Ethiopian Human Rights Activists Visit Cornell

By Sage Daugherty — Online News Editor
Published: October 28, 2013

Cornell University Law School hosted two Ethiopian human rights activists who engaged in a dialogue about the human rights experiences of Ethiopian women and children with disabilities.

Sponsored by Cornell Law’s Avon Global Center for Women and Justice and its International Human Rights Clinic, Ethiopian human rights activists Wesenyelesh Admasu Bezabih and Meseret Mamo Kombolcha spoke at 12:15 p.m. Oct. 24 in Cornell’s Saperston Student Lounge. The presentation was titled “Disability and Gender in Ethiopia: A Conversation with Two Ethiopian Women.”

The Avon Global Center is a Cornell Law–based research and advocacy center that works with judges and other people around the world and supports their efforts to address violence against women as well as advance women’s access to justice.

Both women traveled to the United States to speak at Cornell and Syracuse University, and they will speak at disability conferences in Oregon and Washington, D.C., next week.

Bezabih works with the non-governmental organization Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association, and Kombolcha is a member of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. Both women are prominent human rights activists who work to better the lives of women and individuals with disabilities in Ethiopia.

Elizabeth Brundige, executive director of the Avon Global Center, said both women expressed an interest in visiting Cornell, and she thought it would be an opportunity for students to interact with human rights activists from a different country.

“The issue of human rights of people with disabilities is one that oftentimes is overlooked in the types of human rights events that we have here on campus and more broadly,” Brundige said. “It’s a great opportunity to hear from advocates who have been really engaged in these issues.”

Bezabih and Kombolcha are collaborating with the Disability Rights Clinic at Syracuse University to help make the legal aid center in Ethiopia more accessible to people with disabilities. Brundige said women with disabilities often face multiple forms of discrimination because of their disability as well as their gender.

The conversation shed light on the human rights experiences of people with disabilities and focused on the situation that women and children with disabilities are facing in Ethiopia, Michael Schwartz, director of Syracuse University’s Disability Rights Clinic, said.

Kombolcha stressed the issue of human rights and said because of Ethiopia’s diverse background, which includes 85
different ethnic groups, disability should simply be thought of as another diversity and not as a problem.

“Disability is one kind of diversity. [Our motto is] ‘unity and integrity with diversity,’ all for the same cause — being human and enjoying human rights,” Kombolcha said.

Nora Ali, a second-year law student at Cornell, had a personal investment in the conversation about disability and gender because she studied public health and talked about gender disparities in her undergraduate years. Ali said she thought Ethiopia’s ratification of the U.N. Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was a significant step for the developing nation.

“Seeing that their government and their constitutional structure really entitles [disabled] people to certain rights, I thought that was a testament to how Ethiopia’s trying to advance,” she said. “When you see those kinds of institutional structures in place, it encourages people on the ground to try to get those rights.”

The U.N. Convention was adopted in December 2006 and opened for signatures in March 2007. Ethiopia has ratified the convention, giving full rights to individuals with disabilities, however the U.S. has not yet ratified the convention. The U.S. and Japan are the only countries in the G8 to fail to do so. The remaining countries included in the G8 — Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and the United Kingdom — have all ratified the convention.

Schwartz said disability affects everyone directly or indirectly, and part of the problem is the fact that the American and Ethiopian mindsets of disabilities are vastly different.

“An individual with disability struggles with access … the problem with our country is we don’t think of disability as implicating human rights,” he said. “We think of it as an inconvenience — that we have to give [the disabled] this or that, or pay to hire an interpreter or build a ramp. We never think of it in terms of universal access for everybody. Access for people with disabilities is access for everyone.”