

GLOBAL CHANGE LEADERS CASE STUDY



Dr. Bogaletch Gebre
KMG Ethiopia

Rachel Hess

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP
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Dr. Bogaletch Gebre

KMG Ethiopia

Introduction

“If I can save the life of a single girl, I will have done my job”: This was the vision Dr. Bogaletch (Boge) Gebre brought with her when she returned to Ethiopia in 1997 after 13 years in the United States. Fifteen years after her return, the lives of hundreds of thousands of girls have been radically changed, and an entire area has experienced a cultural revolution with Dr. Boge Gebre at its centre. In 1997, all young girls in her home area in southern Ethiopia were subjected to female genital mutilation. When UNICEF conducted a survey of the area in 2008, they found that 97 percent of the population was opposed to the practice. There are now 20,000 young women participating in ‘un-cut girls clubs’ that work to protect women and girls from female genital mutilation and other harmful traditional practices. This swift transformation in a community’s perspective on a deeply-rooted, traditional, rite of passage is directly attributed to the work of Dr. Boge and her organization, KMG Ethiopia¹. “The reason we have seen this rapid change is because Dr. Boge is a living example,” explains Abinet Wotro, manager of the KMG centre in Durame. “She knows the pain, she is part of the community, and she was willing to leave her life in the U.S. to dedicate herself to seeing a community free of female genital mutilation.” This case study, based on interviews conducted in 2011, examines the experience of KMG and the leadership of Boge Gebre, and highlights the elements that have contributed to this extraordinary transformation.

Context

Ethiopia is one of the oldest continuous civilizations in the world, which has seen the rise and fall of multiple kingdoms and other systems of government throughout its 2,000-year history. The current Ethiopian constitution, which expressly provides for a set of basic human rights, was adopted in December 1994, three and a half years after the collapse of the 17-year military rule of Mengistu Haile Mariam.

Contemporary Ethiopia is home to people of more than 80 ethnic groups, practicing various religions and speaking many languages. Most Ethiopians live in rural communities where health and education services continue to be limited. As a result, literacy levels are low and infant and maternal mortality rates are high. The economy is based on agriculture, but frequent droughts and outdated cultivation practices hinder productivity. In this context, building the self-reliance and resilience of rural, agrarian communities is critical to strengthening the country.

In 1997, when she began her work in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People’s Region of Ethiopia, Boge selected four sub-districts of the Kembatta–Tembarro zone as the initial focus of KMG. These areas were selected because they shared socio-economic challenges and at the same

¹ KMG is the acronym for Kembatti Mentti Gezzima-Tope, which is translated into English as “Kembatta Women Standing Together.”

time they were significantly different. In the highland area, 99 percent of the population was Christian, while in the lowland area, the vast majority was Muslim. KMG began work in these areas by conducting a baseline survey. Focusing particularly on the condition of women, the survey found that all young women were subjected to genital mutilation. Access to health care was extremely limited and reproductive health services were not available in the area. The practice of bride abduction was widespread: in the Muslim community, 87 percent of men had taken their wives through abduction. Few girls attended school and those who did began school much later than boys, most dropping out as they approached puberty for fear of abduction. Therefore, few achieved more than a fourth grade education. At the time of the 1998 survey no woman held an elected or appointed position of public service in the area.

The area of Kembatta–Tembarro is densely populated, with 450-600 people living in one square kilometre, approximately ten times higher than the national average of 53 inhabitants per km² (World Almanac, 1999). Increasing population pressure has led to significant environmental degradation, deforestation and depletion of water resources. This increases the burden on women whose responsibilities include gathering of fuel wood and hauling water for the household. Boge compared the life of a rural woman to that of a beast of burden: “Women were valued no more than the cows they milked. They accepted their back-breaking, spirit-crushing life as their God-given lot.”

The Making of an Activist

It was into this context that Boge was born. Her childhood was typical of any Kembatta girl in the 1950s. Her days were spent helping her mother; she carried water, gathered fuel wood and assisted with other household chores. What was not typical was her ambition to learn. She vividly remembers learning the Amharic alphabet while visiting the home of her father’s uncle — her cousin had just returned from the mission school with a small board on which the alphabet was printed. In the women’s quarters of her granduncle’s house, Boge’s cousin pointed out each letter of the alphabet for her on this precious board. Through the night, she couldn’t wait for morning so that she could recite the alphabet as she had learned it. Before the end of her visit Boge was able to write her name. Her father was proud of her quick learning, but would have preferred to see this quality in a son. She was expected to focus on her housework; there was no plan for school. However, there was an informal school held for a few hours each day in the church to teach children both the language of the Orthodox Church as well as Amharic. Early in the morning, she would hide her water pot in the bushes and run off to this church school for an hour or two and then rush back, collect her water and return home to take up her chores.

Eventually, her father’s uncle took Boge to the mission school where she was the only girl in the classroom. There were many times when she had to miss months of school, yet she worked hard and stood first in her class. Although her parents never attended school events, her granduncle continued to support her and kept her father informed of her achievements. After completing studies at the mission school, Boge received a scholarship to attend the only boarding school for girls in Addis Ababa. She then attended the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and was a Fulbright scholar at the University of Massachusetts, completing her Ph.D. at the University of California, Los Angeles. While studying in the U.S., she began her work to assist her fellow Ethiopians. She ran marathons to

raise money to send more than 300,000 books back to Ethiopian schools. It was also while she was in California that she met Susanna Dakin, who asked her about the prevalence of female genital mutilation in Ethiopia and even whether Boge herself had personal experience with this practice. Boge was incensed by Susanna's direct questions. Her initial response was, "It's none of your business to pry into our traditional practices!" But Susanna continued to provide information about the impact of female genital mutilation on women's health. Boge came to see how damaging the practice was and realized that "we didn't have to go through this life-changing experience." In a moment of dramatic awakening, she turned her anger into commitment to change this traditional practice.

Journey on the Road

Fired by her new understanding of the harmful impact of female genital mutilation, Boge returned to Ethiopia in 1997 with \$5,000 and great determination to make a difference. She did not set out with a defined plan or five-year strategy, but relying on her "foolish courage" and passion to bring change, she returned to her home place, to the people she knew and the culture she understood. While female genital mutilation was her entry point, her broader vision was, and continues to be, working for women's emancipation, for women's discovery of their own power.

In April 1998, Boge was invited to speak in her home church. Eight hundred people gathered for the event. "I was outside of myself because of fear. I was like a possessed person," she recalls. She spoke from her heart on the issues about which she felt passionately: female genital mutilation, HIV/AIDS, and the role of women in the community. She drew on the Bible, the authority she knew her audience would recognize, and challenged the congregation: "As Christians can we correct God's work? When we cut a woman's body that has been created whole, are we not questioning God?" She spoke and answered questions for more than an hour. Her respectful listening and honest discussion with each questioner broke the silence that had surrounded these issues.

While they had listened to her talk, there was another, more urgent priority for which the community sought her help: they needed a permanent, safe bridge to replace a temporary one across a gorge that divided the town. Though she had only \$5,000 that she had planned to use for other purposes, she asked what others could contribute to the bridge. Together with Boge's financing and the community's materials and labour, the bridge was built that year, consolidating her connection to the town. She was no longer perceived as talking only about women's concerns, but became recognized for her concern about the entire community. While a typical non-governmental organization might have approached the community with a specific agenda of projects or services, she was prepared to work with people toward the transformative change they valued.

During this period Boge's mother, who had always been her inspiration, continued to provide guidance, support and practical grounding in local realities. In her eagerness to change traditional practices, Boge felt angry toward men, including her father, whose domineering, patriarchal attitudes she had grown up with. "Why do you tolerate this?" she asked her mother, who pointed out that Boge's father, like other men and women of his time and place, had been given a specific gender role. Men were expected to control the family no matter what that required, thereby gaining and keeping the respect of the community: a paternal role, which, her mother told her, "He fulfilled... perfectly." At the same time, her mother encouraged Boge to reflect on the balance of nature. Life

was not just one thing; all elements were linked. Respect for all elements of this web was critical to bringing change.

Beginning in 1997, Boge built KMG from the ground up, taking on the arduous process of registering her organization, knowing that it typically took three years. She couldn't wait. With dogged determination, she made multiple trips each week to Awassa, the seat of regional government. At the federal level, she persistently followed up her application. She visited a key official in hospital, bearing flowers and a request that he take immediate action to move her application forward; he made a critical call from his hospital bed. In the end, as a tribute to Boge's tenacity, KMG was registered in November 1997, just seven months after she had returned to Ethiopia.

In the first years, Boge did everything herself, driven to understand every element of engaging the community. She says, "I needed to climb the ropes myself." At the time, KMG was building the Resource Centre in Kembatta, and she worked directly with the vendors and construction crew: "I needed to know all the costs, where every cent we spent was going," she explained. Gradually, as the work progressed, she began to hire staff to share the work.

In 1998, KMG conducted a baseline survey of the extent of harmful customary practices in Kembatta and Alaba areas, and in 1999 the findings were presented to the community. Boge and her team expected 90 people to attend, but more than 500 came. The presentation highlighted the negative impact of female genital mutilation on women's health and maternal mortality. This open and public discussion broke down the strong taboo against discussing these issues.

One of KMG's first initiatives was to set up community-based 'dialogue groups' for women to congregate and discuss various social issues they were concerned about. Sixty women joined the first group, which focused on learning about gender. Boge continued to draw on what the community members already knew and valued, using creation stories in the religious texts to illustrate the equality of men and women. The group process was one of listening and sharing; in this context women were introduced to the concept that the subservient role they had accepted as God-given was, in fact, a role developed by society and therefore open to change. She recalls that it was "an absolute revelation to women that they were as equally valuable as human beings as men were."

As a critical mass developed of local women ready to speak out for themselves, Boge and her team began bringing together groups of women and men, young and old, to discuss and act upon issues of mutual concern. A clear demonstration of the change that was beginning to take shape in the minds of community members occurred in late 2000, when a 16 year-old girl was abducted. Earlier, this would have been a commonplace occurrence and while traumatic for the girl, would have been accepted by the community. However, this time her abductor was pursued and she was returned to her family. She brought charges against her abductor and for the first time a perpetrator was sentenced for this crime. The girl was supported by her family and friends to return to high school and went on to graduate from college and become a teacher. "She was our Rosa Parks," Boge remembers. "She was such a symbol of hope and change."

KMG continued to spread information about the damage that female genital mutilation caused to women and the fact that many childbirth deaths could be directly attributed to this practice. In early 2002, KMG made a video of a cutting, showing the trauma of the process. While all the community members had accepted it, few had observed it. This video had a profound impact on everyone. For the first time, women and men, girls and boys, became aware of what was really involved in this practice, which had traditionally been referred to as 'getting out the dirt.' The video served

as a match that ignited action against the practice. In June 2002, 78 girls, carrying placards saying, “I will not be cut,” marched in a rally that drew a crowd of more than 3,000 people. Addressing the crowd, these girls challenged their elders, “We are your daughters, please don’t kill us.” By September 2002, the community celebrated the public marriage of an uncut girl. The bride and groom wore signs, hers declaring that she was uncut and his stating his delight to be marrying a whole woman. Since that first highly-celebrated event, there have been many public weddings in the area, demonstrating support for the eradication of female genital mutilation.

As members of the communities recognized the negative impact of female genital mutilation, they did not rely on the government to enforce the law but created their own sanctions against continuation of this practice. Volunteers stood watch to protect young women from being cut. Those who continued the practice were dismissed from the church or the mosque, shunned by the traditional social self-help groups or idirs that play a central role in the life of the community. The most important change was in the minds of community members, as women and other members of the community came to understand and began to recognize the value and rights of women.

Because female genital mutilation in the Kembatta tradition is typically performed during the teenage years, the girls were able to claim an alternative future for themselves once they realized the dangers of the practice. Boge recognized the power of this youthful passion and supported them in their refusal to submit, creating venues and events that provided opportunities for the young women to spread the anti-female genital mutilation message to others. With the communities of Kembatta–Tembarro, KMG established a new cultural celebration called ‘Whole Body, Healthy Life.’ Occurring in the fall of each year, this new celebration replaces the traditional rites of passage that attended girls’ circumcision. During the first Whole Body celebration in 2004, more than 20,000 uncut girls marched to the administration centre of the Kembatta–Tembarro region and encouraged the more than 50,000 people gathered to join them in denouncing the tradition of female genital mutilation. The annual festival now celebrates the courageous uncut young women and the young men who marry them, their parents who support them, and the communities that accept them. In 2009, a UNICEF evaluation study in the Kembatta–Tembarro zone found that female genital mutilation had been reduced by 97 percent across the entire area. According to the study, only 3 percent of elders reported that they wanted their daughters to be cut and their sons to marry cut girls. In one decade, the work of KMG had spread beyond the initial sub-districts to cover the entire zone.

While eradication of female genital mutilation continues to be a focus of KMG, this issue is not addressed in a vacuum. As early as 2002, KMG entered into a collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to test and implement its ‘Community Capacity Enhancement – Community Conversation’ (CCE-CC) methodology, a participatory learning process focused on strengthening community action related to HIV/AIDS. The CCE-CC methodology was

We are the Medicine

Ana Samuel Aabo, an elder from one of the districts in Kembatta–Tembarro zone had this reflection after attending a community conversation on HIV/AIDS:

Up to yesterday I believed that this disease of AIDS does not have medicine, but yesterday I discovered the medicine... This disease does not jump up and attack me unless I give a way to it. Let us not say that this disease does not have medicine. We are the medicine.

(KMG Newsletter, 2004)

designed to mobilize communities through facilitated dialogue aimed at identifying their key areas of concern as well as local capacity and resources to address these concerns. The conversations are facilitated at the village level by two volunteers trained by KMG. The community selects 50 participants (25 women and 25 men), each of whom represents a segment of the population: women, men, girls, youth, business people, religious leaders, government officials, etc. Group members meet regularly to learn about HIV/AIDS, its transmission and the impact it is having on their area. From the conversations emerge actions the community can take to reduce infections and care for those who already have the disease. One specific action is that both Christian and Muslim leaders now expect young couples to be tested for HIV before marriage.

In 2004, KMG was commissioned by the UNDP to coordinate the expansion of the CCE-CC process in Ethiopia. With support from the country's president, Girma Wolde-Giorgis, the federal government of Ethiopia adopted the CCE-CC methodology tested and refined by KMG as the prototype for a nationwide HIV/AIDS intervention strategy. KMG was then contracted to supervise the training of personnel in HIV/AIDS prevention and control offices in all regions of Ethiopia for one year.

In 2003, KMG became one of three Ethiopian organizations to join Oxfam Canada in piloting an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach. This methodology complemented the key principles that had been guiding the work of KMG from the beginning: listen to the community, learn from local experience, and respect the community's wisdom. Training in ABCD ap-

In the town of Durame, The Matoma (Unity) group meets to strengthen the businesses of its members. The group offers a safe place for members to save as well as the opportunity for them to borrow for business investments. Most of the women who are members of Matoma are engaged in petty trade, so they use the loans to buy inventory in bulk when prices are low to sell at retail when prices rise. During the fasting period, a woman trader may stock up on butter to sell when the fast is broken and everyone is buying butter for the special celebratory foods. Demekech, chairwoman of the group, reflected on the impact of the training in ABCD methodology: "The training helped us recognize what we have. We learned how to mobilize a small thing so that it can be expanded. We now know how to do business so we wouldn't stop even if we didn't have the support of KMG. We take loans, not gifts. We re-pay."

proaches provided KMG new and practical tools to assist communities in identifying their resources, analyzing their economic situation and prioritizing their action. Groups were formed that focused specifically on economic activities such as group saving and loans to support both the small businesses of individual group members as well as collective investments. In combining two methodologies – ABCD, with its focus on economic transformation, and Community Conversation, with its focus on social transformation – KMG strengthened its integrated approach of linking social, economic and ecological issues and solutions.

Lessons Learned

Critical Enabling Factors

The success Boge and her organization has achieved is the result of many factors. First, Boge's personal attributes and clarity of vision have been critical elements. Specifically, her passion for women, for upholding their dignity and improving their lives fuels and energizes the work of KMG and all who are engaged in it. This passion has been accompanied by her openness to what can be learned from each encounter, particularly evident in her capacity to listen. A former KMG staff member described her highly-developed ability to analyze conversations. This quality of listening, he said, has made Boge the most active learner he has ever met.

While Boge and KMG have been the catalysts for change in Kembatta–Tembarro region, they were not working in complete isolation. Other voices were raised against female genital mutilation and in other parts of the country organizations were also working to counter this harmful practice. In 1987, the government of Ethiopia established the National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia (NCTPE) to provide information about the dangers of several traditional practices and to build awareness among religious and traditional leaders of the need to eradicate female genital mutilation. In 2004, the government of Ethiopia passed a law against this practice. In various regions of the country, non-governmental organizations have been working to eliminate female genital mutilation: among them, HUNDEE in Oromia, the Youth and Culture Office of the Amhara Region, and CARE-Ethiopia in Afar. While the practice of female genital mutilation was still universal in the area when Boge and KMG began their work, they were moving in step with the nation-wide efforts to stop the practice. These broader events played a role in preparing even the isolated communities of Kembatta–Tembarro for change.

Boge, through KMG, has always taken a holistic approach in her work. She frequently returns to the symbol of a three-legged stool as an image for sustainable community change. In this model, one change is not pursued in isolation but grows out of addressing the web of social, economic and ecological needs of the community. This has played a central role in KMG's success and has helped the organization weather the recent changes in Ethiopia's law governing non-governmental organizations. One new law that could have had a severe impact on KMG is the so-called Charities and Societies Proclamation, adopted in 2009, which prohibits any Ethiopian NGO receiving more than 10 percent of its funding from abroad from engaging in human rights work. Owing to its strong track record of achievements in enhancing community well-being through a broad range of activities, including infrastructure development, environmental remediation, and promotion of healthy lifestyles, KMG has defied being categorized as a women's rights organization and experienced no restrictions on its work.

Notwithstanding her absolute commitment to KMG and intense absorption in its work, Boge Gebre has developed alliances with other individuals and groups that are working on similar issues elsewhere in the country. She was one of the founders of the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations and served as its vice-chair, as well as being active in the Female Genital Mutilation Network, Poverty Action Network in Ethiopia, Christian Relief and Development Association and other organizations. She has also maintained the circle of friends acquired during the years she

spent in the United States. These longtime friends continue to support Boge Gebre and KMG financially, practically and emotionally.

Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

There have been significant challenges along the way. Initially, there was the fundamental challenge of deeply-rooted traditional views that dominated the region, built on rigidly-defined gender roles that kept women subservient to men, unable to express themselves, and confined to the drudgery of endless labour. Men were also trapped in a role that required them to be in complete control of their family and to discipline the household. In this world, discussion regarding female genital mutilation and HIV/AIDS was strictly taboo. The people of Kembatta vividly recall how deeply offensive the idea of an uncut woman seemed and how impossible open discussion of these forbidden topics appeared. It was not until women began to recognize their own value and power that change began to occur. When Boge listened to women, she understood the reality of their lives, yet she also offered new, relevant information. This engaged conversation became more formalized as KMG refined the Community Capacity Enhancement – Community Conversations methodology. These regular, facilitated exchanges amongst representatives of all parts of the community fostered and reinforced attitudinal change that led to specific and sustained change in practice.

The Kembatta–Tembarro zone lies in the southern region of Ethiopia. This is the area that was the focus of the first Protestant missions to Ethiopia and the frequent recipient of emergency food aid in times of drought and famine. Non-governmental organizations have been active in the area for decades. While much assistance has been provided, these combined experiences have eroded the area's traditional self-reliance and left a strong legacy of dependence. When a new organization enters a community, the expectation is that it will bring money, jobs, and services. In this environment, Boge's approach, through KMG, was starkly different. Even though she did respond to the initial request for financial help to build the bridge, she did so as a partnership, with ownership retained by the community. What the people of the Kembatta–Tembarro communities came to expect was that KMG would listen to their priorities and assist them in developing a plan to address these issues. The respect for the capacity of individuals and communities to solve their own problems has been at the core of KMG's involvement. To catalyze community change, KMG has brought new ideas and strategies in the form of ABCD and community conversations methodologies, tools that are now owned by the communities. As groups clearly identify their priorities, the resources they have in-hand and the gaps they need to fill, they are empowered to seek out those resources from public and private sources. As they gain power, community members don't wait for the government to solve their problems and they learn how to hold their government accountable more effectively.

KMG has also faced the same challenge that all non-governmental organizations encounter: the urge to follow shifting donor priorities in order to secure funding. However, Boge's commitment was to see lives changed, particularly those of women and girls in the area. Her dedication to her vision has meant that KMG has sustained its involvement in Kembatta–Tembarro for nearly 15 years, resulting in dramatic change – the virtual eradication of female genital mutilation – across the entire zone. This atypical persistent commitment over time has been key to the deep transfor-

mation of the area and has resulted in a profound sense of ownership of the organization by the people of Kembatta–Tembarro.

KMG now faces the challenge of success. During the past few years, the organization has grown and its message is now reaching communities well beyond the Kembatta–Tembarro zone. Resources are now available from more donors as many supporters are drawn to the organization through Boge's inspiration. The personal crusade that brought her back to Ethiopia to change the life of one girl has now evolved into an organization at a critical juncture. In the beginning, Boge focused on creating momentum for change and tangible results rather than on developing organizational structures. That approach successfully ignited community transformation in the Kembatta–Tembarro zone, but, based as it was on her charismatic leadership, it had its limits. No longer can she personally plan and shape everything at KMG.

Boge and her team have turned their attention to consolidating what they have learned so that they can develop structures that will support greater scale. In early 2011, KMG conducted an organizational diagnosis that has led to development of a strategic plan for scaling up. This has identified the geography for expansion and clarified the financial and human resources that will be needed, specifically the competencies required at the community, regional and national offices. Through this process, Boge has remained focused. Her goal is that the organization remains committed to increasing the recognition of women's value and to the capacity of communities to address their own concerns. In this way, KMG will be better equipped to make the transition from one individual's personal vision to a vibrant organization.

In addition to this organizational challenge, Boge faces a personal challenge. She recognizes that her next role in the leadership of KMG is to hand off the day-to-day management so that she can focus on the long-range task of developing an institution that can last for generations. Belayneh Nekatibeb, her former colleague, describes this transition as an opportunity for Boge to 'upscale,' or shift her focus from the specific challenges of managing KMG to sharing her vision of women-focused, community-empowered development more broadly. She has a continuing role to play as the inspiring leader and advocate for women's empowerment and can attract others — community organizations, donors, and emerging leaders — to adopt the effective approaches she has demonstrated in KMG. The ongoing challenge lies in successfully negotiating this transition.

Perspective on Leadership

Reflecting on her role in leading change during the past 15 years, Boge pointed out several elements that have been critical to her success. It was important that she chose to return to her home and to work with the people and culture she knew. Because she was a woman who had shared the experiences of the women in the community, they knew she understood their pain. It was also important for her to include men in the process and integrate women's issues into the web of community concerns. She says, "As we work for women's empowerment our oppressors are our best friends, our husbands, our fathers. We must free men so that they can support our struggle."

She did not consciously think of herself as a leader but came to leadership out of a sense of urgency to change a life-destroying practice. "It's not an individual who claims leadership," she says. Leadership is attributed by others, rather than assumed. Others come seeking leadership. The per-

son who can draw others together toward a positive goal is providing leadership. Leaders do what they say: they lead by example, practicing the change they want to see.”

She says that while there are no set rules in community mobilization for change, there are fundamentals that must always be in place. These are the key elements of Boge’s approach that have been critical to KMG’s success:

- Listen to people in the community. They have been surviving for centuries without new ideas, information and technology that others can bring. Integrate what they know and value with new information and ideas that they can use to move forward on the road of their choosing.
- Trust the community. Parents do not want to hurt their children. Their commitment to harmful traditions can change rapidly if they understand the harm these practices do to their children.
- Be transparent and reliable. If you can’t fulfill a promise, explain openly what has changed and why you are not able to carry through.
- Know what you want to achieve, articulate it clearly so that others can join you, and then commit yourself to it.
- Take an integrated, balanced approach linking economy, ecology and social and political systems. Life does not present one thing at a time. It is a complex combination of factors that are all connected.

Boge believes that women bring unique attributes to leadership as they bring to it the same qualities which they draw on in the roles of mother, wife, sister and daughter. These core capacities are needed in the dominant context of hierarchy and competitiveness. One of these is compassion, a deep caring for others that transforms those around a leader and helps others adopt and own that vision. Another is empathy, the ability to put oneself in the position of others and see the situation from their perspective. Listening with wisdom is critical to understand the core of what is being said so that this can be reflected back to the speaker. Managing one’s ego is another element of leadership, not protecting position or territory, but focusing on achieving the goal rather than anticipating recognition. Boge points out how important it is to be willing to learn from each encounter. “Both my detractors and my supporters have been my teachers,” she says. Criticism and disagreement that she has experienced has prompted her to improve her work and to be more strategic. She points out that every challenge, if understood, can lead to stronger, more focused work. And she urges women leaders not to rely on their ‘woman-ness.’ Successful women leaders, in her view, do not expect special recognition nor use their gender as an excuse, but instead focus on the vision, act with confidence and lead by example.

Boge is proud of the many employees who have joined KMG, developed professional skills and then moved on to other opportunities. She values the opportunity to mentor both her core KMG staff members as well as leaders emerging in the communities. Amongst her staff members, Boge looks for potential even when the individual doesn’t see it. Working with promising staff members, she encourages them to take on new challenges and build on their strengths, supporting them in following the path they want to pursue. One example is Belayneh Nekatibeb who, until early 2011, was KMG’s program director. In 2007, Belayneh joined KMG to fill a short-term, part-time posi-

tion. Early on, Boge recognized his strong social skills, his capacity for political analysis and his urge to lead. She sought out ways to encourage him and help him achieve his goals, which included providing the opportunity for him to study at the Coady International Institute and to lead KMG's involvement with the ABCD pilot project. Belayneh has been inspired by Boge's commitment to listening and learning, and by her passion and persistence. After leaving KMG and taking up new responsibilities, he carried with him the example of Boge's work along with the value of strengthening self-reliance within communities.

As a result of KMG's work, leaders have emerged from many corners of the community. Boge has demonstrated her conviction that women, even in very constrained and sometimes violent situations, have the capacity to change things for themselves. She did not take a protective stance or paternalistic attitude toward women with limited or no education. Instead she listened to them and shared information that was new and life-changing and that emphasized their value as human beings with legally protected rights. Many of the women who have participated in KMG training events have become activists and community leaders. One example is Amarich Miniso, KMG coordinator for Dambuya community. She learned about the training KMG offered on women's rights at the time when her deceased husband's family was trying to take her husband's property from her. The training changed her life: "I realized that I have full rights to live my life. It was a great lesson. It made me know myself. I can do anything," she recalls. She immediately applied her new understanding by going to court to claim her husband's property. She won the case, and began sharing her experience with women and girls in her area. She became a community facilitator and later, accepted the responsibility of district coordinator when KMG opened its office in Dambuya. In this role, she continues to support community facilitators and the community groups that now carry on the work started by KMG.

In the 15 years that KMG has been working in Kembatta–Tembarro, a generation of young people has grown up. For many, their life goals have been shaped by the changes they have seen in the community. One such young person is Abinet Wotro, who was a college student when Boge came back to Kembatta. Several months ago, he realized his dream of working with KMG when he took the post of manager of KMG's center in Durame.

Under Boge's leadership, KMG has drawn on this emerging leadership from community and staff members to strengthen and expand the organization.

Final Message

"Leadership comes in many forms, and there are leaders everywhere," says Boge. "The first uncut girl who got married publicly is a leader whose example has changed many lives. So is the 14 year-old girl who addressed a rally publicly stating her refusal to be cut: "My parents are supposed to protect me, not to harm me." If one can articulate a vision through which she can motivate others to make a change, that person is a leader.

Boge's leadership of KMG has drawn on the strength of her own personality and passion for change. She has also been a continuous learner, adopting new approaches and adapting them to the realities of the communities in which she worked. Her focus has been to help community members, both women and men, understand the harm done through female genital mutilation. Building on the momentum of change against this traditional practice, she has gone on to foster community

self-reliance in addressing other critical issues. In the past 15 years, Boge and KMG have brought multi-faceted change to Kembatta–Tembarro region.

With this success comes new challenges. How can an organization that began as a personal campaign against female genital mutilation transform into an institution that can continue to grow? How can it include new leaders without losing its focus on increasing the ability of women and men to recognize their own power to address the needs of their families and communities? And how can Boge, who has committed her very life to this effort, move into a new role that provides the strategic support these new leaders need, while giving them the power to take the organizations into the future? To meet these new challenges, Boge will again draw on the qualities that have served her well: openness to learning, listening to the wisdom of the group, and recognizing the complexity of issues and the need for balance. She acknowledges that the next steps are unclear but that has been true all along. Working for social change is often unpredictable. “What happens might follow a different route than expected,” she observes. “Change takes on its own life and a successful leader is open to this evolution.”

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