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## **“Being a woman farmer is like being cursed”: Gender challenges in horticultural research in South Western Ethiopia**

Mulunesh Abebe<sup>a</sup>, Sarah Nischalke<sup>b</sup>, Beneberu Assefa<sup>c</sup> and Tina Beuchelt<sup>d</sup>

a FANRPAN, Pretoria, South Africa, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia

b Center for Development Research, Bonn, Germany,

c FANRPAN, Pretoria, South Africa, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia

d Center for Development Research, Bonn, Germany

### **Introduction**

Gender is a socially constructed identity of men and women built through socialization. This socially constructed identity is created from the socially assigned roles, responsibilities and behaviors that a given society considers appropriate for women and men, boys and girls (Kabeer, 2003). These behaviors vary from one society to another, differ from one place to another (countries, regions, and villages), from one group to another (class, ethnic, religion, caste) and from time to time (across generations and within one generation). The socialization process starts from birth and it continues up to end. It is further shaped by family, community and society in an interacting manner (Alahira, 2014; Biber & Yaiser, 2004). Gender identity shapes and determines the day-to-day gender relations as well as the resultant power relations between the two sexes. These gender-power-relations are manifested in the specific activities of who should do what, who knows what, who is included in what, who owns what, who controls what, who decides what or who has the power at large. As result, men and women and boys and girls behave differently, perform different roles and obtain different opportunities and challenges that put them at different social positions in a given society (Biber & Yaiser, 2004; Kabeer, 2003).

Ethiopia is one of the developing nations with more than 80 ethnic groups, with diversified cultural values and traditions. Like in other African and developing nations, in Ethiopia roles and responsibilities assigned to be carried out by women and men are highly gendered (Colfer, Catacutan & Naz, 2015; Frank, 1999; Gelinsa, 2015; Kiptot, 2015; Mbosso, et al., 2015). Women contribute up to 70% of the agricultural labour force to smallholder farming in Ethiopia (Asrat & Getnet, 2014, Frank, 1999). In horticulture, especially fruit and vegetable production is one of the primary roles and responsibilities of women. This primary role of women farmers in fruit and vegetable production has paramount importance in enhancing women's income and the food and nutrition security of their families, however, it has its own challenges on women. This study

aimed at exploring gender roles, relations and challenges in a horticultural project in Yayu biosphere reserve in Oromia National Regional State of South Western Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup>

## **Materials and Methods**

Gender-disaggregated qualitative data was collected through 40 focus group discussions, 32 in-depth and 13 key stakeholder interviews in four rural villages (kebeles). An equal number of men and women participated in the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted separately to create a conducive environment, especially for women to speak up and express their ideas freely. Government and non-government officials, including district managers, agriculture extension workers, health extension workers and cooperative heads, were among the key stakeholders who participated in the stakeholder interviews. The qualitative data was collected using semi-structured and open-ended interview protocols. The main topics of the discussion were gender roles and relations, access and control over basic resources, and existing practices and challenges in horticulture, particularly in fruit and vegetable production. Although most of the research participants are bilingual (Oromifa and Amharic), data collection was made in participants' mother-tongue (Oromifa) with the help of local translators. Interviews and focus group discussions were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis method.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of the qualitative data show that women in the study area are overburdened with multiple roles of household chores, child and family care, farming, off-farm activities, and community roles. A woman farmer works up to 17 hours per day and shoulders about 65-70% of the family workload, while men work maximum up to 9 hours per day. Various roles, including preparing food, taking care of children and family members, cleaning, fetching water, collecting firewood, planting, caring and selling of fruits and vegetables, are almost exclusively carried out by women with no or little assistance from their husbands. Besides, women carry out their tasks without the help of modern technologies, which is labor-intensive and tiresome and endangers their health and overall wellbeing. For instance, the findings show that women in the study area cook in traditional open kitchen with lots of smoke and the risk of fire accidents. They walk on average 30 minutes to fetch water, 2-5 hours to collect firewood and 1-3 hours to market places. On average, they do firewood collection twice a week and marketing once per week. They often walk barefoot, carrying goods such as fruits and vegetables on their backs. Modern modes of transportation are often inaccessible or unaffordable for most of the women in the study area.

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<sup>1</sup> This research is part of a horticulture project, NutriHAF, Diversifying Agriculture for Balanced Nutrition through Fruits and Vegetables in multi-storey cropping systems in Africa, funded by Center for Development Research, University of Bonn. The project is launched in Yayu biosphere reserve in Oromia National Regional State of South Western Ethiopia in 2015. It is a multidimensional action research project aimed at collecting evidence-based information including on local farming systems, biodiversity use, socioeconomic and value chain supported with capacity building and demonstration practices. Gender is a cross-cutting issue and an integral part of each component of the project to equally enhance participation and benefits of the project for both men and women farmers.<sup>1</sup>

Despite such substantial contributions of women to family livelihoods, they do not have equal decision-making power to men, though there are some improvements in the last 25 years. Nowadays, women have some control over incomes earned from fruits and vegetables.

In addition to their own domain of tasks, women farmers are increasingly and actively engaging in previously assumed men's roles such as environmental protection activities (e.g. terracing, gully treatment, afforestation), herding and caring of livestock, public gatherings, ploughing and various off-farm activities. This is partly the result of several policies and strategies being undertaken by the government that intended to empower women (Hoden & Tewodros, 2008). However, there is little progress on the side of men in participating in traditionally assigned women's activities or roles. Some young and educated men are assisting women in fetching water, taking care of children, taking grains to the mills and the like. Altogether, extent and level of men's involvement in women's tasks is very low.

Women's active engagement in men's tasks, including ploughing, has a paramount importance for women's livelihood security and their overall empowerment, especially in women-headed households. It helps them to reduce their dependency on men for labour and gradually to be self-reliant. However, it increases the workload of the already overburdened female farmers. For instance, one of the female FGD discussants described the general situation of women in the study area and her feelings about being a woman as follows:

*“The work burden of the family is almost all shouldered by women. Men do not want to help us in household chores except in rare cases. Women's life is miserable because of the work burden we shouldered [...]. I do not think there is a woman who is happy of being a woman. May be those who are educated and government employees, they might hire home maids and get assistance from them but for us (female farmers), there is no one to assist us. Being a woman is like being cursed for me”.*

Another women added:

*“Being a woman is not a problem by itself but it is the culture that makes it bad. As it is observable, most of the time, men get rest after finishing their duties but we, women do not. We are expected to do the household chores after spending the whole day doing the farm activities with our husbands. Since men have time to rest their life is not miserable like us, so that being a man is good and an advantage. But we cannot change it because it is nature”.*

The findings show that male farmers are well aware of the work burden of women farmers and respectively of their own wives. However, most of them were not ready to share more tasks and minimize their wives' workload. This was especially common among older and less educated men who mostly stated cultural reasons. This shows that a lot has to be done to bring cultural transformation and practical behavioral changes through education and strong law enforcement.

The study revealed that horticulture is a neglected sector facing several challenges. The findings show that fruit and vegetable production is generally women's business starting from planting to harvesting, selling and preparing food for household consumption. The challenges include lack of gender-sensitive approaches in extension (i.e. male dominated agriculture services), low

capacities of women for vegetable cultivation due to limited knowledge and skills, lack of access to inputs (i.e. seeds, pesticides), innovations and technologies (e.g. preserving and processing systems), consistent markets, value chains and stable prices and damage by wildlife in home gardens. As a result, women farmers' engagement in horticulture does not lead to the desired boost in income and increase in food and nutrition security of their families. The sector needs more attention and women farmers should be at the center of extension activities in horticulture without adding too much of an additional burden on them.

## Conclusions and Outlook

The findings of this research show that roles, responsibilities and relations among the two sexes are highly gendered. Women in the study area are overburdened with multiple productive, reproductive and community roles and they are increasingly and actively engaging in men's roles crossing the boundaries of gender. Although there are little progresses through time, the extent and level of men's engagement in women's roles are very low and insignificant as compared with women's engagement in men's roles and in relieving women from massive workloads.

Although gender equality policies and efforts being undertaken by the government have played significant roles in empowering women, they also brought unintended consequences of putting additional burdens on the already overburdened women. Thus, the unintended consequences of these empowerment policies and strategies should be addressed by bringing men to the level of engagement that women do in men's roles.

The female-dominated horticulture sector is suffering from lack of attention, gender sensitive approaches, basic inputs, modern technologies and systems. These challenges of the sector should be addressed properly. Horticultural projects that intended to empower women farmers should assess and identify "gender harms" (i.e. additional time/burden on women) and design mitigation plans like exploration of labor-saving technologies (multipurpose crops, preservation/processing of fruits and vegetables, planting relatively fast growing trees as firewood source around houses). In addition, strategies that minimize women's work burden by encouraging men's active participation should be designed.

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