

Dr. Meseret Kassie

The University of Gondar is 64 years old. With Dr. Meseret Kassie this higher education institution has its first and only female Vice President. Dr. Meseret Kassie got her MA in Geography and Environmental Studies in Addis Ababa University and earned her Ph.D. in Agro-forestry from the Universität für Bodenkultur in Vienna, Austria.



“I must say that I was not surprised to win the competition for one of the two Vice President positions. 15 men and only two women applied. Based on objective criteria from the Ministry of Education, I had very good chances to be appointed. This does not keep some from saying that I got the position only because I am a woman. Fortunately, my husband has always actively supported and encouraged me.

My academic career did not start the way I wanted it to. Back in high school my teachers told me that one day I will be like Dr. Yigardu Mulat. I was eager to follow her footsteps and had the example and confidence that women can achieve much. Today Dr. Yigardu Mulat is the director of the Ethiopian Institute of Forest Research. And I am privileged to know her in person. Although I wanted to study economics, I was assigned to geography and environmental studies. But from my first day at university I was eager to complete my Ph.D. one day. For my doctorate degree I changed my field to agro-forestry; I had stronger interest in this field since it is very relevant to Ethiopia. We need to minimize the process of deforestation and help our forests recover. One way is to support farmers through research to have more and the right trees on their land, what we call agro-forestry, depending on the location and soil. This would also help our women who still carry the burden of providing fuel for the household from the remote forest; they travel long ways to collect fuel wood. Agro-forestry minimizes both energy and time for women in rural areas.

I have been appointed as Vice President of Business Affairs less than three months ago. So far, the most challenging aspect of my work is the attitude people have for a woman. Of course, the nature of the work is challenging but manageable. But I find it most challenging to deal with the attitudes and perceptions of people who do not take women serious as a result of misconception that women perform less; it is deep rooted in our long-term masculine thinking.

In so many aspects women are discriminated in society. This works almost everywhere, even in Europe. When I was in Austria, where I got my Ph.D., the male dominance is prevalent, especially in higher positions. Almost all the professors there are men. Women are disproportionately underrepresented in higher and in leadership positions. At our university it starts with our academic councils on college levels where you hardly find a female member. Masculine attitudes and perceptions are pushing women back and disallow empowering practices for our female staff members.

I am the first Vice President of the University of Gondar. And I am very happy to be here. I wanted to be an ice-breaker for other women who have potential to lead. I can assure that many women have the potential to lead an organization and contribute to their institution. In our university, we made a good start to engage women and encourage them in leadership positions; however, this should continue until the disproportion is narrowed.”



Muluemebet Fikre

As a mother and fulltime employee Muluemebet works hard to meet the expectations of all – family and employer. Exemplary for Ethiopian women in Ethiopia, she puts the needs of others first and thus serves the country with ordinary deeds.



“I enjoy working with different kinds of people. Eight years ago I started to work in housekeeping for the guesthouse of the University of Gondar. The university guesthouse is located in Kebele 18. The customers come from all over the world and from all parts of Ethiopia. Some come for short periods of time and others stay longer. Some work for the university or are invited guests. This job gives me the opportunity to interact with all kinds of people. Our university has many partnerships with foreign countries and many of the volunteers who assist at the hospital or at other campuses like to stay here. It is green, safe and peaceful. My interaction with foreigners is limited because I don’t speak English but at least we greet each other and smile. I also enjoy the opportunity to help others; even if it is just in minor ways. When guests or co-workers feel sad I try to encourage them with *Ayzo!* or *Ayzo!* and *Chigir yelem!* When someone is upset I try to calm them down and assure them not to worry because things will be alright. It is not part of my job description but it was how I was raised. I wish that the guest do not only feel as welcomed but also just like home.

My former boss, the income generation manager Tezezo was a huge inspiration for me when it comes to work ethics. She managed many businesses and enterprises within the university. Even though she has a lot of work and responsibilities she never got tired and always stayed positive. She worked very hard and also encouraged others to keep working. She got involved in all activities, was engaged, helpful and overall a good team leader.

My working day starts at 02:00 local time. First we sweep the compound, then we clean the rooms and then we wash the bed sheets. If there was a meeting the day before we clean the meeting hall. And if there was a wedding it may take longer to put everything back into its place. Before work I like to go to church and get my children ready for school. I have two sons and one daughter. I am a mother first and I love my children dearly. Before everything else I cook for my children and feed them. Working fulltime as a mother can be difficult, especially when the children get sick. I want to tend to them but also need to be at work on time. I am very fortunate that I have a great team at work. My colleagues are good friends and we help each other and cover each other in times of need. Thankfully my husband also helps in raising our children. Both of us have sustainable income. We can take care of ourselves, our family.

When I was younger I never had any professional goals. I come from Shoa, a rural area close to Addis Abeba. As a rural woman I was only expected to get married and have children. I have never dreamt of working in a larger city and for a university. Gondar is a historic city, a tourist destination and one of the biggest cities in the countries. I am thankful for the opportunity to live and work here. My youngest daughter is seven years old now. She is enjoying school. I wish for her that she will succeed in school. I encourage her as good as I can. After school when she comes to the guesthouse or at home we sit down and do her homework. We practice the numbers, the letters in Amharic and in English. I am so proud that she can already read and write and also already knows some English. I wish for her to have it easier and to have a good life.”

Nigisti Gebreslassie

Nigisti Gebreslassie is founder and director of the non-governmental charity Yenege Tesfa. This organization was initially devoted to help Gondar's street children to get daily bread. In the meantime, Yenege Tesfa's multiple projects help Gondar's numerous groups of disadvantaged citizens to increase opportunities for a better standard of living.



“Right now I am dreaming of building a youth and recreation center that is open to all of our youngsters. This continues the work of Yenege Tesfa to create safe zones for vulnerable children. In Gondar, we always have hundreds of children living in the streets. Some live separate from their families, others do not have any relatives. When I was a teenager and moved to Gondar with my family, I did not find it tolerable that children are suffering amongst us. In the mornings, on my way to school, I would see them sleeping in the streets. One day I called them and Derese came to me. With friends we started collecting money to buy bread for him and his friends. From this we developed the bread coupon project in which many bakeries and *dabo bet* participate. Next, we helped ten boys to purchase shoe shining equipment. A few months later, when we were teaching 23 street children, people told me that I need a license. I was scared to approach the police because my parents used to tell me to behave, otherwise they would call the police. As it turned out, the police were very helpful. And they were feeding our boys for two years. The prison allowed us to come twice a day and collect *wot* and *injera* for the children. Next the university gave us blankets and beds that we could use in our first home. Today we are supporting 10,000 people every year.

It makes my heart heavy when I see our children suffering in the streets and lacking the most basic needs. We as a society are responsible for them. This starts by acknowledging that these small children with dirty hands and shabby clothes are our relatives. They should not be mistreated and they should receive the same rights and protection. For example, they do not trust the police because often they are not treated nicely by them. If a son is beaten, he can turn to his parents for help. But orphans and street children lack this support system. When they go to the police, they are perceived as being the source of the problem. It is difficult to find solutions to these structural problems on an individual basis. That is why we like to create safe spaces for them where they can get together, share their experiences and discuss what they can do to attain better lives.

In 2003 we formally founded Yenege Tesfa and over the years our organization grew and we diversified our involvement aimed at increasing safety for street children and orphans. We have currently seven homes in Gondar, four for boys and three for girls. We give educational and medical support, provide income generating programs for the children and also for the families. We operate a day-care, a mobile school with library, agricultural projects, and vocational training. We have also been expanding our activities north of Gondar into Debarq and communities in the Simien Mountains. And soon we will start projects south of Gondar in Gorgora. I always feel like the proudest mom when our children are recognized as being at the top of the class in school. One of our first boys is now a philosophy student at Addis Ababa University and his professor is praising him. This is the biggest reward for me. It makes me hopeful that we can break the circle of poverty through these interventions that are addressing the root causes, not only the symptoms.

Since Yenege Tesfa has grown and received a lot of support, we are going further than providing basic needs. We help families, especially single mothers, and try to make sure that our projects will be sustainable in the future. Our work also includes prevention, information, and providing city social workers in the streets. Of course, these are things the government should provide. They should not leave all social problems to NGOs and religious institutions. But until they are ready, we can step in and take care of each other.”

www.yenegetesfa.org

Tadela Fente

The traditional singing artist Tadela Fente operates her own venue, the Shiw Bey Yebahil Mishit in Kebele 3. Inheriting the singing tradition from her father, she now inspires more women to take up the genre of kererto.



“I always felt the music inside me, like I was born with it and have inherited it. My father was also a traditional singer and masinko player. I have always been dancing and singing just for the fun of it. And starting from the age of fourteen I was invited to perform in front of audiences: at weddings, in bars, and we were also going door to door. My singing style was inspired by Yirga Doballa who is a pioneer when it comes to masinko singing. He promoted the Gondarian style and encouraged many singers to follow in his footsteps. I was one of them. But I didn’t have any women to follow. Nobody instructed me in singing and nobody helped me financially. My family didn’t object but didn’t help either.

Luckily my husband was very supportive. I come from Enfranze and was given to him in an arranged marriage at an early age. That is 26 years ago. Twenty years ago we moved to Gondar. In between we have also lived and worked in other places, including Addis Abeba, but Gondar is a special place to be a traditional singer. Gondar people have respect for the culture. Actually, just about everybody in Ethiopia loves cultural songs. Mostly, my customers are well acquainted with the songs, style, and performance. Even the foreigners who come enjoy it much. But in Gondar the traditional songs are tied even more to identity and a way of life. Hence, it happens sometimes that people don’t enjoy the songs when people offer offensive lines that might disappoint other customers. The only thing I fear about my work is that guests might fight each other over the requested lyrics. I treat all customers even if they are drunk. When they ask me to sing for them then I will. After all, they come to enjoy themselves. So I treat everybody friendly, professionally and respectfully.

The business is going very well. I have also more female singers to perform. Every night I am at the Shiw Bey Yebahil Mishit. I take breaks from singing but when guests request me to sing then I will not disappoint them. Of course, in the fasting season it is a little bit slower as we have less customers. During fasting season we start with songs that are related to religion while in other times we have more secular songs. But closing earlier also gives me the opportunity to attend church service in the early mornings. When we have long nights I go to church later in the day.

I may not have had a woman singer to look up to, but it makes me even prouder that other female singers are feeling encouraged by me. I have released four albums between 1991 and 2007 and have also music videos on the market. In the meantime I also took up the kererto style which was previously only performed by men. I started adopting this style and now more women follow me. We have started conducting meetings and giving each other peer feedback. It is not a formal training but we meet every two weeks to exchange our experiences. They watch my performances and get inspired by what they hear and see. In turn, I also attend their performances, learn from them and help them to improve. Now we have a community of female traditional singings artists. And being part of this is wonderful.”

*Shiw Bey Yebahil Mishit in Kebele 3
Close to Medhaniyalem Church
Phone: 0918035906*



Aminet Abdela

The young Muslim women has always wished to be a successful business women. Running a thriving pool and coffee house has gotten her local popularity in and beyond the College area.



“Two years ago I opened my own business in form of a pool house around College, close to Mesquit. Pool is a major part of entertainment in Gondar, especially in the College and Mazoria neighborhood. For me it was a profitable business. Some pool houses hardly get by but I always had many customers. I think I have good customer skills. I welcome people, offer them a chair, have conversations with them. They become familiar with the place and like to come and spend their time. I also added offering coffee and then greeted my customers with an invitation to *shai/buna*. After a while the pool house became a meeting place. People like to talk and I like to listen and also to talk. I got to know a lot of people through this work.

My very good co-worker also met someone who later became her husband. Of course I am happy for her but I had to find a new *serategna* which proves difficult. They have to be interactive, customer friendly, neat and attractive. Even with my co-workers I have very good relationships. They become like family and visit and help me even after they stop working.

In the area are many robberies. One time I was robbed by three young men who threw me on the ground just outside the pool house and stole my phone. They thought I had more money on me. I was hurt and my face was bruised and scratched for a long time but I continued working. Just when the wounds were almost healed I happened to be at Entasol Hotel when the explosion occurred. It resulted in a hole in my head. I lost consciousness and was taken to the hospital where I stayed for five days. So many people came to check on me! Even many who I didn't know. That's when I noticed that I am well-known in the area.

When I was released I stayed home for one month because I couldn't walk. My leg kept on hurting but I wanted to work. Recently I stopped working because the leg was not getting any better. When I was a child I adored my grandfather who was a trader. I have always wished to be a successful business woman. In my family all women are housewives. My family doesn't like that I work outside of the home and they don't support me. This may be partly related to religion. This was my first job. Before I helped in the house. When I was twelve years old my sister was born with cerebral palsy (CP) and I helped my mother raise her. I took her to many places for treatment and to her physiotherapy appointments. She needs a lot of attention. At worse times she didn't eat and didn't even open her eyes. Now she is a bit better but she needs help with everything. I love her and generally I like helping people. Since my sister is in my life I am more aware of other people's needs. This may have helped me in developing my customer and people skills.

When my leg is better I will start working again. My dream is still to have a successful business. Maybe next I will try a boutique. Please come for *shai/buna*!”

*YeAminet Poolna Buna Bet
Kebele 18
Mesquit akababi*

Dr. Haimanot Kasahun

Dr. Haimanot Kasahun, born in Gondar, has studied medicine at the School of Medicine, University of Gondar (UoG) and specializing in oncology. Once opened, she will be the first female doctor at UoG's Institute of Oncology.



“When I was a teenager, I was not too concerned about the profession I would choose. I only wished that I would be happy with the life I would lead. I was interested in either becoming a medical doctor or an engineer. But I remember that when I was in high school there was a lot of talk about medicine, how popular it is, and that most students expired to join medical school. I was interested in those areas, where you can help people, either with their health or through technological innovations. Through the innovations in health care and technology a lot of the current deadly conditions may be treatable. To be part of this would be very rewarding.

In my early childhood I lost my mom to uterine cancer and stayed with my mom’s aunty for some years. Later I lived in my father’s house where the situation was not very favourable for me. We were a middleclass family but it did not benefit me much. My father had some psychiatric issue and my half-siblings thought I do not belong to them. This was a bit frustrating. But it also motivated me to study hard so that I would win my life. So I became good at my education and, infact, I scored 4 points out of 4 in my metric exam taken to join preparatory school. And, again, I was the highest scorer among around 2,000 students for the higher education entrance exam of the year 1999 EC.

As my grades allowed me to join medical school and as I realized that I am more interested in working directly with other people, I decided to pursue my career as a medical doctor. Serving in the field of medicine fits better the way I see and understand human beings than other professions. It allows me to genuinely connect with humanity. It also allowed me to appreciate what I have when studying medicine became more challenging than I thought. Although my (step-)family did not help me financially or psychologically, I received support from others. For having the opportunity to make it through and graduate I would like to thank God and all the good people who supported me along the way.

Just after I graduated in medicine I have decided to specialize in oncology. It is a field that needs to improve much, especially in developing countries like Ethiopia. When I started I could see that there was not much you could do to help patients with cancer in Ethiopia. We did not have early detection mechanisms, screenings and prophylaxes. Also, the record keeping of patients, their treatment and progress is not well documented. Even their pain has not been managed well. I also wanted to treat cancer patients as they are the most honest and vulnerable ones you could get in Ethiopia. Being with such patients is not only practicing medicine but also sharing their despair and desire to live.

In working as an oncologist I witness and face many difficulties. Most patients have financial problems as they come from a low-income background. Many cannot afford to travel, pay for accommodation and the treatment fees. Due to these constrains, many are forced to discontinue their treatment. Without treatment there is not much hope for them. In addition, most new admitted patients are already in advanced stages of their disease. There is not much hope for them to get cured, especially since Ethiopia’s oncological infrastructure still needs to develop. There is only one radiation center and we have only four senior oncologists in the whole country. This results in a long waiting list and makes it impossible to give timely treatment. But being with the patients in such a stressful working area is also rewarding. Despite many disappointing situations in oncology, I never regretted joining this field. The patients’ blessings with their long prayers make me feel great. I am happy with the life I lead and with the work I have.”



Tesfalem Abera

For the past 25 years Tesfalem Abera has been the manager of the Ploughshare Women Crafts Training Center in Woreka. She became not only the face of the project but also its heart and soul.



“I worked as a school director when the British Charles Sherlock was looking for a manager for the Ploughshare Women Crafts Training Center. This was twenty-five years ago and ever since I had the privilege to manage this project, see it grow and grow with it. Back then many Jewish people were leaving Gondar for Israel. Many were waiting for their papers and ticket. In the meantime, many kept themselves busy with handcraft. Charles visited Ethiopia many times and wanted to help. Instead of giving out money he envisioned a sustainable project for them. Luckily we got plenty of support. The government designated almost two hectares of land. The machinery was donated by different embassies at different times and the ambassadors of Israel, Britain, the USA and Japan came to visit. We had a volunteer from Japan who helped us modernize; they also invited me to spend ten months in Japan to learn pottery and get training in administration. When the machinery stops, it can take a while before we can import the spare parts. I already told our university president Dr. Desalegn Mengesha that we need to build these gas or electric kilns (ovens) here.

We started the project with local pottery and one teacher. We keep the traditional style but also add modern techniques that make the products more durable. The local clay is prepared with underground fire with dung, wood and straw. For the women the traditional one is more beneficial because when they finish the program, they can continue the work without the kiln. Since we started, we diversified to include pottery, weaving, spinning, battique and basketing. Weaving was traditionally done by the men but our women are also good at it. And the graduates of the spinning training get to take the spin to their village.

The women who join us are disabled women, single women or single mothers. They live here for three months. Every day single mothers come and seek help. Some come here because of fistula problems; they can't control the urine. This caused by early marriage and pregnancy at a young age of 12 or 13 or as a result of pregnancy in regions without clinics or hospitals. Women in these conditions are regarded as punished by God and expected to leave their husband and family. Now there is surgery available at the hospital here in Gondar. Others are HIV positive; they get free medicine through USAID but they don't have money for bread. So they want to work here. But we can't accept all. We train them according to their interests and capabilities. When they go back to their village, they keep working and sell their products to the local market. If they can't sell them, then we can buy from them. In 25 years we trained 10,000 women from Region 3. We also train them to be teachers.

I feel so happy with my work because we are empowering families. The ones in the program help themselves, their family and the country. Our women become successful. Success means that they can eat three times a day. Success means that the children graduate from school. When I became a manager 25 years ago I expected a luxurious life. But the luxury is not material; it is in helping others. I didn't have my own children so the people here became my family and I adopted one son and one daughter. This is better than having a big house and car.”

*Ploughshare Women Crafts Training Center
Phone: 0582311077*

