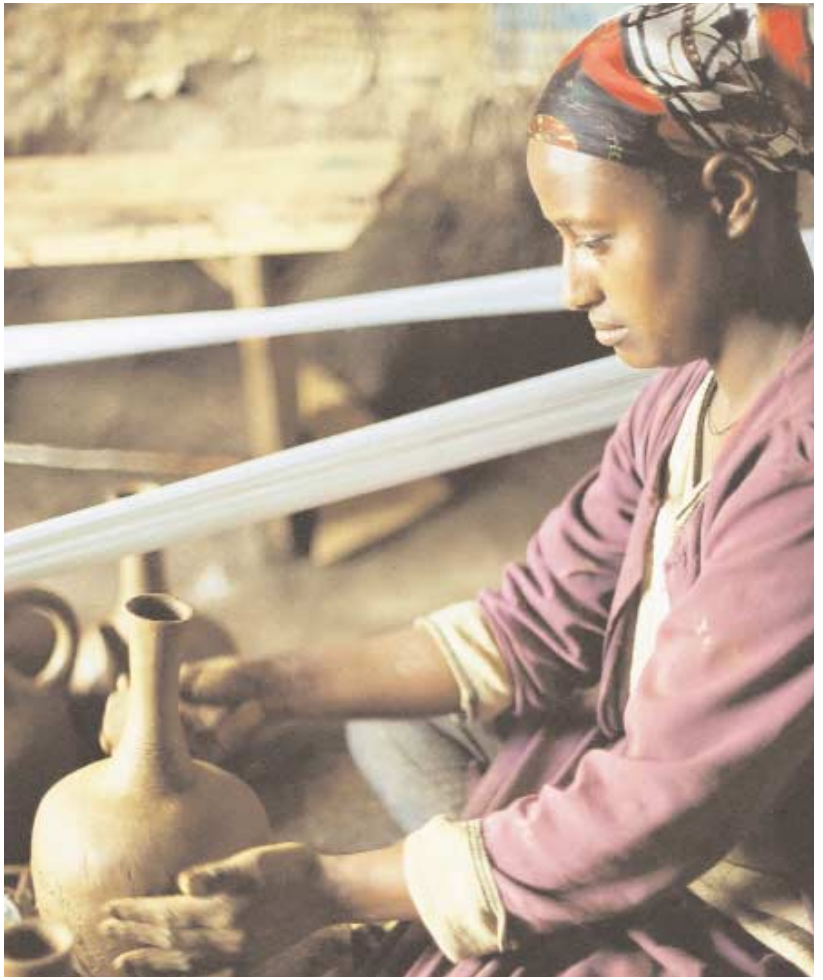
Tiruwork has no storage facilities where she lives, so she keeps her materials at a friend's house. "Sometimes I work there too", says Tiruwork.

"I work from 6am to 6pm, Monday to Saturday. I study painting in my spare time. I take religious lessons on Sundays. In the evenings I meet my friends and watch TV with them between 7 and 8 o'clock."

Tiruwork loves her work and wants to become an artist. "I am happy making figurines", she explains. "My inspiration comes from inside. Doing art work helps me to forget my worries. I earn about 300 birr a month and I have become self-sufficient. My work gives me the money I need to improve my skills, to buy clothes and raw materials. I do not need support from other people."

In 1999 Tiruwork joined the Ethiopian National Association of the Deaf and is treasurer of the women's section. "My only problem is communication", says Tiruwork. "In the future I hope to expand my activities, sell through a shop and improve my life."

Genet Walelgn



At 20, Genet Walelgn has assumed responsibility for supporting her parents and younger siblings. Her parents are unable to work. Her mother, who used to bake injera in other people's houses, broke her hand in a fall. Her father, a weaver, has a debilitating illness. Genet provides for the family by making coffeepots and selling them to retailers in the main market in Addis Ababa. "I have some problems when I sell my products", she explains. "I don't have a pitch of my own in the market, so I have to sell to retailers. They give me a small amount, and then sell the coffeepots for double the price. I would like to have a pitch of my own and to sell directly to customers."

Born in Addis Ababa, Genet has been deaf since she was three years old. Her mother says that Genet lost her hearing after a fall. "My eldest daughter was startled by a dog while she was carrying Genet", her mother explains. "They fell down together. Then Genet became deaf. I did nothing except take her to be cured by holy water. I was busy running from house to house baking injera, worrying about how I could feed my children. If I had taken Genet to the hospital, she might have been cured."

Genet started making coffeepots when her mother went into hospital to give birth. "I started because my mother could not work and my brothers and sisters were in school. Neighbours saw our plight and taught me how to make coffeepots", Genet explains. "After that I felt compelled to do it. I make ten pots a day. I start work at 6am and work until 5pm, five days a week. Shoamebrat, my younger sister, helps me sometimes.

Shoamebrat is also deaf. She gets up early, at 4am, and works until she goes to school. Then she works with me again after school."

Genet would also like to get an education but feels she cannot. She asks, "If I went to school, who would support the family?". Her older sister, a widow with two young children, works at the same trade as Genet. "She lives from hand to mouth, with barely enough to feed her children", says Genet.

"If it wasn't for my helpless situation I would go to school. Who dislikes learning? But with all these problems, I could not concentrate on my lessons. I would not be able to stop worrying."

Etaferahu Mamo

Etaferahu Mamo is doing well. She earns up to 800 birr a month from plaiting the hair of foreign and well-to-do customers. Some pay as much as 60 or 70 birr. Even in a slow month she can earn 300-500 birr. Her husband is working in a factory and they are saving up to build a house. She is active in her community and her neighbours like her very much.

Etaferahu still lives in the part of Addis Ababa in which she was born over 30 years ago. She traces the onset of her deafness to hitting her head in a fall when she was eight years old.

"At first my parents did not understand my problem", she recalls. "My mother picked up a stick to punish me for not responding when she called me. I told her that I could not hear. My parents took me to hospital and also to be cured by holy water. My eye had been slightly injured in the fall and that was cured, but my hearing impairment was irreversible."

At first Etaferahu went to an ordinary school and was educated with children who could hear. When Minilik II school opened classes for students with special needs she transferred there. She became pregnant and left after grade 8.

"I am the oldest child in my family, so I always felt a lot of responsibility", says Etaferahu. "When I was a child, there were a lot of people in my area who plaited hair for a living. I used to watch them. So when I left school I decided to try hair plaiting myself. I started by charging 50 cents or one birr, just to get experience."

After that Etaferahu worked for a beauty salon for three years, giving the salon owner half of her earnings. "During that time my father became seriously ill", she recalls. "I am proud that I was able to support my family at a crucial time when they had no other income. Then I moved to another salon, at a wage of 60 birr a month. Three years later I was earning 200 birr a month there. It still seemed little in comparison with the effort I was putting in, so I resigned.

The owner begged me to stay and put up my salary to 350 birr a month."

Etaferahu stayed in the job for 13 years, until a car accident made her re-evaluate her relationship with her employers. "Nobody from my workplace came to visit me", she says. "Despite the long hours I put in without overtime pay nobody bothered to remember me. I began to think about what would happen to my family if I died. I decided that I would be better off working for myself."

Now Etaferahu plaits hair at her customers' houses. "Customers call me and I go, even if it is at midnight. I work quickly and well, so I get tips", she says.

Etaferahu lives in a rented house near to her mother, brothers and sisters. Her income contributes to the family household and also helps to support her mother. She plans to take further training in hairdressing and then to open her own beauty salon after she and her husband build their house. "When I am not working I play with my children and do handicrafts", Etaferahu says. "I am too busy to go to the National Association of the Deaf. But I like deaf people and I would like to teach them how to plait hair".

"I never think about my hearing impairment", Etaferahu adds. "I live just like everybody else. I lip read and I can speak. People write down what I cannot understand. Thank God I have no other problems."

WOMEN WITH MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS

Introduction

The women with mobility disabilities whose stories appear below differ significantly as a group from the others included in this study. Ranging in age from 19 to 29, none of them is married. All have been in education at some stage, most to at least secondary level - no mean feat in a country in which female literacy was reckoned to be just over 25% in 1995.

The women with mobility disabilities appear to enjoy good support from their families and communities. In addition, their level of start-up capital, ranging from 500 to 2600 birr, was significantly higher than that of other groups. Several of the group had access to loans and/or assistive devices from NGOs or churches, representing valuable support from outside the family. Their relatively secure situations in occupations requiring skill, contacts and creativity mean that their income, on average, is higher than that of any of the other groups.

All the women regard their businesses as having given them the opportunity for increased social contact, improving their status in the community and offering them the chance to be self-sufficient. While their impairments restrict some of their activities and require them to seek assistance for tasks that non-disabled people would be able to do without help, they tend to feel that their disabilities have not put them at a disadvantage in business. By contrast, they often cite the encouragement they have been given by customers and suppliers alike.

Ayelu Basha Bedasa

Not yet 20 years old, Ayelu Basha Bedasa runs her own weaving business, employing four male weavers. Her achievement is impressive, given her physical impairment, her lack of education and the fact that in Ethiopia weaving is traditionally considered to be men's work.

Ayelu was born in a rural area called Selale, about 115km from Addis. When she became disabled in early childhood as the result of a fall, her childless aunt fostered her and took her to Addis Ababa. Her foster parents did not send her to school, so when she grew up Ayelu became a maidservant, working in four different houses over six years and earning between 25 and 50 birr a month.

A chance meeting with some community-based rehabilitation workers, employed by the Cheshire Foundation, changed her life. "Without thinking much about it, I registered as a disabled person", says Ayelu. "Then, later, I was included in a one year vocational training programme, which aims to help people with disabilities to start income-generating activities."

"In Ethiopia", says Ayelu, "most women would not dare to think about weaving, let alone do it, because it is men's work. On top of that, most weavers earn enough for only a hand-to-mouth existence. But what other training could I take? I was illiterate at that time. I felt that of all the types of vocational training available to me then, weaving would be the easiest. I knew that other people could make a living from it. I never imagined that weaving could be profitable, could make me so proud and self-sufficient. And being self-reliant makes me happy. It gives me peace." While she was training Ayelu spun cotton and sometimes worked as a day labourer as a way of supplementing the 50 birr a month paid to her by the Cheshire Foundation. She joined a local saving scheme and put away 3 birr a week, so that by the end of the training programme Ayelu had 300 birr in savings. She took out a loan of a further 200 birr from the Cheshire Foundation and started her weaving business. "I repaid the loan and have been self-sufficient for two and a half years now", says Ayelu proudly.

Ayelu and the four untrained male weavers who work for her make checked shawls in three colourways and patterns, some of which were suggested by her customers. They work small looms in a cramped room that Ayelu rents. The room is dark and poorly ventilated but Ayelu is clear that this does not affect the quality of her work. Despite competition from "lots of men" Ayelu sells to three wholesalers in the main market in Addis every Wednesday, buying a week's supplies of raw materials at the same time. She cannot buy more as she has nowhere to store her supplies.

Neighbours also sometimes come to buy from Ayelu, especially at holiday times in September, January and April. Comparing her shawls with her competitors' products, Ayelu says, "I focus on quality and try to be honest."

Ayelu recently went to a trade fair for the first time and was thrilled by what she saw. "No-one here has products like mine", she says. "I could have my products in here with the others." At present production is limited to about 150 shawls a week so Ayelu plans to get another loan to expand her business and to help her to hire more weavers, to be paid on piece rate.

Ayelu sends most of her income to her family in Selale, supporting her parents and six younger brothers and sisters. She also contributes financially to her relatives in Addis. She buys clothes twice a year and is putting herself through night school, having so far reached third grade. "I see no need for any other support", she says.

Shamsiya Hiyar

Shamsiya Hiyar was born 29 years ago, the sixth child of a peasant family living about 100 km from Addis Ababa. Her physical disability is the result of an accident she sustained when she was eight years old.

When traditional massage in her village failed to cure her, Shamsiya's family took her to Addis Ababa in search of modern medical treatment. She received treatment over five years at a Cheshire Home, and also began her education there. "When the treatment was finished they told me to go back to my parents", Shamsiya recalls, "but I did not go back to my village. Instead I stayed with my sister in Addis and continued my education. That winter I went home to visit my family. It was decided that I should stay there. I stayed a year but I could not go to school because it was a long way from my parents' house. So after that I returned to Addis and went back to school."

Shamsiya did very well at school, always being one of the top three students in her class. Her outstanding academic record made her popular with both teachers and pupils. So she was devastated when she did poorly in her final examinations. "I stayed at home for three years", she says.

Eventually Shamsiya got a job with a self-help group of people with disabilities. At first she was paid 60 birr a month. Then the group ran out of money and she was expected to work as a volunteer. Recalling those days Shamsiya says, "I always wonder at the fact that I used to walk 10km a day on my elbow crutches as I could not afford transport."

Shamsiya then spent a year working with another person with a disability in his small leather works. "He paid me 100 birr a month", she says. "It was hardly enough to cover my transport costs. Then an Ethiopian NGO called the Voluntary Council for the Handicapped started a vocational training and rehabilitation programme in my area. I was fed up with my job and I wanted to get some training in working leather, so I joined a one-year course."

At the end of the course the NGO gave her 600 birr towards starting her own business. She supplemented this with a loan of 1000 birr from her local credit union and also borrowed money from relatives. With a total capital of 2500 birr she opened a small workshop in her sister's house two years ago.

At present Shamsiya earns around 600 birr a month from her business. With the assistance of two other people with disabilities she makes up to 10 dozen coin purses a month. "This is my best selling line", she says. "We also make 5 dozen wallets, the same number of pencil cases, 3 dozen belts, 2 dozen small handbags and 18 hats a month. I make some big handbags, although they do not sell. Sometimes we make leather jackets."

Shamsiya sells her products to retailers in the main market in Addis and also sells through souvenir shops and a women's handicraft centre. "I would like to have a permanent pitch myself in the market", she says. "I think my end consumers are people aged 25-35, both men and women. Sometimes people from my neighbourhood come to the house to buy belts, especially at holiday times."

Competition is tough. "I have at least four competitors, some with more experience and lower prices than I have", Shamsiya confides. "My quality and designs are very similar to theirs. I change my designs at my customers' suggestion. I sell a lot on credit and about half of my customers don't pay. Recently I went to a trade fair for the first time and I learnt a lot. I now know how important it is to promote my products. I also realize that I must make better quality products."

Working conditions are another problem. "Because I have very little storage space I have to buy raw materials in small quantities, sometimes twice a week", Shamsiya explains. "I store some things on a shelf in the workshop. The leather is kept in a corner. Things like zips and finished products are stored in plastic bags which hang on the wall." The workshop itself measures only 3m by 1.5m. Light enters from a small window onto a courtyard where Shamsiya's sister keeps her cows. "I want to get a better place to work", say Shamsiya. "I would also like better tools. At the moment I have a second-hand sewing machine, stamping tools, hammers, cutters, punchers and so on."

Despite these problems Shamsiya is proud of her business and her achievements. "Of course, in the short time that I have been running my business I cannot say that I have achieved all my objectives", she says.

"On the other hand what I am earning at present enables me to support my parents and two of the children orphaned when my brother died. My culture says I must help my family as much as possible and I am delighted to do so. I also contribute to my sister's household, as I live with her. I pay my male assistant 150 birr a month, as he does the sewing. My female assistant earns 120 birr a month."

Overall Shamsiya finds her work satisfying. "Our work is tough", she admits, "but when I see the finished products I am satisfied by their artistry. Working leather has become my career. I love the trade and I have a clear vision of what I want to achieve in the future. Among other goals I would like to provide employment for other people with disabilities. I know that I have to work harder if I am to attain my objectives."

Emebet Deribe Abebe

Emebet Deribe Abebe works for 12 hours each day, running a café in her local community recreation centre. She manages the accounts as well as supervising the work of two assistants. Her business only just breaks even but she enjoys it very much. "Working gives me a lot of satisfaction", Emebet says, "and I like being busy. I am much more active socially now than I used to be."

Born in Addis Ababa 29 years ago, Emebet contracted polio when she was three. She uses a wheelchair and has little or no use of one hand. After she completed high school in 1990 Emebet stayed at home for three years. "I had no idea what I could do next", she recalls. "Then the Daughters of Charity, an NGO, started to work in my area. I registered with them as a person with a disability and they offered me a two-year training programme in working leather."

At the end of the course Emebet went into business with three other graduates of the programme. "We made and repaired shoes, and also made small goods like belts, keyrings and coin purses", Emebet says. "For a year we worked out of a converted container on the premises of the NGO but then we had to leave. Our original idea was to use our income to strengthen and expand the business, but when we moved out we could hardly make enough money to cover our rent. We struggled on for another year before disbanding."

Undaunted, Emebet borrowed 1000 birr and set up her café. "The recreation centre had a lot of the furniture and fittings I needed for the café", she explains. "I brought the rest of what I needed from home." The business is barely profitable, however. Two-thirds of Emebet's average monthly income of 450 birr goes on rent, and most of the rest is taken up by the wages of her assistants.

"I am lucky that my family is self-sufficient", says Emebet. "There are a lot of drawbacks to my business. The location is not ideal so I do not have enough customers. I can't go to buy supplies myself and this brings its own problems. I had hoped it would be more profitable than this."

Emebet thinks that things would improve if she had more capital. "I use traditional ways of recording my income and expenditure", she says. "I think training in doing accounts would be useful if I am to make a success of this business. But to make it work properly I will need to move to a better location."

Roza Gesesse

One of three disabled children in a family of five, 23-year-old Roza Gesesse runs a commodity shop from at her parents' house in a suburb of Addis Ababa. Roza has been disabled by rheumatoid arthritis since she was five years old. All the children in the family were educated. "I completed secondary school but was not able to go to college", Roza says. "Lack of transport prevented me from doing vocational training so I sat at home idle for four years. My mother was very worried about me."

Her mother, Genet G/hana, agrees. "Roza is my eldest child," she says. "I thought, if her future is gloomy, what will happen to my other disabled children, Robel and Betelihem? They were at school at the time. Now my son Robel is in his first year at college."

One of the churches that Roza attends became concerned about her situation. "They gave me wood worth 70 birr to help me to build a house beside my parents' house", she says. "My mother raised a loan of 2000 birr from relatives. We built the house and rented it out for a year. We used the rent to finish fitting it out as a commodity shop and it opened six months ago."

Genet plays an important role in Roza's business. "I run the shop in the mornings, until it gets warm", she says. "Roza is susceptible to the cold because of her disability. I also go to get about 200 birr worth of stock for the shop every Saturday. But customers prefer to be served by Roza. They use her nickname and ask, 'Where is Mimi? Where is Mimi?' if she is not there."

With her average monthly income of 800 birr, Roza has reduced her liability by half. "I have only 1000 birr outstanding on my loan", she says. "My income pays for my clothes, transport and other expenses. I am also able to provide my sister with some things that she needs. I made an arrangement with my mother, too, to save 10 birr a day."

Generating her own income is not the only advantage to running her business. "My body is more supple since I started working in the shop", Roza reports.

"Stretching to get items down off the shelves and give them to customers has made me feel fitter than I used to. Working in the shop has also helped me to develop good relationships with people. I am happy."

Roza acknowledges the support her mother gives her. "I do not know what I would do if she was not around", Roza says. She is determined to be independent, however.

"I have to learn this thing gradually", she asserts, "if I am to realise my plan to expand the business, become fully self-sufficient and support my family."

Amakelech Goshu Degifu

Amakelech Goshu Degifu makes her living by working as an ecclesiastical outfitter, using a leased sewing machine in a rented premises. A religious woman of 20, she works all the time unless she is attending church services. "I like my work", Amakelech says, "and I like not having a nagging boss!"

Amakelech is the youngest child of six. "My parents told me that I was disabled in a fall", she says. "My father died when I was in grade 8 at school. Our family circumstances deteriorated badly. My mother is a housewife with no income. My brothers worked day and night to support the family but they could not cover my school expenses, so I had to leave."

Amakelech was unemployed for a few years before getting the opportunity to do a one-year course in tailoring, run by the Cheshire Foundation. "When the course ended I went to work with another tailor", says Amakelech. "I thought I would learn more that way, but I did not. It was a step forward but I wasn't happy. Instead I borrowed 2600 birr from the Cheshire Foundation and set up my own business."

Because her family's house was not suitable Amakelech rented a small premises at 100 birr a month. She then leased a sewing machine for a further 25 birr a month and began making priestly vestments and robes, monks' habits and turbans. "I also make ordinary clothes if my customers ask me to", Amakelech says. "I make garments to the highest quality that I can. Above all I work to meet my customers' deadlines and to respect their needs. That is what satisfies my customers and why I am getting more every day." Being busy causes some problems for Amakelech, however. "My feet get very tired if I work for a long time without a break in order to meet my delivery dates", she says. "As well as that, I cannot keep large quantities of stock, so if I get a new order while I am working on another one I have to stop work to go out and buy more material. If I had a better cash flow I would not have to do

Amakelech uses her 225 birr monthly income to cover her living expenses, even though she is single and living in the family home. She is paying off her loan and now owes only 1000 birr. "My next plan is to pay off my loan in full", Amakelech says. "Then I will buy my own sewing machine. My family has a very low standard of living and a lot of problems. My greatest wish is to use my business to be able to help them."

WOMEN WHO HAVE HAD LEPROSY

Introduction

Compared with the other groups in this study, the women who have had leprosy are the poorest and most troubled. Mostly working in unskilled occupations, they report that they live from hand to mouth. In a way, however, because of the particular circumstances of their lives, comparisons between women affected by leprosy and women with other impairments have little meaning. The women who have had leprosy are quick to point out that, however low their income, it is preferable to earn their living from participating in the economy than from begging. As Yeshareg Meshesha, a petty trader, puts it, "ten birr you earn from a dignified activity is better than 100 birr you get from begging".

Several of the women affected by leprosy have had to beg for a living at some stage in their lives. All have been deeply affected by the strong stigma still attaching to leprosy in Ethiopia, despite the availability of effective multi-drug treatment. Ironically, the stigma is the very reason why the families of some of the women delayed seeking the modern medical treatment that prevents the disabilities and disfigurement cited in the prejudice against people who have had leprosy.

Although the women affected by leprosy range in age from 23 to around 60, their experiences are very similar. The belief that leprosy is hereditary, or that it is caused by possession by malevolent spirits, is still widely held in the rural and poorer parts of Ethiopia.

Their families all tried traditional cures, including providing special foods and visiting wizards, before accessing modern medicine.

Their experience of leprosy led the women, several of whom are from rural backgrounds and had married at a very young age, into unwanted divorce, abandonment by friends and community, lives of secrecy and eventually being compelled to leave their home districts. Even when in contact with educated people, the women have not been able to relax.

Ageritu Ayalew, who now bakes injera for a living, recalls the restrictions placed on her by the nurse who employed her as a nanny when she first went to Addis Ababa.

None of the women affected by leprosy has had any vocational training, several had little education and only one obtained start-up capital from a source other than her savings. Self-reliance is the chief characteristic of this group of women. For them, working in their own micro-enterprise is a symbol of survival and self- belief, the arbiter of a life better than the one they might have had. As shop-keeper Tiruwork Mengistu, says, "life is a school".

Ageritu Ayalew

A basket covered with crochet stands outside the door of Ageritu Ayalew's house, showing that she is a baker of injera. Despite competition that she describes as "fierce" Ageritu has made a success of her business and has diversified into selling kindling and charcoal. "I am very happy in my work and my life", she says.

Now 32 years of age, Ageritu is a childless widow. She received a basic education during the military regime. "I can read perfectly but I lack the confidence to write", she says. "I married very young and left my home village in Gonder in the north of Ethiopia when I was 13. Lesions had appeared on my face. It was leprosy. My husband's parents call leprosy 'bad body'. This means that the person with leprosy will become deformed or disabled. My husband's relatives gathered and divorced us."

After a year Ageritu went to Addis Ababa to seek treatment at the All-Africa Research and Training Centre (ALERT) Hospital. "I went home then", Ageritu recalls. "I stayed there for three years. I could not take any of the medicine I had been prescribed because I could not get it in a rural pharmacy. Finally I decided to return to Addis Ababa so that I could get the medicine from the ALERT Hospital."

A person who knew Ageritu from Gonder found her a job as nanny to the twin children of a nurse at the ging me", says Ageritu. "She told me not to touch the children with my bare hands and never to put them on my shoulders or hold them close to my neck. I always did what I was told but she hurt my feelings. I cried all the time."

As well as looking after the children Ageritu was expected to wash clothes. "It was this that made me leave the job in the end", she says. "I felt a lot of pain in my hands when they were in cold water for a long time. I think this was due to nerve damage caused by the disease."

Ageritu then got a temporary job as a day labourer, carrying stone. "At that time I had no alternative", she recalls. "I hate begging." When the job ended Ageritu asked a friend who sold cereals for a quintal of teff and another of wheat on credit and started her current trade.

At first business was very good. "There were very few bakers of injera then", Ageritu explains. "Now there are many. Thank God I still have many customers. They are loyal because they recognise the quality of my products. Most bakers of injera in this area collect wood and plastic from the garbage dump to use as fuel. I buy wood for fuel from the market, so my injera is the best."

Ageritu saves at least 10 birr a week in her local credit union. She recently used her savings to buy a heifer.

hospital. Ageritu was unhappy there, however. "Despite the fact that I was taking medicine the lady kept nag "I "I will breed the heifer and sell her milk", says Ageritu. "I have joined the local 'grass association' set up by my neighbours who also keep cows for milk. I put in 50 birr a month. We use the money to buy fodder and other necessities. I am also continuing to sell kindling and charcoal at my door and, twice a week, in my local market."

Ageritu's income enables her to support herself and also her niece and two nephews, all under 11, the children of her deceased brother. She uses her 39.50 birr widow's pension to pay her burial society dues.

Leprosy damaged Ageritu's toes and lips and also her sensitivity to heat and touch. "Because of this I exercise extreme caution in all situations which might be dangerous for me", she says. "For example, I bought a very good quality oven for baking injera.

It is economical with fuel and means that my hands and face are unlikely to get burned. I am also very attentive to my personal hygiene. I have my pride."

Tiruwork Mengistu

Tiruwork Mengistu was seven years old and living with her childless aunt when she contracted leprosy in 1986. Her life was very hard. "I had to get up at dead of night and grind grain until dawn", Tiruwork remembers. "Then I looked after my aunt's cattle from morning to sunset. One day, after grinding grain as usual, I took the cattle to graze. I was found fast asleep in the grass, exhausted by the hard work and lack of sleep.

"After that day the skin on my left foot started to crack. From the very beginning my parents knew that it was leprosy. My father believed that I contracted the disease by being possessed by a malevolent spirit while I slept on the grass. As a result he quarreled with my aunt and she threw me out of my house."

Tiruwork feels that her parents "did their level best" to find a cure for her leprosy. "First they took me to kalichas, wizards and holy water. Then they took me to the nearest health centre, where I was given medicine", Tiruwork says.

Because of the attitude to leprosy in her area (Arsi, about 100km from Addis Ababa), Tiruwork had to take her medicine secretly. "If people knew about my leprosy my family could have been excluded completely from the community", she explains. "My younger siblings might be prevented from marrying. Leprosy is seen as horrifying in my area. The social stigma against people with leprosy is very strong. My family had to keep my condition secret."

The family's resolve to find a cure did not stop, however. "My uncle was not happy with my treatment", Tiruwork says. "He also had had leprosy. He was afraid that I might have a permanent disability if I did not get adequate treatment in good time. He took me to Addis Tesfa Hiwot where he was living. There is a better health centre for people with leprosy in Addis Hiwot. A lot of people affected by leprosy live nearby. I was examined at the clinic and was treated with several drugs."

Despite living in Addis Hiwot Tiruwork continued to keep her leprosy secret. "I hate to be called 'leper'", she explains. "It was only when I joined the National Association of Ex-Leprosy Patients that people realized that I had had leprosy."

Tiruwork lived with her uncle in Addis Hiwot and completed grade 8 in school. She finished her secondary education in Addis Ababa, living with another aunt. "When I left school I applied for lots of jobs but I was unlucky", says Tiruwork. "In the end my aunt's husband gave me 70 birr. I built a temporary shelter in my aunt's compound, by the side of the street, and began selling goods there. I sold things like sweets, spices, cooking oil and exercise books." Her business went well, allowing Tiruwork to save some money. "Then I quarreled with my aunt", Tiruwork continues. "I was taken in by a woman from my home village. I used my savings to build a two-room house in her compound. I live in one room and run my shop from the other."

Business has continued to go well for Tiruwork. "I sell at a low margin", she explains, "and I offer credit to customers. This is sometimes a problem. I once lost 375 birr due to a bad debt. I learnt to limit the amount of credit that I offer to customers. I am able now to deposit 30 birr a week in my local credit union. My landlady's maidservant helps me so I sometimes buy her shoes or clothes, too." Tiruwork believes that building a business involves offering "good hospitality" to customers. "People like a trader who deals with them properly and tells them the truth", she says. "I ask my suppliers about how to handle customers. They give me good advice. They also advise me on how to maximize my profits." "Looking back", Tiruwork concludes, "I can see a lot of changes in my life over the past three years. Like they say, life is a school!"

Yeshareg Meshesha

Now a mother of four children, Yeshareg Meshesha contracted leprosy when she was at primary school in Jimma in the west of Ethiopia. "Lesions appeared on my ears and my feet swelled", she says. "This happened just after a stalk of sorghum had gone into my leg, so I thought that was the cause of the swelling. When it didn't get better my parents took me to a wizard's house - a wukabi-bet - for about a year."

Eventually Yeshareg's parents took her to the Agaro Health Centre, where she was diagnosed with leprosy. "My mother was very shocked", Yeshareg recalls. "She had leprosy a long time ago. She began to think that the disease was hereditary."

Life became very difficult in the rural area in which Yeshareg lived. "People began to hate me. Even my schoolfriends began to abandon me", she says. "I was having good medical treatment and taking medicine regularly but it appeared to make no difference.

The people who might have married me were terrified. In the end the stigma forced me to leave my home village and come to Addis Ababa."

Once in Addis Yeshareg went to live in Zenebework, a district that is home to a large community of people who have had leprosy. She went to ALERT Hospital for more treatment.

en my treatment was over I had to beg for alms for some time", Yeshareg says. "Then I began to earn my living by gathering and selling wood for fuel. I saved some money and went to visit my mother. When she found out about my life she borrowed some money and gave it to me." Yeshareg decided to start trading. On the way back to Addis Ababa she bought some buckthorn, and on her return she began to sell buckthorn, charcoal, coffee and berbere. "My trade enabled me to save 20 birr a month in my local credit union", Yeshareg says. "When I had saved 700 birr I went to Diredawa, near the border with Djibouti, and bought some second-hand clothes. I am in this trade to this day."

Although she says that she earns 300 birr a month from trading in second-hand clothes, Yeshareg is not happy with her work. "It is a tough job", she says. "I have to travel by train by day and by night. As dealing in second-hand clothes is illegal, I always run the risk of losing my investment." Yeshareg sees little alternative to her trade, however. "My husband is blind", she says. "He hated being unemployed and now he begs. I know how difficult begging is. I do not want him to do it. I am doing my best to dissuade him from begging." Yeshareg needs to earn more to support her family if her husband is to stop begging. "Eventually I would like to open a shop or a café", she says. "In my view ten birr you earn from a dignified activity is better than 100 birr you get from begging."

Zewditu Belay

Now around 60, Zewditu Belay contracted leprosy when she was six years old. "My parents tried to find a cure using holy water and traditional medicine", she says. "Because I did not get modern medical treatment in time I lost my fingers and toes. My nose is also affected."

Zewditu cannot read or write as contracting leprosy as a child prevented her from attending school. "I am not married because my disability meant that I never thought about marriage", she adds. When Zewditu came to Addis Ababa for medical treatment she knew no-one who could support her. "I came to Addis with nothing except a few clothes and the money left over from my fare", she recalls. "When my money was gone I was compelled to beg for alms. In my view begging is the most disgusting and difficult thing to do but I had no alternative."

Like many people who have had leprosy Zewditu went to live in the Zenebework district of Addis. "I found it too far to go from there into the centre of the city to beg", she says, "so I started to look for alternatives. At first I tried to bake and sell injera but I found it unsuited to my disability. Instead I started selling berbere and spices. So far I find I am able to lead a better life by doing this trade." Zewditu's work enables her to support five dependents. She has built her own house and is saving money in her local credit union. It is not easy, however. "The work is tough", she says. "On Wednesdays and Saturdays I sit in the sun in the small open-air market in my neighbourhood from morning to sunset. When the wind blows I get covered in dust and it hurts my eyes. I need a lot of patience but the work is profitable. I have never tried any other sort of job," Zewditu concludes. "It looks like I will never be able to earn my living by doing something else. If God helps me, I will expand my trade".

Zemzem Shifa

"In 1967 a white thing appeared on my hand", says Zemzem Shifa. "I was 15 years old and had been married for five years. My parents knew it was leprosy. They divorced me from my husband, saying that I would get better treatment if I was with them. Although it was difficult to tell what they were thinking, my husband and his family had not said anything against me."

In line with the beliefs of the area in which she was living, for eight months Zemzem was fed chicken with butter that had been kept for a long time, along with a mixture of honey and ginger. "Then my brother, who was living in Addis Ababa, found out about ALERT Hospital", says Zemzem. "He summoned me to Addis. I went and was cured in a month, although I lost all my fingers."

Zemzem's family went to Addis every month for two years to support her and to give her food. "I was very moved by their effort", says Zemzem. "Although I had no education I decided to earn my own living. I saved money from the pocket money that they gave me. I bought 25kg of peas and the same of lentils, along with berbere and shuro and I started trading."

When Zemzem met her second husband they started trading together. "We opened a small shop. With our profits we built a house in our compound and opened it as a tearoom."

Their situation deteriorated in the early 1980s when Zemzem's husband became ill. He has been confined to bed ever since. "It was devastating. Then all my money was used up in providing food for my family in the famine of 1985. I raised 1000 birr by mortgaging the house I had built behind my own house in the compound and with that I restarted the tearoom."

Life was still very difficult. "My income enabled us to live only from hand to mouth", Zemzem recalls. "I was not able to pay the mortgage and I lost the house. Eventually I took a loan of 900 birr from the revolving fund operated by the National Association of Ex-Leprosy Patients. Now my trade has improved and I have repaid the loan."

Zemzem buys the bread that she sells in the tearoom but makes the tea and the pastries herself. "Some potential customers are alarmed when they see my hands", she says. "They ask, 'Isn't there anybody else?'. That makes me angry, so I say, 'You will be surprised to learn that I am the one who baked the pastries'. Then they leave! On the other hand, there are other people who encourage me. They see how much effort I am putting into earning my own living despite my disability and they drink two cups of tea, rather than one!"

Zemzem's average monthly income from her business is 200 birr. With this she supports not only herself and her husband but also her deceased brother's three children and her assistant, a boy of about 12 or 13 who she brought to Addis from the countryside. She is not satisfied with her life, however. "I need money", says Zemzem. "People do not come to my tearoom because it is in bad condition. It is small and dark and not very inviting. I do not have the money to improve it." Conversely, Zemzem considers this to be her only problem. "I am not interested in training", she says. "My only problem is money. I live my life thanking Allah for giving me strength and health."

MOTHERS OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Introduction

The mothers of children with learning disabilities whose stories appear below live circumscribed lives. The lack of services for children with learning disabilities means that most of the women work from home, so that they can be around when their children need their help, and this limits their economic potential. Only Mare Zewde Ashgari, the youngest of whose three learning disabled sons is 13, goes outside her home to work as a trader. Two of her sons go with her.

The women have all had contact with support organisations and NGOs involved in community-based rehabilitation, and most have found this to be very useful, both for themselves and for their children. All found their children's diagnoses hard to accept and have tried traditional as well as modern medicine and support services. Assisting their children and securing services and medicine for them takes up a lot of their time and energy.

Perhaps for this reason most of these women work

simply to keep alive. By contrast with the other groups in this study, they mostly do not speak of job satisfaction or self-reliance. Duty and endurance are evident in their stories. "At the moment my life is just about eating, sleeping and baking injera", says Mame Alemu, and in her sentiment she could be speaking for any of them. The mothers remain optimistic that a higher income would enable them to access better services - and, ultimately, a cure - for their children, and they work for that.

Mame Alemu

Mame Alemu is used to dealing with disability. Now in her late thirties, Mame was born in the Amhara region of Ethiopia, north of Addis Ababa. She learnt to read and write at primary school before marrying at 15 years of age. "After five years of marriage I began to suffer from migraine and anxiety attacks", Mame says. "I came to stay with my sister in Addis Ababa, hoping to get medical treatment. But the treatment I got at the hospital did not cure me so I decided to try tabal (holy water)."

After nine years of using the holy water Mame saw some improvement in her condition. By this time she had given birth to her only daughter, Askale Kidane, and sent her to live with her aunt. Askale was a healthy child until about five years ago, when she was nine years old. During her first term in grade 4 her teachers told her family that they had observed some worrying symptoms. "They said her behaviour had changed and that she became dizzy", says Mame. "Later her body stiffened and she became restless, her appetite increased and she started to cry a lot.

We took her to Kusquam Monastery, a place renowned for the curative powers of its holy water. Askale stayed there for seven months but with only minor improvements."

"I had to accept that it was impossible to change Askale's situation", Mame says. "When Askale is sick she will sleep for more than a month without moving", she explains. "Eventually I have to feed her liquid from a spoon until she recovers. She needs constant care. I could not leave this responsibility to her aunt, so Askale came to live with me."

Mame's own situation was changing. "After many years of lonely life", she says, "I married an ex-soldier. Marrying again gave me strength. Here was someone else who could help me to find a solution to my daughter's problem. Together we could give Askale the care she deserves."

Unfortunately, as an ex-soldier Mame's husband had an income of only 80 birr a month. At the time Mame was working as a cook in a restaurant. "In order to get the extra income we needed I began to bake and sell injera", she says. "It was a successful move. Not long afterwards a support organisation for people with learning disabilities helped us to get Askale examined at a hospital. The doctors diagnosed epilepsy. Now our problem is that the medicine they prescribed for her is not available in Addis Ababa. Even if it was available, it would be too expensive."

Despite her many responsibilities, her husband's low income and her daughter's health difficulties Mame's injera business is a success. "I charge 70 cents per injera, which is 10 cents more than other people charge", says Mame. "I can do this because I sell from my house while other people sell in the market. Also, people do not like injera to taste bitter. Mine is a higher quality product that tastes good. I sell up to 150 every day, mostly to single men who live in my neighbourhood. I also cater for funerals, sometimes as often as four times a month. I used to have a sign at my door to show that I had injera for sale, but I no longer need to do that. My success and my strength come from the support and encouragement of my neighbours and customers."

Mame buys 100kg of teff at a time from her local mill and stores it in her one-room house. "I do the first process of making injera in plastic containers which stand on the floor of my house", Mame explains. "Two of my sisters help me. We bake the injera on a wood-burning stove in the kitchen I share with my neighbour. We wash all our pots after use and keep everything clean."

"Making injera is back-breaking work", Mame continues. "I do not like baking injera every day as it takes a lot of energy. I am getting old." On the other hand, Mame's income enables her to support her entire family, including her brother, her mother and her three sisters as well as her husband and child. "I save money in my local credit union", she says, "but I do not use credit. I think it is bad to have credit. I think, 'What would happen if I died?'. I spend about 40% of my income on food for us all. We eat our own injera!"

Mame's business is constrained by several factors, including her inadequate kitchen arrangements. In addition the stove is inefficient and uses a lot of fuel. But Mame has dreams and plans. "I have a bed, a few chairs and a TV. I would like to expand my trade and then open a commodity shop or a café", she says. "I would like to buy a car. Then I would bring butter from where my mother lives. I would like to have more money and people to work for me."

"At the moment my life is just about eating, sleeping and baking injera", Mame says. "I live from hand to mouth. I want to do more with my life. My main expenditure is on my daughter's health. I do not know exactly how much I spend. I just know that it is a lot. If I had more money I could find out about my daughter's real problem and make sure that she gets the very best medical care."

Mare Zewde Ashgari

Originally from Gonder, in the north of Ethiopia, Mare Zewde Ashgari went to live in Addis Ababa when her husband abandoned her. At that time the mother of two sons with learning disabilities, Mare hoped to find medical treatment for them in the capital.

Now around 40 years old, Mare was married at 16. She remembers vividly the birth of her first son. "I was alone in the house without any idea that I was about to give birth", she recalls. "All of a sudden the labour began. As the child emerged I fainted and fell down. My husband came in from outside. He could not believe his eyes and summoned the neighbours. If the traditional midwife had not intervened the baby and I both could have died."

When Mare recovered she noticed a swelling on her son's body. "The local women told me that I had a fat baby and to stop worrying", she says. "I took him to a health centre but they said that they did not treat children less than a day old. So a few days later I took him back. They said he was healthy but he was not."

Three years later Mare had her second son, Tensai Alemeneh. This time her labour began while she was in the toilet. "I fell again, and this time it was worse as I had to get from the toilet to the house", Mare recalls. "Again the neighbours saved both me and my son. But instead of standing by us, my husband left. I was bewildered. I sold all my possessions and went to Addis with the hope of finding medical treatment for my sons."

Mare says that her sons benefited from the treatment they received at the Minilik II Hospital. A village priest taught them to read and write before they went to primary school. "They had to leave the school because of their challenging behaviour", says Mare. "I did not give up, though, and with the help of an NGO called the Medical Missionaries of Mary they attended the Catholic school for children with learning disabilities until they were 18. After that they continued their education with a support organization for people with learning disabilities but it was too far from our house and they had to stop going."

Mare gave birth to her third son in Addis Ababa in 1989, assisted by a traditional midwife. "At first my youngest son was healthy", Mare says, "but when he was eight years old he began to exhibit odd behaviour and to isolate himself from other children. The doctors said he was healthy but his behaviour meant that he had to leave school." Mare tried to find a cure for her youngest son, taking him to hospitals and to holy water, but to no avail. "By now I had become very poor", says Mare, "so I took out a loan and began selling charcoal and wheat kinche in the street. My income is barely enough to feed me and my children. We live from hand to mouth."

Despite their impairments, Mare's children help her in her work. "My eldest son comes with me to the market and carries the things I buy", she says. "My second son cleans the place I sell from and my youngest son helps the family by doing things in the house. My children are my pillars."

Huluagerish Admasu

Born in Oromia, south of Addis Ababa, in 1941, Huluagerish Admasu was married without her consent when she was 15 years old. "I had a child but after four years of married life I was unhappy in my marriage", she says. "I wanted to get away from the countryside. So even though I had not been to school and knew nothing of urban life I fled to Addis Ababa."

Huluagerish knew nobody in Addis. She earned her living by going from house to house, washing clothes. "Deep inside I never stopped blaming my past life and my parents", Huluagerish admits. "I was unsettled and life was difficult for me. Eventually I rented a two-room house, sharing with another person. Then I married a day labourer and had four more children with him."

The last of these children, a daughter, Samrawit, was born in hospital with a tumour-like swelling on the top of her head. "The swelling was removed surgically when Samrawit was only one month old", says Huluagerish. "It seems that the surgery caused some brain damage. Samrawit could not move or eat without help."

At the same time Huluagerish's husband became seriously ill. "Nursing both my husband and my daughter was not a simple task", she says.

Huluagerish's husband died but she continued to seek help for her daughter. Samrawit was diagnosed as having a learning disability. She was sent to the Medical Missionaries of Mary, an NGO engaged in community-based rehabilitation. "As a result of what we both learned there, Samrawit can now feed and dress herself and keep herself clean", says Huluagerish.

After her husband's death Huluagerish began to brew tela, local barley beer, in order to earn money for her family. "I also started to trade in a small way", she says, "and this enables me to feed my family. I have managed to improve my daughter's situation and to earn my living but I am not satisfied. I need support, though, if I am to improve my trade and my income."

Huluagerish is certain that Samrawit can achieve more. "Learning the skills of daily living and doing exercises have partially solved Samrawit's problems", she says.

"I can tell by looking at her movements and seeing what she can understand that if she had adequate training in good time she could easily improve and live a better life. I think that if she got some additional support, like medicine, education, better food and clothes, her life could change remarkably."

Mulumebet Eshete

When she was still a child, Mulumebet Eshete's aunt brought her from North Shoa to Addis Ababa. "My parents are peasants", Mulumebet explains. "My aunt convinced them that it would be better for my education if I lived in Addis. But my aunt did not keep her promise. Instead I was virtually her maidservant."

Mulumebet was determined to get an education, however. "I did my best to get my aunt to keep her promise", she recalls, "and after long years of struggle I started my primary education.

Although I was forced to interrupt my education several times I managed to finish high school. I got a job at a salary of 50 birr a month, working in an office in the public transport company."

Mulumebet continued to have a "discouraging and difficult life" with her aunt. "I tried to continue my education at night school but I had to stop since my aunt insisted that I give her all my wages. In the end I got married just to get away from her."

A year after her marriage Mulumebet gave birth in hospital to her daughter, Yanet. "The labour was very long", Mulumebet recalls. "There were complications during the birth. We both stayed in hospital for three weeks after Yanet was born."

"When we got home", Mulumebet continues, "Yanet started to lose weight and her behaviour changed. She failed to reach her six-month, year and two-year milestones. At two she still could not walk and she had a lot of other problems. When she reached pre-school age I enrolled her in a kindergarten. Nothing changed there but I still enrolled her in a primary school." When the teachers told Mulumebet that her daughter was sleepy and dizzy in class she discontinued her formal education and taught her at home.

"My husband and I took Yanet from hospital to hospital, and from holy water to holy water, until finally we were told that she had a learning disability", says Mulumebet.

"The input I have received from the support organization for people with learning disabilities has helped me to understand my daughter's problems better. I have found out a lot about learning disability. I have a close relationship with the support organization."

Around the time of Yanet's diagnosis Mulumebet gave up the job she had held for ten years in order to provide her daughter with full-time care. Her attention has paid off. "At one time Yanet could not keep clean or play without the help of others", Mulumebet recalls. "She could not tell what was edible from inedible things. Now she is 13 years old and does not look like she has a learning disability. She goes to school with other children of her age. I follow her progress keenly!"

Since Mulumebet left her job she embroiders bedcovers, throws and tablecloths in order to supplement her husband's income. "I borrowed 300 birr in order to start my business", she says. "I embroider my own designs by hand as I don't have a sewing machine. I sell mostly to neighbours. One day I would like to open my own shop."

Mulumebet uses her income to help to support both of her children. "The family has a better life now", she says, "and Yanet is helping me with my embroidery work."

Wagaye Nigusse

"Necessity is the mother of invention", says Wagaye Nigusse. The mother of eight children, Wagaye took up pottery as a business when her eldest son became ill and her husband lost his job. Two of Wagaye's teenage daughters are also involved in the business.

Although she was born in Addis Ababa Wagaye did not go to school, as her parents were very poor. "I really envied children who could go to school. I was eager to go myself but I married young", she says. "I can read and write, though."

One of Wagaye's daughters, Mulu Arage, has a learning disability. "Mulu was delivered by a traditional midwife", says Wagaye. "From the very beginning she had problems. She could not feed from the breast and she cried a lot. I had to be around almost all the time. As she grew up she was not able to develop basic living skills, so we took her to a hospital. The doctors diagnosed learning disability and told us to do physical exercises with her every day. They said this would help her mobility disabilities and develop her strength."

Wagaye was not happy with this advice. "We wanted an immediate solution", she admits, "so we took her to another hospital. They told us the exact same thing. So then we took her to the Cheshire community-based rehabilitation project in our area. They gave her physiotherapy for two years and taught me how to manage her at home."

At the end of the two years the Cheshire project moved out of the area. "They gave Mulu a wheelchair and they gave money to me", says Wagaye. "This was also the time when my husband lost his job and my eldest son became ill. We were in a very difficult situation. I had to do something."

What Wagaye did was to learn from a friend how to make pottery. "My main product is coffeepots but I also make pots for storing or serving food, sugar bowls, dishes for sweets, flower pots and pottery animals", Wagaye explains. "A wholesaler comes to my house and buys everything I produce. This is good because I need to be around all the time for Mulu. Four or five people in my neighbourhood are my competitors but the wholesaler buys everything I make. This is because of the quality of my goods. They are more expensive than other people's." Wagaye is now the breadwinner of the family. "I know I could earn more if I could expand my activity or if I could supply shops or sell in the market", she says, "but Mulu needs me here. If I could find a school or a day-care centre that would take her, it would help a lot. I am worried because Mulu still cannot walk."

Wagaye says that she needs money, modern tools and an adequate supply of raw materials if her business is to improve. "Most of my income goes on food, clothes and Mulu's health care", she says. "With the support of my family and neighbours I am trying to be self-sufficient. I believe strongly that it is my duty to work hard."