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“Solidarity in a competing world —
fair use of resources”

“Being a Woman Farmer Is Like Being Cursed” - Gender Challenges in Horticultural Research in South Western Ethiopia

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Abstract

Female farmers in the Global South are often overburdened with the multiple roles they inhabit in households, farming, childcare and the community. Horticultural projects that aim at improving nutrition and livelihoods usually address the women’s domain of home gardens and vegetable farming. As a consequence interventions tend to increase the workload of female farmers and run the risk to negatively affect the well-being of women as well as the nutritional status of households. This paper explores gender challenges of horticultural research projects, using one example from Ethiopia, where an attempt is made to promote horticultural production in agroforestry systems without putting additional work on already overstrained women farmers. Data was collected through ethnography, 40 gender-disaggregated focus group discussions, 32 in-depth interviews and 13 key stakeholder interviews in four village sites in Oromia, Ethiopia. Research results showed a need for a critical reflection on the gender discourse in development. In Ethiopia, the government course of action on gender equality had as result that a gender and development rhetoric among male and female farmers was created, who predominantly assure that they control, access, share and decide everything equally. However, in reality, the underlying unequal power relations lead to a situation, where women are not relieved of work but work harder, because they face pressure and expectations to participate in male-dominated agricultural tasks. While men commiserate women with their workload, they do not take over female tasks. The research revealed that the new discourse in the scientific community on do-no-harm approaches in agricultural projects is more than relevant in the study region, where women already work at their limits. The paper investigates areas, where women farmers want and realistically could receive more support from male family members and it suggests strategies how to better involve men in the female domain of horticulture and nutrition in order to reduce the burden of women e.g. by saving time for firewood collection (cultivation of fast growing firewood trees) or through food processing techniques.

Keywords: Do-no-harm-approaches, gender, horticulture, nutrition, women’s work burden