

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**The Socialization and Feminine Identity of Jewish-Ethiopian
Girls who Graduated from Israeli "Ulpanas"**

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to examine the feminine identity of Ethiopian girls who have immigrated to Israel and who have studied at "Ulpanas" (high schools for religious girls). The existing studies concerning the Jewish-Ethiopian community in general, and, particularly, those concerning the Jewish-Ethiopian woman, tend to focus on the description of the characteristics and cultural values of the Jewish-Ethiopian society. Within these studies, the emphasis had been placed on the way the culture of origin (the Ethiopian culture) has treated the Jewish-Ethiopian female as being inferior to the Jewish-Ethiopian male. Having said that, as of yet, the topic of the way the Israeli-Ethiopian women perceive the process in which their new feminine identity was established, and the influence of the educational institutions which they had attended, within this context, in light of the significant socialization processes which these women had undergone within those institutions, has not yet been studied.

The Research Question

What is the opinion of Jewish-Ethiopian women who have immigrated to Israel and who have studied in Ulpanas regarding the socialization processes that they had undergone within the Ulpanas, with regards to the way their feminine world was designed?

The Research Population

The research population consisted of twenty religious women aged 23-35, whom immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia between the years 1985 to 1995, and have graduated from Ulpanas. Sixteen of the participants had studied in boarding school Ulpanas, and four of them had studied in Ulpanas designed for external studies.

The Methodology

The current study is a part of the research project of Prof. Gross, dealing with the world of religious-Zionist girls (Gross, 2002). Gross's study deals with girls who are currently doing national service and army service as teachers of soldiers, who studied in religious-educational institutions, as far as their relationship to four identities are concerned: The feminine identity, the religious identity, the Zionistic identity, and the civilian identity. The current study deals, in addition to the four above-mentioned identities, with the ethnic identity.

The Research Tools

In the present research we used Gross's (1995) research tools. Each participant was asked to write a composition concerning the advantages and the disadvantages of the Ulpana in which she had studied, by focusing on the way it had designed her world and her Jewish-religious-social perceptions. Afterwards, the researcher held a semi-structured interview with each one of the participants, based on the model suggested by Spradley (1980). The interview consisted of questions having to do with the four above-mentioned identities, as well as specific questions regarding the linkage between each participant's ethnic identity and feminine identity. The data collected was analyzed using the methodology of qualitative data analysis (Gross, 1995), that includes 4 stages: word, category, connection between categories and model building.

The Results and Discussion

1. The feministic-religious-Ethiopian identity in light of the double and triple exclusion: The current study reveals, for the first time, the voice and experience of national-religious women from Ethiopian descent, and sheds a light on the way in which they experience the immigration and socialization processes as ones which establish their feminine identity. The current study identified the existence of a feminine, feministic, religious, Ethiopian identity. This finding is able to be explained through the models of the Black-American feminism (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Hooks, 1986), as well as through the Feminism of the Mizrahi-Jewish Women (from Arab countries) (Dahan-Kalev, 2005, 2006).

The results and discussion show that the women who had immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia suffer from exclusion and oppression from their inside and their outside surroundings. These women suffer from double and triple exclusion on the basis of their gender, as well as their culture and ethnicity and their status. The Ethiopian society is patriarchal, in which the woman is shoved to the margins of their society due to their gender. On top of that, within the Israeli society, these women suffer from discrimination not only since they are women, but also due to the color of their skin, and further more due to their belonging to an ethnic minority, which possesses a low status. According to the perception of participants in the current study, the Ethiopian

woman is situated in the lower part of the social scale, while the Ashkenazi women are on top, and following are the Mizrahi women.

2. The influence of the Ulpana on the feminine identity of the Jewish-Ethiopian women: The Ulpana, as an educational institution, was found to be a very significant factor in the establishment and nourishment of the personality in general, and specifically of the feminine and religious identity of girls who have immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia. The educational figures who had a significant influence on the girls were, mostly, the woman-principal of the Ulpana, as well as the homeroom teachers and guides. These women served as a role model for the participants of the study, as these are educated, religious women, who combine a successful career alongside the religious family life. The educational staff in the Ulpana encouraged the study participants to fulfill themselves, to develop a career, and to combine a religious family life, whilst providing no restriction to the possible range of fields of occupation. These standpoints, which were represented by the Ulpanas, served to undermine the traditional feminine role of the Ethiopian female, and encouraged them to dream and aspire, as well as to fulfill senior roles within the public and private sectors, and to lead their own families from a standpoint of feminine strength and economic independence. Thus, the Ulpana serves as a significant factor, which accelerates the processes of social integration undergone by young Jewish-Ethiopian women in the Israeli society and contributing to the ascent in their status.

These results are unique to the current study. Previous studies, such as those conducted by Gross (2000), Meir (2003), Felheimer (2005), and Perlmutter (2013), had shown a very small amount of influence of the educational institution as far as the design and composure of the feminine identity of the female participants are concerned.

The way the Ulpana refers to the ethnic identity: Despite the great positive influence that the study participants felt that the Ulpana had had on the design and composure of their feminine identity, they also felt that they received very limited support concerning their ethnic identity. The participants reported having undergone a major identity crisis during their period of studying in the Ulpanas, which included detaching from their parents, and escaping from the Jewish tradition and the values held by the Jewish-Ethiopian community. These girls tensions and underwent crises, because of the gaps between the modern culture and the fulfillment of Jewish Mitzvahs, as they were educated to in the Ulpana, versus the religious life of the Jewish-Ethiopian community. The results of the current study show that the educational staffs were

entirely unaware of the hardships, which these girls had undergone. Furthermore, in most of the Ulpanas which were attended by the participants of the current study, the issue of ethnic identity had not been formally expressed at all. The participants of the current study believed that the aspiration of the Ulpanas had been to transform their students who had immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia into "new Israelis", in accordance with the model encouraged by the Zionist-religious Ulpana model, even when this had its costs on the participants, including alienation and detachment from their ethnic identity.

In spite of the above-mentioned results, 4 of the study participants, who had attended two Ulpana institutions, stated that their Ulpanas had provided them a proper response to the issues of ethnic identity, with which they had been concerned, and that their Ulpana staff was aware of the cultural and religious gaps that they had experienced. These four girls believe that this unique form of attention to their needs had a major contribution to their feeling of belonging and being an inseparable part of the values of their Ulpanas and of the Israeli society, as well as to their relations with their own nuclear families. These Ulpanas had taken care to acquaint these girls with Ethiopian-religious couples, who had served as a role model for them, as per the combination of these two worlds. These Ulpanas had also emphasized the importance of these girls' ethnic identity by celebrating the Sigd holiday within the Ulpana.

The model suggested by Berry (1984) served as one of the sources of the analysis of the results of the current study. The analysis of the current study results, in light of this model, suggests that the current situation today, after having examined and evaluated the two cultures, inclusive of learning about their cultural identities, the women who participated in the current study believe today, in the merging standpoint, and thus, they merge the traditional and conservative world of the Jewish-Ethiopian sector with the modern-Israeli world.

3. The definition of the feminine identity and its location within the hierarchy of identities: When the participants of the current study were asked to define feminine identity, some of the definitions they provided consisted of components of a feminine identity which are identified with the traditional Jewish-Ethiopian heritage, such as the traits and roles of the women, which the participants had been socialized to from their early childhood. However, this perception contradicts the way that they define themselves as pioneering, ambitious, educated, career women, as they had been educated to be within their Ulpanas. Furthermore, the components of their traditional

Ethiopian identity contradict the profound criticism provided by the study's participants as per the life of the traditional woman within the Jewish-Ethiopian society. According to another definition, the feminine identity is rapidly changing and is influenced by the social-cultural context. This statement is yet another testimony to the great change which occurs in the life of the Jewish-Ethiopian women following their immigration to Israel. From these contradicting results, we learn that the participants of the current study are still experiencing conflicts and stress between the new feminine identity which they had devised themselves and their ethnic identity. These women negotiate themselves between those components, which they wish to preserve from the traditional feminine Ethiopian model to those components which they have chosen to adopt from the Israeli feminine model. Despite the stress and complexity that these women are currently undergoing, the participants of the current study define their identity as one which is feminine, religious, feministic and Ethiopian. As per the bond between their feminine identities and their religious identity, the participants of the current study reported not only that no actual contradiction exists between these two identities, but, rather, that they believe that the religious identity assists the women in fulfilling themselves and their feminine mission in life in the best way possible.

After her personal interview, each participant was asked to rate the four identities (feminine, religious, Zionistic and civilian) in their rank of importance as it is perceived by her, and then she should rank them according to their rank of importance as she believes it is perceived by the Ulpana. Afterwards, each one was requested to rate five identities (feminine, religious, Zionistic, civilian and ethnic) in their rank of importance as it is perceived by her, and as she believes it is perceived by the Ulpana in which she had studied. The replies to these two questions according to the participants' perception show that the feminine identity was rated in the first place, followed by the religious, ethnic, Zionistic and civilian identities. No compatibility was found between the participants' own rating and the way their perceived the Ulpanas rating of these identities. According to the participants of the current study, the rating of the Ulpanas as per these identities would be as follows: The religious identity first and foremost, followed by the Zionistic, feminine and civilian identities, and, finally, the ethnic identity.

The ongoing change within these women's Ethiopian, religious, feministic approach, which is evolving from the bottom-up, should be seen as one which derives from their need to redefine and reposition their status. Throughout the study, the

feminine strength of the participants greatly stood out. Furthermore, it was found that this feminine strength is also reflected by their mothers, who were found to be encouraging, supportive women, and served as a personal example for the participants as far as dealing with challenges is concerned. Yet another expression of these women, as is revealed within the current study, is that they disrupt the existing social order which characterizes the traditional Ethiopian society, and it is inevitable that this process has a great influence on the relationships in the traditional Ethiopian family. This situation requires a renewed definition of the statuses of the man and woman within the Ethiopian family. From the results of the current study, it also derived that the more the feminine identity becomes stronger, the more the masculine identity gets weaker, and the result is a crisis between the couple, as well as a family crisis. The interviewees also protested about the continuation of the uneven role-distribution between the husband and wife in the Jewish-Ethiopian family in Israel.

The women who had participated in the current study struggle on a daily basis in order to achieve their right to be considered equal amongst equals, to raise awareness to a new agenda as per the identity and placement of the Jewish-Ethiopian women who have immigrated to Israel, amongst the members of the Ethiopian society, as well as amongst those of the Israeli society, of which they are a part.

The contribution of the current study

On the theoretical level, the current study contributes a unique layer to the research literature which deals with the feministic identity. This is the first study which explored the process of the establishment of the feminine identity of the religious women who have immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia. This is also the first study in which the role of the Ulpana as an educational institution was examined, alongside the contribution of the socialization processes within the establishment of the identity of Jewish-Ethiopian women who have immigrated to Israel.

The current study shows us the significant place of the educational figures of the Ethiopian students of the Ulpana. These women have served as a role model and a source of inspiration for these students, as they combine between careers and family lives. Furthermore, the current study has provided an insight into the educational approach and curriculums which the participants were exposed to and which served to empower their feminine identity. Nevertheless, the current study has shown that the Ulpanas have relatively little information regarding the ethnic identity of the Ethiopian-Jewish girls, as well as regarding the gaps between the Ethiopian-Jewish traditions and

the religious values which are expected from students of the Ulpanas. Thus, the current study has also exposed the lack of ability of the Ulpanas to assist their students who have undergone an identity crisis due to the contradicting values of their home versus those of their Ulpana. On the community level, it was found in the current study that there is a lack of system-wide response to the gender, social and religious gaps that the Jewish-Ethiopians must deal with, and which exist between their own native culture and the modern Israeli culture.

Summary and Recommendations

Throughout this study, the feminine strength was very evident. It came about in the participants' aspirations and fulfillment of their personal dreams, their self-expression, their assertiveness and their independence. The women who participated in the current study try to raise the awareness for a new agenda regarding the identity and placement of the women who have immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia, amongst the Ethiopian as well as amongst the Israeli societies. In the current study, it was found that they possess a feminine, religious, feministic Ethiopian identity, and that they are determined to change their social status, despite the fact that they are dealing with internal and external conflicts and their struggle against the double and triple exclusion: The first time, due to them being women who live in a patriarchal society which forces them to face cultural and social barriers and makes it difficult for them to advance themselves; and the second time, due to their skin color, which is different than that of the rest of society. The results of the current study show that a change has occurred in the perception of Ethiopian-Jewish women towards the traditional values on which they were raised. During their period of studies in the Ulpana, they had rejected their ethnic belonging and adopted the Israeli modern model, in order to insure their successful integration within the Israeli society. Only during the period of their national service and higher religious education, did they get acquainted with their ethnic identity from a mature standpoint. Thus, at the end of the process of structuring of the feminine model, they are now able to perceive themselves as having feminine strength, as being revolutionary and successful, who combine higher education, careers, and home management, while holding a non-compromised approach towards maintaining an equal domestic job distribution in their new homes.

In light of the above-mentioned results, it is recommended that the educational system deal, both formally and informally, with contents which respect the heritage of the Jewish-Ethiopians – their religious life, their main leaders and figures, their

devotion towards the Land of Israel and their connection to the Israeli nation. It is also advised to include in the institutions who train teachers a program which deals with the multi-cultural Israeli society and the characteristics of the various ethnic groups who live in Israel. The educational staffs must get acquainted with the Ethiopian culture, inclusive of its world of values, its heritage and its unique characteristics. It is thus recommended that the educational system include within its teaching and management staffs leaders from the Jewish-Ethiopian community, in order to have them serve as a personal example to the Jewish-Ethiopian girls and to allow them to contribute to these girls' self-efficacy and personal belief in themselves. It is the duty of the educational system to increase its awareness of the changes which are undergoing within the Jewish-Ethiopian community in Israel, whilst placing a special emphasis on the inter-family relations, the different positions between the husband and wife, and the relationship of the parents and their children.