

Minimising Marginalisation through Education

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Similar to an ‘untouchable’ social class, the Menja ethnic minority in Bonga, the administrative centre of the Keffa Zone in Ethiopia, faces complex social and economic forms of marginalisation. Traditionally a hunting community living in isolation in the forests and at the outskirts of settlements, the customs of the Menja are not well understood by locals, leading to misconceptions and them being somewhat of a ‘counter-culture’. The discriminatory practices the Menja community faces include being denied access to restaurants, being required to use different cups and utensils from others, exclusion from meeting places, being obliged to sell their products at a cheaper price, and facing physical violence when requesting services from businesses.

Additionally, UNESCO designated the Keffa Zone a Biosphere Reserve in 2010. These areas are established to promote biodiversity conservation through sustainable use. As the traditional economic activities of the Menja é producing and selling firewood and charcoal é impact on deforestation, new legislation which protects the environment brings further exclusion to the Menja. The marginalisation of this group further restricts their alternative sources of income necessary from this UNESCO designation.

Due to the marginalisation and economic discrimination they face, the level of attendance of Menja children in schools is poor with many dropping out at an early grade level. Children of this ethnic minority also tend to start school at a later age than the dominant ethnic group.

The organisations A Partnership with Africa (APA) and Community of Volunteers for the World (CVM) have been active in Bonga working to promote integration through training and workshops and increasing access to education. However, research on poverty and education issues is required to comprehend the problems being faced by the community and to guide future interventions. This research project will be the first collection of data on the discrimination and levels of access to education by the Menja minority in Bonga.

This project therefore aims to examine the types of discrimination this ethnic minority currently faces and what steps have been taken so far to integrate the Menja people through education. With particular focus on women, this research intends to answer the following questions:

- What are the barriers to education?
- What are the reasons for not continuing education or dropping out of school at an early level?
- What has the experience been for those girls who have received scholarships from the organisations APA and CVM to attend school?
- Are there barriers for the Menja ethnic minority to becoming economically productive members of society upon receiving an education?

This project will commence in May and terminates at the end of July and the findings would be summarised in the poster presentation at this conference.