

**Gender, Agricultural Development and Food Security in Amhara, Ethiopia:
The Contested Identity of Women Farmers in Ethiopia**

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Summary

While women take an active role in agricultural production and processing and marketing of food products their identity as farmers is highly contested within the agricultural development framework in Ethiopia. This has led to a series of structural barriers, augmented by local cultural perceptions, that have largely precluded women's participation in the agricultural extension process. In addition, women's access to land, technology and decision making power is critically impeded. Unless these structural and cultural barriers are actively addressed by agricultural development programs women's location within the agricultural production process will continue to be marginalized hampering efforts to obtain household food security at a regional and national level.

Introduction

The chronic and severe food insecurity that have characterized Ethiopia over the last several decades has exacerbated the already serious obstacles facing the country's economic and social development. In 1999 alone it is estimated that over six million people (approximately one tenth of the population) will require food aid and at least an additional two million people will be at risk of facing serious food shortage (Personal communication with T. Shortley). The international donor community is currently comparing the food insecurity situation in Ethiopia to the famine of 1984-85. Addressing the structural causes of food insecurity has become a national priority for the Ethiopian government and the international community.

There are four regions in Ethiopia that are responsible for the majority of the country's food production. These primary agricultural regions themselves frequently face severe food shortages and certain areas within these regions are continual recipients of international food aid. The high production areas in these regions are threatened by the degradation of the natural environment and the current farming practices are not sustainable. The Amhara Region is one of the four primary agricultural regions and at the same time has a large portion of the most chronically food insecure population in the country. The international community in collaboration with the Ethiopian government and regional officials are devising strategies designed to move these vulnerable populations from chronically food insecure to productive members of an agriculturally based economy. At the same time rehabilitating and preserving the natural resource base is recognized as essential if the newly designed strategies are to be sustainable.

¹ The views presented in this paper do not necessarily reflect the position of USAID Ethiopia and are the views of the author. All comments and suggestions are welcome.

In Ethiopia women do almost half of the labor required for agricultural production. Despite this women have been left out of the formal agriculture extension process and the formal structures for rural development. By preventing women equal access to agriculture extension advice, inputs and financial credit, household food insecurity has been exacerbated. This paper examines the constraints facing women's complete integration into the agricultural development process and its subsequent effects on household food security in Ethiopia.

Background

The Ethiopian human and physical landscape can perhaps best be characterized as widely diverse with cultural and geographic variability preventing researchers from making generalizations or extrapolating from one situation and applying the same framework to other areas of the country. While issues surrounding the intersection of gender, food security and agricultural development face the same set of constraints as other development issues in Ethiopia, there are a number of common themes that repeatedly emerge in the literature and over the course of interviews regardless of the agricultural region. It is these themes that this study seeks to address and provide recommendations within the context of the proposed interventions for agricultural and economic development in Amhara Region.

International donors have proposed to address food security in Ethiopia by pursuing/supporting activities that work to achieve the following: (a) increase food availability through increased agricultural production and productivity; (b) increase access to food through increased household incomes and more efficient agricultural markets; and (c) improve food utilization through better pre- and post-harvest technologies and nutritional practices. By superimposing a gendered analysis on this framework a number of development priorities begin to emerge. The information suggests that failing to address these priorities will inhibit agricultural development and food security in Amhara Region. It seems a rather obvious conclusion that if women were provided equal access to resources and institutional support that they would be able to become more productive. However, there are a number of institutional and social barriers that continue to prohibit women from engaging fully in the productive sphere.

From a study done by Comitato Internazionale Per Lo Sviluppo Dei Popoli (CISP) in 1997 for the Embassy of the Netherlands;

It appears difficult to persuade policy makers and planners oriented towards food self-sufficiency objectives that if women were given the same resources as men and had the same access to yield increasing inputs, then the small holder agriculture sector would see significant increases in agricultural productivity. Yet, the evidence suggests that the adoption of agricultural support measures targeting women as farmers, would improve the local food security of some of the most resource poor farmers in rural communities. (P.xi, CISP, 1997).

Methodology

The information used for this study was collected by reviewing pertinent documents, literature and national policy material. In addition, meetings and interviews were held with relevant persons to gather information on the current dimensions of gender issues in Amhara region and to discuss existing strategies and problems for addressing these issues. The results from the above work led to a series of ongoing discussions with women farmers and the researcher.

Are women in Ethiopia really farmers?

In contrast to the rest of sub-Saharan Africa (Boserup E. 1970 , Sachs C.1983) this issue still proves quite contentious among extension agents in Ethiopia. According to a study done by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1992, on average women are responsible for about 40 percent of all agricultural labor in Ethiopia. In Amhara Region some of women's primary agricultural responsibilities include land preparation, weeding, harvesting, threshing and storing. In livestock production women are often responsible for herding, tending sick animals, watering, barn cleaning, milking and milk processing. Women are also solely responsible for the household garden. Yet, despite participation in all of these agricultural tasks many agricultural extension agents refuse to acknowledge the importance of women's role in agricultural production.

... in terms of semantics, throughout Ethiopia, both within government bureaus and communities, the term 'farmer' is used synonymously with the word for 'man'. It is clear that whether rural women contribute to the process of agricultural production to a greater or lesser extent, they are generally perceived as marginal players, particularly by those individuals with significant influence on development activities such as bureau heads, development agents and peasant associations. (P.8, CISP, 1997)

In most communities the word 'farmer' is defined by someone who can independently engage in the activities of plowing and sowing. While women assist in sowing, very few women in Amhara Region plow. It is considered an inappropriate activity and too physically demanding for women. It is interesting to note however that plowing does not seem "too physically demanding" for boys as one frequently sees them plowing the fields in the rural communities in Amhara Region. In addition, when one poses the question to women farmers, many of them say they would be happy to learn how to plow, but it would take men some time to accept. There is also evidence of at least a few women in rural communities engaging in plowing activities. This indicates that perhaps women's inability to plow is based more on cultural perceptions than on actual physical inability. The information suggests that many male farmers refuse to consider the idea of 'women as farmers'. They assert that if female-headed households were to be considered as farmers and provided the same access to land and other resources as male-headed households that they would then engage in repeated marriages without care and the entire socio-economic fabric of society would be destroyed (P.14, Masfield, 1998).

In contrast to the above, the National Women's Affairs office stresses the importance of women's role in the rural economy and the Amhara Food Security Program has stated it is committed to working with female-headed households. This indicates that, at least at a Regional level, rural women are recognized as having an important role in agricultural production. More importantly, continuing to marginalize women's role in agricultural production will prevent meaningful interventions and technology developments that could serve to substantially increase household food security. At this time there is not a representative from the Women's Affairs Office, nor a gender specialist on the organizing committee for the Integrated Food Security Program in Amhara Region. It seems that if the Amhara Food Security Program is truly committed to addressing the gendered nuances of household food security it would seek to include at least one professional with a gender focus.

Female-Headed Households vs. Women Farmers in Male-Headed Households

Women in male-headed households and women who head households face different constraints and will require different types of agricultural extension and development interventions. In developing intervention strategies it is important to look at these as two distinct groups that have different advantages and disadvantages within a rural community structure.

On one hand women who head their own households are at an advantage in that if they own land (either through death or divorce of their husband) they are allowed to be members of the Peasant Association (PA)² and therefore have access to and are more likely to receive extension. While they will almost never occupy a position of power within a Peasant Association they will at least legitimately occupy a position within a public community power structure. It also appears that many development efforts are sensitive to the particular economic and social vulnerability of female-headed households. Therefore, these households are often targeted to be beneficiaries of both community and international development efforts (Clay, et al, 1998). On the other hand ultimately these programs have failed to overcome structural constraints to development facing female-headed households. These households remain at an extreme disadvantage when it comes to getting access to labor, land, oxen and other resources and continue to be among the most food insecure.

Women in male-headed households are not members of Peasant Associations because membership is designed for heads of households (in this case, the male). Nor are they often members of agricultural cooperatives for similar reasons. While efforts to encourage women in male-headed households to become members of agricultural cooperatives are underway, at this time women's participation in cooperatives is very low. It is currently estimated that female membership in cooperatives in the Amhara Region is about ten percent (P.3, VOCA/Ethiopia, 1999). Married women have limited

² Peasant Associations were formed under the military regime that governed Ethiopia from 1974-1991. Today they operate independent from government intervention. The Association forms the organization unit for the farmers of the community and provide the formal structure to access resources like extension, fertilizer and land.

access to extension services, generally do not receive agricultural advice and have little decision-making power over household income or resources. Moreover, they do not have rights over land as individuals. In Amhara Region, women in male-headed households no longer even receive home economics or family planning advice as the Home Extension program has been discontinued. However, they generally perform fewer agricultural activities than women in female-headed households and may have some access to inputs and other resources through their husbands.

Extension in the Amhara Region and throughout Ethiopia has adopted a family centered approach that deals primarily with households as a unit. While this approach provides better extension opportunities for female household heads, it fails to capture the unique and important role women in male-headed households occupy and continues to marginalize them from the development process. It also fails to recognize the complexity of intra-household economies, falsely assuming that information provided to and decisions made by the household head will equally benefit all members of the household. Generally Gender and Development (GAD) literature suggests recognizing the household as a collective rather than a unitary entity. Farming households are characterized as enterprises with overlapping but semi-autonomous production and consumption units managed by different members of the household that occupy different locations within the household power structure (p. 6, Masefield, 1996). Thus, while problems faced by female-headed households should not be ignored, there is a need to expand extension or development efforts to reach women centered activities in all households.

Women's Primary Agricultural Activities

Below is a summary of agricultural activities that are generally performed by women in male-headed households. Individual women may participate in these activities to a greater or lesser extent depending on personal circumstances, however these activities highlight the extent to which women are crucial for agricultural production in Amhara Region. In Amhara Region and throughout Ethiopia agricultural production can be characterized as extremely labor intensive and utilizing little if any modern technology. Most of the information below is based on research found in "A Case Study on Women's Access to Agricultural Extension Services", done by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1992. Other sources are used to substantiate additional activities.

- Land preparation – women participate in clearing the fields, leveling and picking away unwanted plant materials. Women also bring food to the field for those engaged in plowing.
- Sowing – women transport seeds to the field and provide required amount of seed to person planting. In some areas women are also involved in furrowing and planting while men are involved in broadcast planting.
- Hoeing – this activity is performed by women almost on an equal basis with the rest of the family.

- Weeding – weeding is almost exclusively performed by women and of the agricultural activities women do, is the most time consuming.
- Harvesting – women harvest pulses, root crops as well as perennial crops like coffee and enset.
- Threshing and storing – these are the most important activities in which women take part. Women are responsible for the preparation of threshing ground and transporting the harvested crop to the threshing field, and when threshing is completed, transporting crop into the storage barn. To prepare the ground for threshing activities include ground clearing, providing cow dung and water to then be smeared on the ground. Women's other threshing activities are winnowing and separating seeds from chaff using a sieve to clean seeds. Before putting crops in storage women use traditional methods of pest management to mitigate post-harvest storage loss.
- Household garden - the house garden is the responsibility of the woman. She decides what is to be planted, provides the labor, and she controls the production from the garden. Most of the produce is used for household consumption but she may also sell this produce for cash, which in most cases she can spend as she chooses.
- Livestock Production - Women in farming communities are responsible for herding, barn cleaning, hay processing, milking and milk processing, fetching drinking water for animals, tending sick animals kept at home, and trekking animals to water source and vaccination centers.

Women tend to own and have the right to income from small animals, especially chickens, goats and sheep, but this is not an absolute. Evidence suggests that if there are a small number of these animals, women will maintain control over them. However, if the numbers increase, men will generally take over.

In light of the above description it is difficult to deny that women play a critical role in agricultural production. Extension efforts can be effectively targeted toward women surrounding these activities. In the agricultural regions of Ethiopia, extension programs specifically targeted to women have traditionally focused on domestic household activities like sewing, and improved cooking techniques. While these programs have utility, ultimately, they deny the importance women have in the food production process.

Existing Constraints:

Women's Labor Burden

When developing new agricultural production activities it is essential to consider women's existing labor burden. Nationwide it is estimated that rural women work between thirteen and seventeen hours a day, in many cases more than twice that of men. (Women's Affairs Officer, Ministry of Agriculture). A study done on gender, population and development in Ethiopia by UNFPA in 1998 claims the following;

The studies found that the workload of rural women, while already enormous continues to increase as they struggle to provide enough food for their families. The main problems identified with respect to the work of rural women included limited access to land for growing food; limited availability of grinding mill services; limited participation in community decision making; limited access to credit and limited access to transportation (especially for domestic transport tasks.)

In Ethiopia, large amounts of women's time is spent in household reproduction activities such as gathering firewood, collecting water and preparing food. With so much time spent on domestic activities women's opportunities to engage in activities that are more productive are severely limited. The colossal labor burden carried by rural women also jeopardizes their health and generally inhibits human and family development. Ignoring the link between women's labor burden and household production capacity perpetuates household food insecurity.

Interestingly, one of the reasons identified for claiming that women in Ethiopia cannot be seen as farmers or at least not "strong" farmers is because the household reproductive tasks are so labor intensive and time consuming that women do not have time to fully engage in agricultural activities. One woman informant indicated "Everyone expects women in Ethiopia to sweat from six in the morning until midnight. This is just her lot and she is supposed to accept this" (Personal communication, Y. Chiche, 1999). This serves as a reason not to actively seek women's participation in more productive development activities and denies the importance of domestic tasks to the food production capacity of the household. Evans 1998 observes:

Systems researchers have often overlooked appropriate indirect or non-farm solutions to farm-based problems. For instance, farm output may increase if the productivity of household-based activities, many of which are women's responsibility, were to improve.

Traditionally, the farming systems research and extension approach has obscured the complexity of women's position in regard to household labor requirements. To better illuminate this position and improve women's ability to integrate into rural development efforts it is important to approach extension and development efforts in a more holistic way. Firstly, it is imperative that development programs designed to increase agricultural productivity do not inadvertently add to an already unmanageable labor burden. This can be facilitated by devising labor calendars by gender and ensuring that women are not responsible for overlapping, time consuming, labor intensive tasks. For example, during cultivation and harvesting seasons community labor is mobilized and people outside the family assist with field activities (*dobbo*). Women are responsible for preparing all the food for these people. Thus, while women may not be fully involved in agricultural activities at this time, they are in fact quite busy. Women's labor burden in situations like these may be concealed if agriculture labor calendars are developed centered only on men's activities or men's input.

The same approach is needed in prioritizing community problems. From observations of community prioritizing activities it appears essential to allow women to prioritize their problems separately. Different problems surface and take priority including more fuel-efficient stoves, access to water and firewood and family health. Women identify the need for time saving technologies and solutions for household centered tasks whereas men tend to identify activities and services traditionally provided to them by the extension services. Allowing women's concerns to occupy the same level of importance as men's concerns may change development interventions to actively include women in agro-forestry schemes, to introduce time saving mechanisms for household food production, or provide information on family nutrition. It needs to be stressed that this is not to suggest that the problems men identify are not important. However, in the past women's concerns have not been given the same priority, causing a gradual increase in their workloads, prohibiting them from fully engaging in "development activities" and increasing household food insecurity.

Finally, the issue of rights to/control over existing technology need to be addressed. Women spend many hours a day collecting firewood and fetching water. Most reports suggest these are the most time consuming activities performed by women, taking several hours a day. Women farmers themselves complain about the physical difficulty of these tasks. Because women do not control access to or have rights over existing technology, including even donkeys, they are often forced to carry water and firewood on their backs over a long distance. This depletes women's energy and endangers their health. It also prevents them from fully engaging in more productive household activities. In addition when researchers develop or look for new technologies they are frequently centered around activities traditionally performed by men as it is seen as the fastest avenue for increasing production. These technologies are often introduced to men through traditional extension programs. After determining the number of hours women work on average per day in the Eastern Zone of Tigray Region, researchers drew the following conclusion about women and technology.

This means a total of 79% of the rural women work over sixteen hours per day, when it can be reduced by half, if improved household technologies had been introduced. Hence rural women in general do not have time to participate in skill upgrading training and attend extension demonstrational services (P. 35, UNECA, 1997).

Access to Land

While it is widely recognized that the land tenure situation in Ethiopia is problematic and in many ways inhibits investments and agricultural productivity, (Bruce, et al, 1994), when gender enters this equation the problems are compounded. Both the Constitution and the Public Ownership of Rural Lands Proclamation of 1975 provide for women to have access to land. The Rural Lands Proclamation Article 4(1) states; "Without differentiation of the sexes, any person who is willing to personally cultivate land shall be allotted rural land sufficient for his maintenance and that of his family." This article is designed to address the head of a household, and therefore theoretically benefits female-headed households, but does not benefit individual married women within households.

Unfortunately equitable systems of land distribution are not in place and women occupy a rather tenuous position with regards to access to land. This is exacerbated by women's inadequate access to other resources.

At the local level customary systems of land distribution are pervasive. With the exception of North Wollo, in Amhara Region, customary law restricts the ownership of land on the part of women. Elsewhere in Amhara Region if women are entitled to inherit land from their families, their entitlement is significantly less than their male counterparts. Legally, in the case of divorce (reported to be quite common in several areas of Amhara Region), women are entitled to receive an equal share of land and assets. However, because local elders generally have discretion over the actual distribution of the land, cultural assumptions and community perceptions tend to prevail and women get less land than men in these settlements (p. 17 CISP, 1997). Additionally, women are generally unaware of their rights to land in divorce settlements and frequently lack adequate representation.

One customary system operating in Oromiya Zone offers a striking example of the insecure position women occupy with regard to land. According to a study conducted by UNECA (1998) as part of the Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Rehabilitation Program (SAERP), in certain parts of the Oromiya Zone if a man asks for a divorce women are given their share of the land in the divorce settlement. The man is also required to return her dowry payment. However if a woman asks for a divorce she is forced to give up any claims over the land as well as pay the man compensation for the divorce. Generally the payment is somewhere between 500 and 950 birr and is paid by the woman's family. Women in this area complain that men take advantage of this system. If a man wants a divorce, instead of asking for one, the man makes the woman's life so miserable she is forced to ask for a divorce, thus placing her in the position of losing all her land as well as making a large compensation payment.

There are several important interconnected structural and social reasons that place female-headed households' rights over land access on the margins within local community structures. One reason is that the majority of male farmers and PA leaders do not see women as capable of engaging in autonomous farming efforts, because women are not farmers. As stated previously, to view women as farmers and to provide them resources that would allow them to engage in farming activities on a level equal to men is considered a threat to the social fabric of rural communities. Thus, it is considered entirely justified to allow men to retain rights over the majority of land and resources accumulated during marriage if there is a divorce, by default ensuring women's economic dependence on men.

Secondly, ownership of oxen is considered essential for an effective farming capacity. Women rarely have oxen or the same access to other agricultural resources as men, so they are perceived at best as "weak farmers" and often as "non-farmers". Even if women do own a team of oxen it is considered inappropriate for them to engage in plowing activities. In addition women rarely receive extension advice on effective use of agricultural inputs or technologies as those extension efforts are almost exclusively

directed toward male farmers. Land is a scarce commodity and it is generally perceived by community leaders (often rightly so because of the outlined social and cultural reasons) that without adult male labor women will be unable to effectively utilize the land. These factors lead to additional reasons why divorce settlements generally result in more land being distributed to men.

The lack of oxen ownership actually proves quite problematic for female farming households. In most agricultural areas of Ethiopia ownership of a team of oxen is perceived as synonymous with food security. If a household does not own a team of oxen that household is required to enter into a sharecropping arrangement with someone who does. If a male-headed household enters into a sharecropping arrangement of this nature the man is expected to make some labor contribution such as roofing, or masonry, or arrange for fertilizer application. On this basis the male household head will generally expect to retain the straw from his land.

If a female-headed household enters into a sharecropping type of arrangement she will not be able to make a similar type of labor contribution or arrange for fertilizer application and will thus be expected to give up more of her produce to the owner of the oxen. Nor will she retain any straw or fodder from her land. In certain cases she gives up control of her land completely and is removed from all farming activities. In these instances she is forbidden from even visiting her own land. In more typical cases where a woman retains some rights and responsibilities for farming the land, she is still forbidden to plow and is completely dependent on when the owner of the oxen has time to plow her land. Unless a woman is willing to face social sanctions, even if she does own a team of oxen she faces a similar constraint. Thus, women's leased land is frequently not sowed, plowed or harvested on time, resulting in lower production. As a result, even if female-headed households do have access to land they cannot utilize it effectively and often find themselves facing food shortages. This contributes to the perception that women lack farming capacity, making them vulnerable to losing their land in community land redistribution.

Interestingly, women who own their own team of oxen frequently do engage in plowing activities. And women who have adult sons living with them, providing them a labor source over which they have control, are as effective at farming as men and make the same type of agricultural management decisions as male-headed households.

It can generally be expected that farming women with direct access to fertilizer will be heading households that can be considered as food self-sufficient and are most likely able to sell part of their produce. With productive assets such as land, oxen and male labor (adult sons), women appear to manage their field agricultural activities in a similar way to male heads of households. They tend to take a leading role in the overall management of productive activities and family affairs, closely monitoring, controlling and supervising the activities of their sons and spending a great deal of time in the field on agricultural matters. Those women generally perceive that they have equal access to inputs from the service cooperatives through the PA. They have little difficulty with the idea of

cooperating with a male DA and often have a detailed knowledge of the rates of different inputs in proportion to their field plots.” (p. 31, CISP, 1997)

Extension Services

Extension in the Amhara Region and all of Ethiopia has developed as a top down approach. Researchers develop a new technology which becomes incorporated into part of an “extension package”, which generally includes improved seed varieties, inputs and technologies. Farmers with enough money to take advantage of this package are strongly encouraged to do so. There is little farmer feedback and little flexibility in packages. These packages are not always tested locally and they are not always successful. When the packages fail there is little recourse and farmers find it difficult to regain capital expended on the extension package. Many farmers, particularly female farmers, perceive the current extension system to be beyond their financial reach.

There used to be a home extension program in Amhara Region that was separate from the farm extension program. The home extension program was staffed almost exclusively by women and worked with women in male-headed households and female household heads, offering advice on household activities like hygiene, cooking techniques and family planning. This program was seen as ineffective and a waste of resources by some Regional officials and was discontinued a few years ago.

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed within the current extension system if it hopes to properly reach and address women working in agriculture in Amhara Region. In this regard the extension system needs to develop and implement an effective home extension program, address ways to better communicate with women in male-headed households and to deliver relevant information to women surrounding not only household reproductive activities but also agricultural activities traditionally performed by women.

Under the traditional Agriculture Extension program an extension program that actively targeted women farmers was rejected and what emerged was a “family centered approach”. The family centered approach operates with the understanding that “the process of demonstrations and guidance should be designed not to target farmers as individuals but as representatives of the household” (CISP, 1997). The current extension program identifies and targets female-headed households as well as male-headed households. However, the belief that a family centered approach to extension would facilitate the effective distribution of information to the relevant household members has proven incorrect. Husbands do not convey extension advice to their wives and extension agents do not provide extension advice relevant to women’s productive and reproductive activities. In discussions with female heads of households most maintain that the current extension program is simply beyond their financial reach and therefore do not utilize its services.

Most of the zonal agricultural departments also reported that married women, whose husbands are members of the extension packages are not fully involved in the training and management processes. The assumption is that there are no

“women farmers extension services”. Also, that men household heads would transmit messages that they have learned to their wives are proven wrong.” (p. 15, UNECA, 1998).

In the Amhara Region the Home Extension program was discontinued a few years ago because a number of regional level officials did not perceive it as useful. Unfortunately, before the program was discontinued, women participating in the program were not consulted as to whether or not they found the Home Extension program beneficial. In the existing extension program there is not adequate information about family nutrition, family planning or food preparation, all of which was distributed under the traditional home extension program.

Some other people at the regional decision making level on the other hand, felt that the home extension agents’ service given to rural families, didn’t bring any vital change on the life of the rural women and was not need oriented. Therefore, for these people it was found to be a waste of resources and decided to remove the structure and assumed that the home extension activities can be carried out by general development agents of the region (p. 10 UNECA, 1998).

Home Extension programs have traditionally distributed information on family nutrition and hygiene, family planning and more effective home gardening techniques. The information distributed does not readily lend itself to easily quantifiable measures of improvement in family life. Development effects from information distributed through home extension programs often take several months or years to become visible and the benefits from these programs are not obvious to individuals outside the programs. With the cancellation of the Home Extension program married women in Amhara Region were effectively cut-off from any outside extension advice. Yet, when discussing this issue with female farmers in Amhara Region they maintain that they would like some sort of home extension program to be reinstated (Personal Communication, S. Nigussie, Bahir Dar, May 1999).

Although it may complicate the issue its necessary to point out that traditional home extension programs have serious limitations. They tend to focus on what are perceived as women’s practical needs centering around household reproduction and childcare activities and impart little information on ways that women can engage in more economically viable activities. When women are asked on which topics they would like to receive extension advice major topics include home gardening, animal husbandry and poultry production (p. 76, Ministry of Agriculture, 1992 and personal communication with women farmers). Without denying the importance of family health and planning issues, if we expect women to actively engage in the development process they need to be provided information on productive activities.

International donor organizations contend that extension packages that appropriately target women’s activities do not exist. Research on activities traditionally performed by women is not encouraged as part of national or regional programs of agricultural

research, nor do extension curriculums generally contain material relevant to women centered activities.

Review of the 1990/1991 E.C. action plan documents if the plan and economic development and agricultural planning bureaus and departments at the regional and zonal levels, indicates that there are insignificant number or no extension packages (or other programs) that specifically target women and women related activities. (P.15, UNECA, 1998)

While this may be changing (evidenced by Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organization for the first time hiring a Gender Specialist, and Amhara Region committing to reinstate some sort of Home Extension Program) it is vital that these changes be supported and actively encouraged. Without changing the extension curriculums and training programs to encompass all activities surrounding agricultural production, development agents will continue to fail to adequately address women's agricultural information needs and perpetuate the stereotype of women as "weak farmers." Additionally, better reporting on women's activities need to take place at a zonal and regional level. Gender disaggregated data on agricultural activities is available at the woreda level in Amhara Region but at the zonal level all data is lumped together (Personal communication, S. Nigussie, 1999). Urging officials at the zonal and regional level to keep information disaggregated by gender will allow trends in women's participation in agriculture to emerge and more informed policy decisions to be made.

Finally extension programs need to address how best to reach women with extension information. The reasons identified for why women in general and particularly women in male-headed households do not receive extension advice were threefold. First, Development Agents only seek out landholders and give advice to them. Secondly there is now a cultural perception that extension programs only address men so women generally do not even conceive that they can receive valuable advice from DA's. Finally, because nearly all Development Agents are men and in many areas it is perceived as inappropriate for men outside the household to be talking to women alone, it is difficult for extension agents to approach women.

These problems compound when looking at the design of many extension programs. Women, as the primary caretakers of children, find it difficult to leave their home for long periods of time for training activities. Training programs are frequently developed that require participants to spend a week away from their village, yet are open to both genders. When few or no women show up trainers often complain that "women just don't want to learn, or aren't interested." Yet, when talking with women farmers it seems that neither is the case. It is merely that training schedules and information dissemination systems need to be developed appropriately around content, timing and location that allow women to participate.

Extension programs need to begin to address how to recruit more women to become Development Agents. Interestingly, when this was brought up in the research, a litany of reasons were given that illustrate the structural constraints to women's participation in

this sphere. These reasons include but are not limited to women who get pregnant during Development Agent training are asked to leave the program; its socially inappropriate for women to be away from home; and problems with living alone for a length of time to receive training, etc. etc. According to the 1992 report on Women and Agricultural Extension put out by the Ministry of Agriculture, approximately 6 percent of the Development Agents are women and at that time no single female staff had held the position of extension supervisor. Once again, without diminishing the difficulty in overcoming cultural barriers to women's participation in this sphere, if there continue to be an extremely limited number of female development agents, effectively including rural women in an agricultural development program seems dubious. Moreover, the lack of female development agents serves to further perpetuate stereotypes about women's non-participation in agriculture.

Agricultural Inputs and Technologies

The issue of access to agricultural inputs and technologies is directly related to the issue of whether or not women are perceived as farmers. Like limited access to information and land, limited access to agricultural inputs and technologies severely constrains the productive ability of women in general, and female headed households in particular. Such issues are deeply intertwined and separating them is nearly impossible. The reasons as to why women's access to inputs and technologies are limited closely resemble reasons as to why their access to land is limited. With few exceptions women who head households are considered weak farmers and information regarding inputs as well as the actual inputs themselves are rarely distributed to women. The overwhelming perception by Peasant Association leaders is that women would not be able to utilize inputs as effectively as male farmers would and therefore impede women's access to these resources.

If resources such as credit/fertilizer/extension services are perceived to be in scarce supply, then applications for inputs from farmers considered to be 'weak' due to resource disadvantages (i.e. poverty), physical disability or gender based disadvantages (in most case study areas the definition of a 'weak farmer' is as one who is unable to plow – by implication, at best a woman can only be a 'weak farmer') are most likely to be rejected. In many cases it was found that preconditions for ox ownership or 'cultivation capacity' were being observed, thus automatically providing direct barriers for access by many female-headed households (P.27, CISP, 1997).

The current agriculture intensification program (the official national extension program) relies quite heavily on the adoption of inputs. Many resource poor farmers perceive the trend of inputs adoption leading to increasing rural stratification (p. 10, Masfield, 1998). If this perception is correct and female-headed households continue to be denied access to agricultural inputs and other production intensification technologies due to cultural perceptions, these households will quickly fall to the bottom of rural economies and be unlikely to achieve household food security through agricultural activities. And due to limited income generating opportunities and lack of training, female household heads face major constraints obtaining livelihood security through other means.

Decision Making/Community Influence

Rural development and research programs present a diversity of perspectives on this issue. While their reports indicate that women have very little influence or decision making power in the public sphere some of the studies indicate that women have a great deal of influence in household decisions (Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture, 1992, Agridec, 1997). These reports suggest that men and women discuss quantity and timing of inputs, grain marketing and household purchases. In this scenario men try to convince their wives and presumably if they can't, they won't carry out an action that she doesn't agree with. However, other studies suggest that women do not have this type of influence in the home (UNECA, 1998) and it is certainly difficult to ascertain whether or not women's disagreement is actually able to change a male farmer's course of action. The researchers own observations indicate that it varies widely within households.

With regard to intra-household decision making on agricultural matters, different categories of women and men stressed that within the household, there generally exists extensive consultation between husbands and wives with regard to agricultural matters. Nevertheless, at no point did any informant counter the basic assertion that in the last resort, it is the male head of household who has final say on decisions concerning productive resources of the household (p. 24, CISP, 1997).

While the above suggests that women in Amhara region are active in household decision making there is nothing that suggests that women themselves may make decisions without consulting their husbands, or that they are even in a position to bring items up with their husbands for discussion. In discussions between the researcher and married female farmers women claim that their husbands frequently withhold information about the exact amount of grain available. They do this because women will use grain reserves that men have set aside for marketing or using for the coming year's crop to feed the family. When asked about this, men concur that they do indeed mislead their wives about the amount of grain available and say they do it for "their [the woman's] own good". This illustrates the tension existing in chronic food insecure areas between trying to obtain/achieve long-term livelihood security and immediate food needs. Furthermore it supports the observations made by CISP that ultimately men control household productive resources. It is also widely reported that women have little control over important social issues such as their own fertility, or when and to whom their children will marry.

Women's participation in decision making in the public sphere appears much more limited than that within the household. If a male head of household is unable to attend a community meeting he will send a male child to represent the family. This indicates a strong perception among rural communities that women are ineffective at participating in community decision making and have little influence at this level. Further evidence of this perception can be found by noting women's extremely limited membership in Peasant Associations (12 percent nationwide), service cooperatives (8 percent

nationwide) or producer cooperatives (6 percent nationwide), and their virtual absence from leadership positions within community institutions (Agridéc, 1995).

Decision making powers are vital for women's development. If women are not effectively influencing decisions at the household and community level their priorities will continue to be submerged within a national development context. Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) is effectively addressing this concern in its rural integrated development program in Amhara Region by ensuring that women hold at least half of the decision making positions within the project committees. Reportedly this is having a profound effect on the way in which and types of decisions communities make (Personal Communication, S. Nigussie, 1999). Encouraging men and women at the community level to recognize the ability and importance of women in actively participating in community development ought to be actively supported on a number of levels. Placing women in decision-making positions empowers local women, challenge negative gender based stereotypes and perhaps most importantly, provides women an opportunity to define and take an active role in the development process as opposed to being relegated to being merely beneficiaries.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Women in Ethiopia and Amhara Region are indeed farmers. Clearly the structural and cultural constraints barring women from fully participating in agricultural production are intertwined and appear to be beyond the parameters of an agricultural development program. Looking at household food security only from the perspective of resource poor households is not sufficient. It fails to capture the gendered nuances that contribute to food insecurity. Through a gender-based framework however, there are a number of appropriate avenues for intervention.

Some development strategies in Amhara Region seek to facilitate appropriate technology development and adoption. As opposed to focusing solely on technologies that increase production, the program should actively promote seeking technologies that also reduce women's labor burden. Moreover, the program should actively promote alternative ways of developing extension programs that allow women to learn about these technologies and effectively utilize them. This will require awareness about constraints to women's participation to be recognized and incorporated into new extension strategies. It also may require finding ways to actively recruit and retain women development agents. While there are a number of embedded social and cultural constraints impeding women's full participation in extension training, at some point they need to be confronted if negative stereotypes about women's capabilities in agricultural production are to be overcome.

Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa it is widely accepted that income generated by women feeds back more directly into household food security. In light of this fact it is imperative that income generation possibilities for women be explored. There are a number of opportunities that exist within the agricultural sphere in which women are operating. Input programs that focus on increasing productivity of backyard gardens have dual benefit potential through directly increasing household consumption of vegetables or

through income earned in marketing extra produce. Providing women information on poultry production and animal husbandry would also increase women's potential for income generation without adding additional tasks.

As the use of inputs, credit and technology for increasing agriculture production is intensified structural barriers facing women in accessing these resources need to be addressed. These barriers are based largely on perceptions of women's inability to utilize these resources as effectively as men. However, programs can be designed that ensure female-headed households receive these resources at the same rate as male-headed households.

Issues surrounding women's rights to land and resource access can and should be addressed through widespread education campaigns. Additionally gender disaggregated data on agricultural activities at the zonal and regional level should be required. This information is essential for informing policy decisions and exposing women's role in agricultural production.

The above suggestions are in no way meant to indicate the limit to gendered interventions in contributing to household food security in Amhara Region. They are only a few suggestions where gendering strategies are obvious within the current proposed development strategies. The information provided presents a number of obstacles that need to be overcome before women are fully integrated into agricultural development. Consistently re-evaluating intervention strategies within the context of these barriers will allow emerging gender needs to be appropriately incorporated into future development goals.

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