

## **How can I improve my practice? A journey into my personal and professional growth as a development worker engaged with gender inequalities in Ethiopia**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on my encounter with a group of Ethiopian female students whose common denominators are poverty, discrimination, violence, inequality and resilience, hope, courage and dignity. I describe these students' belief that education has enriched their lives in a country still dominated by patriarchy, with a high adolescent birth rate and a low Gender Development Index (UNDP, 2016).

I draw insights from my practical experience as a development professional with the aim of contributing to the realization of the human capabilities of these young women. They aspire to a dignified life and believe education to be the sole instrument with which they can free themselves from the subordinated position society attributes to them.

As a Living Theory researcher I neither separate myself, or my practical experience, from the social formation I am part of. In this account I explain my educational influences in learning and show how my work in Ethiopia is enriched by my Living Educational Theory research as it helps me to understand more fully the motivating power of love, faith in humanity and action that I incorporate within my practice, and how I originated the notion of generativity in my living-theory of sustainable development.

I also write about recognising the significance of gender, professionally, personally and interpersonally and provide an insight into my research journey, unveiling my living values and living standards of judgment (Laidlaw, 1996) while attempting to be a 'good' development professional aspiring towards a 'good' change (Chambers, 2005). I focus on the influence those Ethiopian women have on my practice and how they have shaped my view of development, sustainability, and gender. I conclude by reflecting on the process that may lead me eventually to answer a key question for a Living Theory researcher, 'How can I improve my practice?'

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## My First Encounter With Ethiopia

Love enables justice to see rightly (Civille, 1981, p. 300)

I am a development economist and practitioner working in developing countries promoting sustainable development from the perspective of those who are receiving aid. I am also a researcher. My research is that of Living Theory research that drives my own development and strengthens my capabilities, as well as my ability, to contribute to the realization of the human capabilities of the people I work with in development countries.

I started my profession in 2005 in Ethiopia. That experience represented my first time outside the western world and certainly outside my personal comfort zone. I did not quite know what to expect from a country that according to the World Economic Forum is deemed to be one of the poorest in the world (Tasch, 2015). Living and working in Ethiopia forged irreversibly my character and my professional views on poverty, the international development sector, gender issues and human rights. It also changed my life in very unexpected ways. This paper is a glimpse into the changes that affected the lives of the Ethiopian girls and women I worked with, and also into mine.

I shall commence by clarifying the values I hold, and I want to live by: love; faith in humanity; empathy; justice; dignity and gender equality. I would like to clarify what I mean by gender equality. Women and men are not entirely alike and, in the differences, lay the beauty of our diversity. Gender equality is defined by UN WOMAN (*United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2018: unpaginated*) as the, 'equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men, of girls and boys. Equality does not mean sameness, it rather means that 'women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female' (ibid.). However, I believe that there is no gender equality without gender justice. The process leading to gender equality in fact passes through the recognition that society needs to end institutionalized sexism for the benefit of both women and men (hooks, 2000, p.4). If we want to be really fair to women and men we need to pursue gender justice by transforming the system and bringing an end to patriarchy and sexism (ibid.).

I perceive the development work I carry out as an act of faith and love (Briganti, 2016). By faith and love I mean faith in and love for humanity. In my practical experience, I have learned that development work takes patience, humility, courage (especially the courage to fail) and above all a profound faith in humanity. Moreover, the people I work with have to have faith in me and believe that I value their lives enormously, see their unique human capabilities and want nothing more than being part of the process that might drive a positive change in their existence. I concur with Fromm (1957, p. 16) when he defines love as a way to solve the problem of existence, and as, 'a union under the condition to preserve each other's integrity, one's individuality'.

My choice to become a development professional has to do with my personal story, which convinced me to commit to support underprivileged people (in particular to girls and women) in overcoming their daily struggle for survival and regain their dignity. My professional goal is to sustain them in acquiring the capacities to stand up for their just and equal opportunities. As a human rights defender, I understand love and respect for

humanity as conducive to justice. There is a relation between love and justice in resolving conflicts of rights. I agree with Civile (1981) that love enables justice to see rightly. Justice is both the path I am on and the destination I want to reach in my life. So I often wondered what justice means to me and to the girls and women I work with in Ethiopia and how do we achieve it? This narrative offers the reader an example on how I worked with some other development professionals to design and run a project aimed at providing some young Ethiopian women access to the right to educate themselves, and a way out of poverty. In pursuing gender justice (hook, 2000, p.viii) the project's wider goal is to support its beneficiaries to enjoy a dignified and more just existence.

## Nove Onlus In Ethiopia

What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead. (Mandela, 2002:unpaginated)

With the above-mentioned values in mind and with almost ten years of experience in Ethiopia working with destitute people, especially girls and women, in 2012 I set up a small charity with some trustworthy friends and colleagues with whom I share the wish to contribute to make a difference in the lives of others. We called the charity Nove Onlus and it provides humanitarian assistance, education and socio-economic development. It supports vulnerable people, particularly women, children and disabled persons. These were the premises on which the project called 'I do not have leprosy' saw the light in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa. The aim of the project was, and still is, to create a small opening for six young women from the leper-community in Addis Ababa to enter into the Ethiopian society and have the same opportunities as others. These women live in the ghetto<sup>1</sup> known for hosting the country's biggest leper-community. Its inhabitants, even though they are not infectious, are discriminated against and excluded from the socio-economic life of the country. They are not allowed to leave the ghetto, where there are only a few kindergarten schools, and severe lack of job opportunities. As a consequence many people, including children, spend their lives begging on the street. In the ghetto there is profound misery. Those who are more affected by the situation and bear the stigma that isolates them from the rest of the community always seemed to me, and a nun who works closely with the residents of the ghetto, to be girls and women predominantly. The project's team believes in the empowering and freeing force education brings about, especially for women, in developing countries. The Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai's words encapsulate my feeling about education:

Education is one of the blessings of life and one of its necessities [...] education went from being a right to being a crime. I had two options: one is to remain silent and wait to be killed and the second was to speak up and then be killed. I chose the second one. (Yousafzai, 2017:unpaginated)

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<sup>1</sup> In order to protect the identity of those part of the project and of the leprosy-affected community I avoid mentioning the real name of the ghetto

Hence, we decided to make it possible for some young students living in the ghetto to keep educating themselves by accessing higher education. Kure, Banchu, Alex, Tseghe, Mercy and Fere<sup>2</sup> are brave and committed girls who have struggled to get out of the ghetto, hidden their background for years and managed to go to school. For them education was not a right, they had to fight for it. As mentioned, people living in the ghetto, are not supposed to leave it by any means and when caught doing so risk being subjected to violence that endangers their lives. Eventually these girls have been awarded their high-school diploma with honors, earning the right to attend the public university. However, this feels like a cruel paradox to me, because although they had been granted the right to pursue higher education these young women are so poor that they are not able to accept the offer of the Government, which pays only for the fees. They even lack the money to travel to the campus<sup>3</sup>, feed themselves, buy a blanket or even a piece of soap. Many young women end up prostituting themselves in order to earn what they need to start university. Many more continue to prostitute themselves during their university years in order to survive.

Often the condition of extreme poverty women live in deprives them of their dignity. I believe, like Hicks (2016) all people are born worthy but at the same time are vulnerable to having their dignity and worth violated. There is a sense in which I am beginning to equate the process of helping others to dignify themselves and doing it for myself, with the processes leading to empowerment. The following interviews with some of the students that Nove Onlus supports might shed light on the meaning of women's empowerment and its connection to education.

In the interview process I followed the ethical guidance for educational research published by the British Educational Research Association (2011). By this I mean that I believe I have operated within an ethic of respect for any persons involved in the research I undertook (British Educational Research Association 2011, p.5). The consent of the participants was voluntary and informed by a discussion in both English and Amharic (the native language spoken by the interviews) that preceded the interview. I have acquired their consent in written form as well. I have decided not to video some of the conversations since I felt that a video camera might have violated the women's private boundaries. In such cases I rely on my field notes. I am aware that due to my dual role of researcher and donor representative, my position is power-loaded. I am also aware that I am a foreign person who has been supporting those people for quite some time, which might raise my societal status in the eyes of many local people. In many countries it is not acceptable to say no to such a person. I am therefore extremely careful that their consent should not be solely motivated by cultural norms or gratitude, which might end up causing them personal discomfort. I aim at always being transparent about that. I know I am not able to affirm that gratitude does not have a stake at all in their decision to take part in my research. That would not be realistic. However, I decided to be open with all the participants about my concerns about

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<sup>2</sup> I'm using pseudonyms to protect the students' identity.

<sup>3</sup> The Government displaced the students, sending them to universities located far away from their city of origin. Students in order to attend the university have to leave their houses and families for years. The Government chooses the faculty the students are going to attend.

ethics and to try to engage them in the discussion. This method proved very useful in enabling me to sense whether there is some discomfort that the participants are trying to hide for fear of disappointing me. I invite the people I work with and interview, to challenge the work I do as well as my knowledge, which especially at the beginning of my career as development professional, came mainly from my western socio-historical and cultural background (Habermas, 1976). I am constantly searching for a stable balance between the part of my epistemology influenced by the 'metropole' I was born and raised in and that influenced by the 'periphery' I decided to work and live in:

The global economy is a dynamic and often turbulent affair. It doesn't produce a simple dichotomy. It does produce massive structures of centrality and marginality, whose main axis is the metropole-periphery, North-South relationship. (Connell, 2014, p.526)

By that I mean that I value enormously the knowledge of the people I work with in developing countries, which inform my living-theory research. The purpose for writing is also to value and disseminate their knowledge, which is often considered as 'subaltern knowledges' (de Sousa Santos, 2014, p. 134) by western academics. I detached myself from the view of the, 'periphery being used as a source of raw data which are shipped back to the metropole, that becomes the site of the *theoretical* moment in knowledge production' (Connell, 2014, p. 526).

The interview process took the form of an unstructured interview with all the students together. I chose to carry out the interview at the Catholic nuns' mission since it is a very familiar place to all of us, and there we all feel at ease. At the end of the unstructured interview I asked the students whether they wanted to deepen with me face-to-face some of the topics related to the project and their involvement. Merci, Alex and Banchu participated in the semi-structured interview.

Mercy is currently 22 years old and has been raised by a single mother who is mentally ill. She was conceived as a result of a rape. She's been the carer of her mother for as long as she can remember. For both Mercy and her mother life has always been characterized by extreme poverty, vulnerability and a sense of helplessness, as she tells me during our conversation. She has always been a bright student and the Government granted her permission to attend University. In 2015 Mercy sent the following letter to the team of Nove Onlus:

Dear Friends of Nove ONLUS,

How are you? Thanks to God I am doing well. I always thank God that He gave you to me. By your support and God help, I am in good situation. You know, hopefully, I will graduate in Marketing Management. This is will be big success for me. In the future I have big plan to work in this profession. [...]. You taught me how to help people and to show them love. [...] I know this letter would not explain all my thankfulness, but you will always be in my heart because of your great support, and for this I always thank God and pray for you to have a blessing and wonderful time. God be always with you!

Yours Mercy (Mercy, Personal Communication, 2015)

In 2017 during my visit to Ethiopia I met Mercy and followed up on her progress. Below there is a part of our conversation:

I graduated from Bahardar University in Marketing and Management. I'm so happy that I completed my education and grateful to Nove Onlus for its support without which I could not have completed my bachelor, which changed my life. I found a good job at the Commercial Bank in Addis Ababa where I work as a marketer in the department of e-payment. I really enjoy my work there. I'm still a member of charity club in the university which mandate is to help street children. Our motto is 'keep hope alive'. [...] I've been helped to go to school and finish University and now I want to help other children. I've been helped the way I help them now. Everybody has the responsibility to help other people.' Now that I'm educated I feel safe, it's a way out and I feel stronger. I have overcome a lot of challenges, and finally I made it and completed my studies. (Briganti, field notes Ethiopia, 2017)

I asked her what is empowerment in her eyes and she responded:

It means to make a women strong, and change her life. I can do what's right for me and what's good for others. (ibid.) *If this was from oral feedback, it should be 'to make a woman strong' (singular)*

Alex who was born and still lives in the ghetto, is now 20 years old. The following is part of our conversation in July 2017:

I study pharmacy (currently 3rd year). In 2 years, I'll be done with my bachelor degree. I learn how to create new medicines and I enjoy it. I want to help my country and my people. I want to work in a hospital in Addis Ababa. I want to become a doctor and gain a master's degree. I have 2 sisters and 2 brothers (twins), my mom is divorced and my family's financial condition is very bad. We all work and study. During the summer, the Sisters<sup>4</sup> provide me with a job, I clean and cook and do whatever I can to help my family. Life in campus is very difficult, the food is horrible, and I very often fall sick. Lately I had typhus due also to the appalling hygiene condition. Thanks to the money I receive from Nove Onlus not only I can study but I can buy some food and the medicine I needed to recover from typhus. I also bought my books, and I could pay the bus to travel back home twice in a year. (Briganti, field notes Ethiopia, 2017)

We then talked about education and the following is what she says on the matter:

Education is the source of life, the source of a beautiful life. The world needs educated people. I'm more confident now due to my education, I feel lucky because I can educate myself. You [she refers to Nove Onlus] have helped me so much. Sister Angela is hiring me during the summer and I'm so happy that she offered me a job, I'm so happy I can work. I'm never tired to work. (Briganti, field notes Ethiopia, 2017)

In 2015 Banchu wrote about her story:

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<sup>4</sup> I refer to the 'Sisters' to describe a group of Catholic nuns very well known in the neighbourhood of the ghetto for the help they provide to destitute people. Nove Onlus and the Sisters collaborate very often in running projects in Addis Ababa. The focal person in the mission is Sister Angela. In order to protect the identity and the work of those nuns and the people they assist I use pseudonyms and avoid mentioning the name of the congregation.

I live in the ghetto with my mother (leprosy-affected and blind) and my younger siblings. I'm overwhelmed by the many memories of my childhood. I see myself again when I was a child with my mom and my younger brother and sister begging on the street in front of the Sisters' mission. It was so cold out there. Our hearts were beating faster when we would see the Sisters, as we knew that although they had no money in their pockets, they would greet us, smile at us or caress our cheeks. Sister Angela enrolled me and my siblings in their kindergarten when I was four. They gave me a clean school uniform (I was not wet and dirty anymore!) and a warm sweater. I liked the school because it was made out of bricks. Our house instead used to be a small latrine which we re-adapted and used as habitation. My teacher loved me because I loved to study and I was committed to it. My mom worked so much and attended the Sisters' microcredit program. She managed to have enough money to rent a small but real house for us, so that we don't have to live in a latrine anymore. My mom although poor, leprosy affected and blind taught us good manners, to be tidy and clean. I always helped her to see through my eyes. (Banchu, Personal Communication, 2015)

Banchu, in 2017 during our face-to-face conversation, told me the following:

I'm now 23-year-old and thanks to Nove Onlus I have a diploma of accounting from the National College of Addis Ababa. Now I'm studying for my degree (1st year) which I will complete in 3 more years. Thanks to my diploma I started working at a radio station called Fana. I work during the day and study in the evenings. I want to do a master's degree in accounting. I want to serve my society and my people and provide them with a quality service whenever they'll come to my office. I'd like to help other colleagues improving their knowledge and learn from my experience. Other people helped me in the past like Nove Onlus and the Sisters, hence I want to help my colleagues improving their lives the way I was helped improving my life. I feel empowerment now, which means that I can do it, and that I can change my life. This feeling gives me confidence. My sister is now 16-year-old and I want to help her to study at university. (Briganti, field notes Ethiopia, 2017)

## What Comes Next?

I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended. (Mandela, 1994, p.751)

Many years of work in developing countries and in particular 13 years of engagement in Ethiopia have formed my opinion on development and the meaning of sustainability beyond the jargon adopted by international discourses. My vision of development and sustainability is not fixed; it's 'living' instead as my meanings are enriched by professional and personal experience and molded around my values and living standards of judgment (Laidlaw, 1996). I concur with Maathai (2009, p. 56), who argues that development does not only entail the acquisition of material goods but is also a means of achieving a quality of life that is sustainable, and of allowing the expression of the full range of creativity and humanity.

Sustainable development is envisaged as a time when people are capable of contributing to the building of a society in which inclusion, gender-equality, cultural cohesion, equity, educational development, respect for diversities and the natural

environment are recognized as fundamental values (Briganti, 2015). Hence the aim of development interventions in practice is, in my eyes, that of tackling the holistic development of the people I work with (i.e. emotional, psychological, spiritual, economic), and at the same time to tackle my growth as a professional and human being bearing in mind the question: how do I improve my practice? (Whitehead, 1989).

Maathai continues her argument on the challenges that hinder the development of Africa by describing the perfect equilibrium the continent should work towards (and I add any other place in the world) as a three-legged traditional African stool. The first leg represents democratic space where rights are respected; the second leg is the sustainable and accountable management of natural resources and the final one stands for the cultures of peace, namely fairness, respect, compassion, forgiveness, recompense and justice (Maathai, 2009, p. 56). Those issues, she argues must be addressed simultaneously just as the African stool is made out of a single block of wood and each element exists and is well functioning only in conjunction with others.

According to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 'everyone has the right to education [...] and shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms' (United Nations, 1948: unpaginated). However, reality is far from this. At the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Graduation Ceremonies 2017 Machel focused her speech on the urgency to end gender inequity by addressing what she calls an 'assault on the freedom to learn and to access education'. She added:

Research has shown that the education of girls can help break the cycle of poverty, boost the economy and improve health and affirms the human rights and dignity of women. The cost of gender inequality is great. We know that we cannot stop the cycle of poverty, economic deprivation and poor health unless everyone has an equal opportunity to access education. (Machel, 2017:unpaginated)

With all the above in mind and my professional and personal experience shaping around the lives of the girls and women I attempt to support in their daily struggle for regaining their rights to education and to a dignified life, I wonder what comes next for me.

Paraphrasing Mandela (2014), after overcoming a great challenge we shall need to prepare ourselves in overcoming the next great challenge. Notwithstanding the life-changing achievements by Alex, Mercy, Banchu and their colleagues whose efforts led them to enjoy a dignified life and to a full(er) development of their human personality (United Nations, 1948: unpaginated), I ask myself what's my role as development practitioner and human rights activist who feels so deeply for gender equality in the world. I believe that the girls' academic accomplishment was not my ultimate goal in the first place. I'll attempt to gain some clues while I also clarify what aim do I set to myself personally and professionally.

The following story demonstrates that my approach to sustainable development allows generative development to flourish (Briganti, 2016). By that I mean that sustainability evolves into a self-perpetuating force that can make the greatest contribution to human capabilities (Briganti, 2016). Volckmann (McCaslin, 2013) argues that generativity involves supporting the thriving of present and future generations.



## Good Days Will Come

If I can help one person and that person can help another person then it becomes a change.  
(Ntaiya, 2015:unpaginated)

Rahma is 41 years old, mother of three daughters: Semira (25-year-old), Salwa (21-year-old) and Fozjia (19-year-old). The family is of Eritrean origin, but Rahma and her daughters have been living in Addis Ababa for the past 20 years. Their lives have been hit irredeemably by the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998-2000). Rahma's husband, Ismail, and father of her daughters had been deported to Eritrea where he died during the war. Rahma suddenly found herself alone in Addis Ababa, completely isolated from the community (people of Eritrean origin were discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity) with three young children and no source of income. The family was disenfranchised, thus exposed to any sorts of danger and abuses. For years they suffered from severe hunger, diseases, very often lack of water and no access to potable water, lack of hygiene, lack of a proper shelter, harassed by the community and ostracized since Rahma's disease was mistakenly considered to be HIV. In other words, they lived without many human rights. I met Rahma and the family in 2005 and since then we've been very close.

In June 2017 during our latest conversation in Addis Ababa, Rahma talks about her eldest daughter Semira graduating from university and what that means to her as a woman and as a mother.

I was born in Eritrea in the countryside and I'm not educated. When I was young I did not want to give birth given the situation for girls in my country. I didn't want my kids to grow up in the situation I grew up in. (Briganti, field notes Ethiopia, 2017)

As a Living Theory researcher, I use multi-media approaches, such as a video camera, to record conversations when I'm allowed to do so. I find this method particularly useful in trying to understand the body language of the interviewees when in the same space with me. I like to capture the flow of life-affirming energy (Whitehead, 2010) and those imperceptible physical language reactions impossible to reproduce in written language. In fact, the significance of multi-media narratives is that they compensate for some of the limitations in our binocular vision into our relationally dynamic awareness of the movement of bodies in space and boundaries; in other words, our proprioception (Whitehead, 2010). I also wish people to tell their own story, which in my view is as a contribution to the process of dignifying themselves by speaking with their own voice.

We ridiculed representation and said it was finished, but we failed to draw the consequences of this "theoretical" conversion - to appreciate the theoretical fact that only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf. (Foucault, 1980, p.209)

In the following video Rahma (wearing a traditional dress), Salwa (translating from Amharic to English) and Fozjia (on my right-hand side) discuss life and education. Rahma speaks about education as something that no one can take away from you. She then defines her life and those of her daughters as incomparable (from minutes 1:11 to 1:46 and from 3:08 to 4:07 in English).



**Video 1.** [Rahma talking with Arianna and her daughters on education](#) (Briganti, 2017)

When she was young she was deprived of the right to go to school (she can only write her name) whilst her daughters are pursuing their higher education (Semira graduated in July 2017, Salwa is attending second year of university, and Fozjia will complete high school in 2018). Rahma speaks about what education means to her:

Salwa (translating Rahma from minute 1:12 to 1:43): Education for an individual something no one can take away from him. [...] Education stays with you forever, you cannot lend it to anyone, it's just yours. Instead a car or a house can always be taken away. I don't have a car, I don't have a house to give you, but I can give you education, which is the best for you, for your future. This will stay forever with you.

To my question: 'how do the lives of your educated daughters differ from yours?' Rahma responds the following:

Salwa (translating Rahma from minute 3:08 to 4:08): It's very incomparable. In older times if you made it to attend the first grade, you would have learnt the Amharic alphabet in order to write your name and avoid signing with your thumb. If you reached first grade, especially for a girl...that's it! Then you were ready to get married. But nowadays even to be a cleaner you need a paper that you attended 10<sup>th</sup> grade at least. Now everything has changed, and more attention is given to women to be more educated, because in the past they were discriminated. Now even at top level there are women that lead a country.

Later in the conversation Salwa adds that her strengths and motivation to go to school and gain an education came from the conviction that, as she puts it, 'good days will come'. From minutes 4:58 onwards Fozjia with her usual entertaining and joyful spirit recalls when she was attending the Sisters' kindergarten but used to cry a lot since she did not want to go; instead she was only keen to play. Fozjia's ability to laugh and make us laugh even in the most appalling and difficult situations has always impressed me. Even when life was so tough on them, she has always been the one who, with her contagious laughter, sense of humor and optimism, would remind her family (and myself) not to allow anything to deprive them of the little joys of life and from enjoying themselves. I find her ability to have faith in humanity, in the future and look always at the bright side of life very healthy and extremely dignifying. She and her family were living for many years on less than 1 USD per day (according to the World Bank estimate in 2013, 10.7 percent of the world's population lived on less than US\$1.90 a day) (World Bank, 2016, p.59). However, Fozjia and her family never

inspired pity in me; on the contrary they embody the dignified image of African children - one not of malnutrition, but of health, not of child soldiers or street children addicted to drugs, but hardworking students and intact families (Maathai, 2009, p.81).



Video 2. [Semira and Arianna on education](#) (Briganti, 2017)

The following video shows my conversation with Semira, Rahma's eldest daughter who at the time of talking just completed her bachelor's degree in Business Management. Semira, at the age of twelve, had to take charge of the entire household. She had to leave the school and struggled to feed her family members and herself. Out of despair Semira decided to leave Ethiopia and look elsewhere for a better life and more income for her family. Some human traffickers intent on recruiting young Ethiopian women had duped Semira into believing that a brighter future awaited her in Saudi Arabia. She left her mother's home without a trace and started working as a housemaid for a local family in order to earn the money asked by the traffickers for sorting out all the paperwork to travel to Saudi Arabia. Thirteen years later Semira talks about that period of her life with me. From minutes 1:52 -5:41 Semira recalls her painful past and the sense of helplessness she felt whilst thinking that no one would help her family.

Semira: Do you remember when I disappeared from the house? The only thing that I had in my mind was to go the Arab countries, because I saw a lot of my neighbors' children going there, working there and then changing the house and buying some furniture [...]. The only thing I imagined was to go there, work less and gain more money. Because I was tired to see my mom cooking *enjera*<sup>5</sup> every morning ready to be sold and washing other people's cloths. I was not sure about you (Semira refers to me) [...] I thought you will come sometimes, give us some food and then you would leave us. We could not be sure with you. [...] Every night I was dreaming of going to Arab countries and then sending the money to mom. At that time, you remember, our mom was sick. We could not even play with our neighbors' kids, because their thought it was HIV and that we were also infected. Inside me I was dying every day. I still remember when they said: 'you cannot play with us'. How could I have stayed here when and seeing that, that my sisters cannot play...

From 6:23 onwards she provides a powerful insight on how education changed her life.

Semira: being educated gives you confidence, even to speak aloud and say: this is my life [...] I can fight for my rights and I can be independent. Being dependent from someone is like being a slave.

<sup>5</sup> This is the Ethiopian typical bread.

Through education she freed herself, which makes her independent from marital support. While talking about all those girls who are not going to school, Semira says: 'there are some girls staying at home doing nothing and I can convince them to go to school, being free from others, then they will do the same and we can change our world' (from minutes 9:17 to 10:03).

Semira and all the other young women whose stories are presented in this paper manifest the self-perpetrating energy I call generativity, which nurtures the blossoming of the next generation (Briganti, 2016). This is how long lasting changes may occur and bind my empowerment with another person's empowerment.

In essence, generativity is the act of preparing another's garden for spring. It's power in the service of love. It's an act of giving that enables another person to manifest his or her own strengths and gifts through love... Generativity protects our mental and physical health across an entire lifespan. When we nurture others, we nurture ourselves. (Mc Caslin, 2013: unpaginated)

All these are fundamental for my enquiry about the validity of my work as a development professional. My ultimate goal transcends the girls' academic accomplishment and is twofold: firstly it is about emancipation, empowerment, self-confidence and self-determination, autonomy, dignity and social justice; secondly, it is about planting seeds of generativity that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity (Whitehead, 1989).

## How Do I Improve My Practice?

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference. (Frost, 1916: unpaginated)

As a Living Theory researcher I always wonder whether I am improving my practice. Simply put, my profession is to design policies and implement projects that focus on poverty-reduction strategies in developing countries, in the full respect of Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Right at the beginning of my career, I started experiencing that the 'poorest among the poor' are women (The World Bank, 2012, p 55.). In 1995 the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has been adopted with the aim of promoting and protecting the full enjoyment of all human rights and the fundamental freedoms of all women throughout their life cycle (United Nations, 2015, p. IX). However, across the world women are still more likely than men to live in poverty, are consistently earning less than men and concentrated in the lowest-paid and least secure forms of work (Oxfam, 2017, p. 2). At the current rate of progress, the overall global gender gap can be closed in 61 years in Western Europe, 62 years in South Asia, 79 years in Latin America and the Caribbean, 102 years in Sub-Saharan Africa, 128 years in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 157 years in the Middle East and North Africa, 161 years in East Asia and the Pacific, and 168 years in North America (World Economic Forum, 2017, p.25). As a consequence of the above, whilst I started working on those policies and projects, I found myself living and operating alongside women and girls who are discriminated against and realized how much influence gender inequalities have on their personal and professional development. I started wondering how can I contribute to a 'good change' (Chambers, 2005) in the lives of those people. Hence,

how can I do my job better, in order to help vulnerable women and girls in realizing their capabilities and get out of poverty and oppression?

As a manager of development interventions in developing countries (and a very inquisitive person) I am always keen to keep educating myself, hence my interest in acquiring those skills in the field of management and international development that will strengthen my business profile and make me a valid candidate for various business positions. As a Living Theory researcher and field worker I treasure the lessons I learn from the direct contact with the many people I work with in developing countries. My practical experience and my reflexive self, show me that I need to understand better the similarities between me and the girls and women that I help if I really want to improve my practice and transcend the shortfall of development intervention. I concur with what Maathai says about the international development sector:

While aid can be a very useful tool for development, it also may be achieving a complete opposite outcome, undermining its stated objectives and leaving a majority of Africans dependent rather than empowered. [...] The international community often expects fact returns from its development investments, but the problem of underdevelopment, marginalization, lack of self-esteem, fear and cynicism didn't afflict Africa's people yesterday- indeed they have accumulated over centuries. (Maathai, 2009, p.77)

I also echo Maathai when she says that 'sometimes when we do our work in high-level meetings, we are not making changes where they really matter' (Maathai, 2009, p. 15). As a LT researcher I am researching my own practice as a development worker to generate and share educational knowledge that can be of use to others in generative sustainable development to enhance the flow of values and understandings that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity (Whitehead, 1989). These are the reasons why I decided to engage in a very disciplined and deep analysis of my personal and professional story in generating my living-educational-theory with my values and where they come from as my explanatory principles. I found out that there are aspects of my younger self that are more similar to the women I work with than I could have guessed.

Until we actually sit down and look at what the mind is doing, [and see] the nature of awareness. . . there is really no motivation to wake up, which is precisely why most people in the world are just going through their lives; and waking up is not a high priority; because they haven't seen what their minds are doing, what their minds are up to. (Goldstein, 2008: audio file)

By pursuing the nature of my awareness (ibid.) I have recently recognized aspects of my young self, which brought me back many years to when I was in a subordinated and disempowered position and made me feel a vulnerable and helpless little girl. It's the first time that I've seen how similar I am to some of the women I have worked with regardless of my privileged education and western upbringing. It is also my first time to recognize that some of those women's common denominators, such as discrimination, violence and inequality, have also been mine. I wonder if I was thinking that I was immune or in denial as my own biases make me associate (mistakenly) gender discrimination with less developed countries more. It seems I did. I also admit that the woman I become, struggles both

cognitively and emotionally to accept that features of vulnerability and helplessness I see in other women's eyes as similar to what used to be my own.

Insight is really a function of an intuitive new way of seeing a situation or experience. Insight isn't about creating some mental state or changing what's actually going on, but . . . suddenly, Aha! [we] see something differently. The situation doesn't change, but our perspective on it can change because we see it in a different way. (Wilson, 2006: audio file)

I therefore also recognize that I used their same 'weapons' to fight back against patriarchy and the lack of choices that refrained me from exploring my own potential as a human being and as a woman. Acquiring the freedom to choose was part of the process I adopted to dignify myself and become the changes I wish to see in the world.<sup>6</sup> Those weapons are resilience, hope, courage and love. These are the skills that I need the most in my personal and professional life. These are the skills I know I want to pass on to all those girls and women who feel discriminated against in terms of their gender, disempowered and helpless. This is the path I walk along to improve my practice, both in my work as a (generative) development professional and as a researcher who is contributing to knowledge of her field as she explores the implications of asking, researching and answering questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'

## Conclusion

Let us truly see those about whom we speak (Adichie, 2016: unpaginated)

In this article, I have explored some of the implications of asking, researching and answering my question 'How can I improve my practice?' (Whitehead, 1989). I have presented a journey into my personal and professional growth as a development worker engaged with gender inequalities in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is a country still dominated by patriarchy, with an adolescent birth rate of 58.4 % (births per 1000 women aged 15-19) and a gender development index of 0.842 (UNDP, 2016). The self-reflexive journey includes the generation of my living-educational-theory as I focus on improving my practice as well as the professional and academic knowledge-base of development work. I explained how as a development professional I envisage development work as a means for sustaining underprivileged people in the process of empowering themselves and moving towards a sustainable and generative development. The evidence I use to justify my claims to know, includes digital multi-media data within my narrative. By showing myself in conversation with Ethiopian young women I am seeking to show and clarify the meanings of the embodied values I use in explaining my educational influences in my own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations that influence my practice and understandings. This ongoing process has helped me to 'see' myself in relation to the people I work with, consequently 'seeing' them more clearly and connecting more deeply with their lives, expectations, vulnerabilities and humanity.

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<sup>6</sup> This frequently used quotation is attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, but it cannot be traced back to a definite year or publication

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