

Gender and Determinants of Women's Engagement in Productive Activities in South Wollo, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This research is carried out with the aim of scrutinizing the major socio-cultural stumbling blocks altering women's access to and control over productive assets, especially, land and credit. The research employs qualitative orientation through basic qualitative survey techniques. Focus group discussion, individual interview, and participatory observation used as basic data gathering tools accompanied by a guide checklist for primary data and published and unpublished documents for secondary information respectively. The findings of the study show that women's access to and control over productive assets is seriously constrained by various social, cultural, economic, political, psychological and ideological versions of analogy. Appropriate recommendations proffered to enhance women's access to and control over productive assets.

Key words: Gender, Women, productive assets, legal pluralism, patriarchy, land tenure, patrilineal inheritance)

1. Introduction

Significant gender inequalities can be found in peoples' access to key productive assets and services: land, labor, financial services, water, rural infrastructure, technology, and other inputs. Available evidence indicates that the distribution of land ownership is heavily skewed toward men. For example, roughly 70 to 90 percent of formal owners of farmland are men in many SSA and in Latin American Countries (Quisumbing et al, 2004). Gender related constraints reflect gender inequalities in access to resources and development opportunities. Unless these structural and cultural barriers are actively addressed, women's will continue to be marginalized (Emily, 1999).

Access to and control of land and financial services is crucial to relieve women from their economic dependency and enhance their engagement in productive activities, but major socio-cultural, socio-legal and institutional challenges continue to prevent the rural women from gaining secure tenure rights – and such challenges are more pronounced for women(UNDP 2000:36). This is due to the deeply rooted discriminatory socio- cultural values and traditions embedded particularly in the policy and legal environment and in institutional support mechanisms (Ogato et al; 2009).

This study is carried out in Argoba District (woreda), South Wollo Administrative Zone, Amhara Regional state aiming to scrutinizing some of the major socio-cultural elements impeding women's access to and control over productive assets especially, land and financial services.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical framework

The feminists developed an economics that serve interests of large and different group of people (Strassman, 1999). Feminist economists argued against traditional economics because traditional economics depicted women as dependent on fathers, husbands or male partners by considering the family as a basic economic unit. They affirmed that this assumption enforces women's dependence on men, women's secondary status within the family, the community and women's exclusion from decision-making. These feminists developed an economics that serve interests of large and different group of people (ibid). Feminist economists contributed new insights to economic

thought and Strategic gender needs are long-term and are not easily identified are common to almost all women and men enable women to become agents of change.

2.1.1. The Feminist methodology

Feminist economic methodology was categorized into Domestic systems, Economic success, Human agency, Ethical judgments and Gender, race, class, Power (Marilyn, 2004). Feminist economists asserted that cultural factors are very important in explaining women's issues in the agriculture sector in developing countries. They have three well known methodologies. Domestic system Methodology asserted that the household should be treated as an important economic institution and unpaid work performed in a domestic setting ought to be valued. A human agency methodology attempts to look at women's relationships within a given system, their relationship with people and institutions. It looks at where power in a system lies and who has unequal access to it. Women's limited access to institutions in a given system constrains their involvement in decision-making. Ethical judgments methodology looks at systems from a specific moral position and viewpoint rather than from point of view of neutral observer (Folbre, 1994).

2.2. *Women, access to productive assets and customary laws*

In the African context especially, the role of customary inheritance and property laws cannot be ignored. While there are exceptions and examples of matrilineal societies, most African cultures are patrilineal. This has hindered women's access to land or other resources in three forms: traditions that prevent women from owning land, traditions that prevent women from inheriting land and access to financial facilities, traditions that prevent women from speaking in public, traditions that prevent women from owning land (Agrawal: 260 et seq, 486 et seq, 1997). In many communities women's access to land and their exclusive access and control over financial resources is governed by both statutory and customary laws. Customary laws emerge from unwritten social rules derived from shared community values and traditions. Customary laws limit women's rights on land to secondary rights mainly derived from their membership in patriarchal households. This law underpins patriarchal system of traditional authority to reinforce patriarchal values which disadvantage women (Walker, 2001). In this patriarchal system, marriage has been primary means of getting access to land under customary system of tenure.

2.3. *Arguments on the importance of independent access to and control right over productive assets to women*

The importance of independent rights to women to access and control over productive assets can be divided into three categories of arguments (Agrawal, 1994). Welfare argument dictates the importance of land and credit right and access to other expanded support services when essential to substantially reduce poverty and the threats of poverty, especially in poor rural households. The efficiency argument explain that if women are given the same quantity and quality of land, 'inputs' and 'technologies' and the same education and information, they can produce as much, if not, more than men as they are already responsible for a sizable proportion of agricultural output but due to their lack of land right, they cannot obtain access to these facilities. Equality and empowerment argument dictates that Gender equality is a measure of equitable society.

2.4. *Gender related constraints in access to and control over productive assets in Ethiopia*

According to Kabeer(2003)gender related impediments reflect gender inequalities in access to resources and development opportunities. Although class, poverty, ethnicity and physical location may influence these inequalities, the gender factor tends to make them more severe. Access to and control over productive assets is a major issue in the gender discourse. Despite the significant roles women play in agriculture and food security in many developing countries, they continue to have a poorer command over a range of productive resources, including education, land, information, and financial resources (World Bank 2001; Odame et al. 2002). Gender could be defined as "the rules, norms, customs and practices by which biological differences between males and females are translated into socially constructed differences between men and women and boys and girls" (Kabeer, 2003; IIRR-Ethiopia 2000).

By understanding the value of empowering women in every sphere of life, currently the Ethiopian government has been making efforts to empower women in decision-making processes in order to facilitate the attainment of the country's sustainable development goals. Among these efforts the establishment of the Women's Affairs Office in the country and the formulation of a national policy on women, on the quest of entitling and ensuring women's right to property, employment and pension clearly demonstrates the commitment of the government (United Nations, 2002). Nevertheless, gender empowerment in the country is facing a number major constraints, including the low level of awareness by the society about the roles played by women in the development of the country; the deep-rooted

cultural beliefs and traditional practices that prevent women from fully participating in the development process of the country(Ibid).

Empirical evidence shows that in Ethiopia women may have greater ownership of certain types of assets as compared to men, that women typically have fewer overall assets than men. Furthermore, women's share of the total value of assets was lower than their share among asset owners, indicating that even when women own assets, they are often of lower quality and value than men's assets. It is fascinating that in situations where women have a seemingly access to those assets but they seriously lack control and direct benefit out of them as most of their direct use and control rights are highly determined and constrained by traditional norms and patriarchal ideologies (Getachew, 2010).

Currently there is unequivocal argument in various literatures and in the country that increasing women's access to assets and narrowing the gender-asset gap would directly improve women's wellbeing by reducing their vulnerability and enhancing their health, self-esteem, and sense of control. It could also lead to improved outcomes for a range of development indicators not only for women but also for their families and communities. Increasing women's control over assets, including land, physical, and financial assets, has positive effects on a number of important development outcomes for the household, including food security, child nutrition, and education, as well as for women's own well-being and empowerment (Kabeer 2010; Quisumbing 2003; Smith 2003; World Bank 2001).

3. Methodology

Primary and secondary data used as a source of information. Useful information was gathered as a number of issues were raised from participants dwelling in ²Argoba. Focus group discussion, Key informant interview and participatory observations were central to the methods of data collection. The focus group discussion offered opportunities to capture case stories. Case stories are captured on relevant issues raised on discussions from women representing two villages. The study indulged qualitative research technique specifically case study research design, mainly incorporating qualitative information and qualitative methods of data analysis. PA officials, female and male headed households of different categories and women's representatives were part and parcel of the sampling categories.

4. Result and Discussion

4.2. Socio-cultural expectations regarding women's right to access and control over land

Beatrice (2004) stated that, women's right to land vary in accordance with time and location, social group, cultural conditionalities, societal expectations, and the legal system applicable. The societal folks and traditional sayings obtained from Argoba clearly manifest the fact that women's deprivation to access and control over productive assets and dominance of patriarchal thoughts have a strong historical foundation. Traditional sayings like for example, *the share of woman is only a bed* (indicating that sexual gratification is the only role and gift they deserve to have), *never show your purse to your wife* (denotes women are extravagant and cannot be trusted), *giving birth to a female child is like inviting loss to the house* and other similar sayings have a lot to do with the dwindled status women are granted with and to the denial of access and control over land and financial assets.

² One of the districts found in Amhara region of South Wollo Zone. It is both the land and the people that are called Argoba. According to local elders and Asfaw Aklilu(2000) Argoba peoples are the **descendants of Arabs** and states that the term Argoba comes from the Amharic word **Arab-geba** which means **Arabs have entered**. Nonetheless, on account of historical migrations, the Argoba are now intermingled both through marriage and shared culture with neighboring Amhara, Oromo, and Afar peoples. Religious wise hundred percent of them are Muslims. They have a language called Argobighna only spoken by few elders not known by the youngsters. Till recently, it has been considered by the linguists as a language which is on the verge of demise, had it not been for the recent effort of the government, Argoba born academicians, merchants and the elders who strived hard to resurrect the language by publishing the first Argobigna Alphabet and Arobigna-Amharic dictionary. There are three nations living adjacent to Argoba. **Oromo peoples** living by the border of **Kemissie, Oromia zone, Amhara region** near by the place called **Dewoy**, the **Afar pastoralists** settled bordering the Oromo people by the side of **Dewoy** and the Amhara peoples.

To analyzing gaps regarding women's right to access and control over land entitlement, female headed households and married women were considered. The majority of the married women gave their testimony saying they have access to the land of their husband though they don't have a legal entitlement over the tenure. According to the respondents, it is a common phenomenon for husbands to divorce their wife without any exit option from what she deserves to have. By the same token, during times of divorce, it is up to the husband to decide on the split of assets. The local customary rulings which are considered to be malicious by the dwellers lose their coerciveness when it comes to the sharing of properties amongst spouses in times of divorce. Regarding the question posed to the discussants about claiming of rights through statutory laws, it is found out that their level of acquaintance about it is limited and besides they don't have access to the court in their district as a result they rather prefer to settle conflicts through customary laws effected by local elders (³*shimgilina*). It is explained by the women's representative in the district that even where statutory national laws recognize women's rights to land, housing and property, "traditional" values prevail amongst judges, police officers, local councilors and land officials. They often interpret statutory laws in what at present are understood to be "customary ways", as a result of which women are deprived of the rights they should enjoy.

4.3. Means of land acquisition by women

Women's equal right to access, own and control land, housing and property are firmly recognized under international law and the country law too. However, in Argoba, the prevalence of discriminatory traditional laws, patriarchal customs, and attitudes are blocking women from enjoying their rights among others.

For a tabular presentation of means of land acquisition by women see Table. 1

Despite the fact that most of the women have access to land through marriage, the actual representation of the reality behind the curtain is different. When we analyze the actual issue regarding control, entitlement and registration and real benefit, it has been found that women have a figure head role and the same thing holds true for the other two ways of acquisition.

4.3.1 Inheritance

Analysis of local patrilineal system of inheritance in Argoba shows that most of the times rights to land are mostly, though not exclusively awarded to men under local laws and that women's right are usually tenuous and derivatives. Cultural or local prohibitions against women's ownership of land are often more powerful than written laws that allow women to own land. The following is a case story of a 28 years old lady from the village;

Case Story 1

".....I was married few years ago. In those years of my marriage, I experienced the most grievous torture. My husband always insulted me and telling me that I am like a ⁴mule that doesn't give birth. His insult emanates from my infertility because I couldn't give him children. One night, he awaked me up yelling and questioning me whether I am going to give him child or not. I begun to tremble and said to him that I am not God capable of giving children over night. He beats me hard till my hand is broken. He left home and came back at dawn to tell me that he has a wife in secret for two years and now she is pregnant and this proves him that I'm a barren. He warned me to call the local elders and my relatives by the next morning for divorce, saying that he is not obliged to live with a mule. By the approval of the local elders, we broke up without any share of property except two quintals of sorghum as a penalty for the broken hand of mine. The local elders judged without any sense of humanity. I went to the local police station a few kilometers away from my village and explained them the case and they told me to go back to the local elders and claim the case again. Finally, I went to my father's home and found him passed away a year ago. My mother married another man and my brothers inherited the property amongst themselves. I told my family that I am a divorced woman has nothing to begin my life with and I deserve to inherit from the leftovers. They turned their back to me saying that a woman does not deserve inheritance and warned me not to comeback. Some teachers gave me a motive to accuse my former husband and bring him to court and have my share back. I did like what they told me to do with their support. By now, I am here in this empty house waiting for my next appointment in the court."

³ An Amharic word denoting the system of negotiating any parties who are in the fit of conflict & often undertaken by elders elected for this pupose. It is part and parcel of customary law.

⁴ In this context mule refers to an insult usually applicable to those women who are barren (infertile).

The story revealed that patrilineal form of inheritance is central to the share of properties from the deceased family members in Argoba. The local customary laws do not give women the right to equally share properties during divorce. Infertility (*being barren*) in marriage has also been mentioned as a hindrance central to the breakup of marriage and as a stumbling block in women's right to share of properties during times of divorce. By the same token, woman's limited or no acquaintance and access to the modern statutory laws are some of the debilitating challenges as observed in Argoba.

4.4. Legal pluralism

In most developing countries, however, rights are derived from one legal system but from several concurrently. The legal system of women vis-à-vis productive assets is governed by a situation of legal pluralism in which statutory law, local law and frequently religious laws simultaneously applicable. According to those whom the researcher asked their preference of legal system upon which they prefer to be judged accordingly, the researcher has summarized their response by the following table.

Regarding relative preference of legal systems by men and women See Table2

The table shows that majority of the male are in a substantial favor of the local law. The reason is because local laws have got a special privilege for male than female. Unlike the local laws which provide maximum preference for male, the religious law which is applicable in some peasant associations and statutory laws (which is not practiced due to lack of awareness and distance to the center) allowed female sections an equal share of properties at least theoretically.

4.5 Factors affecting women's engagement in productive income generating activities

The time, credit, mobility and education (which is related to low level of numeracy and literacy) related constraints were raised by the discussants as major stumbling blocks hampering their active engagement in income generating activities. Due to shortage of funds, their activities are confined within the realm of selling of local beverage, fire woods, fuel (two-three litters) and which is only for once a week during the local market day. The scant availability of rural credit and the failure of the woreda to launch rural credit scheme is making them prone to potential local money lenders ⁵(*arata abedary*) through the system of usury; paying two fold of the money they have initially borrowed during a month period of time if not, it kept on replicating the interest. Respondents divulged the fact that, in most cases the money they borrowed for the purpose of generating income from the local lenders, often times forcefully snatched by the husband for his own sake which in turn makes the return of the money difficult as it has not been allocated for a productive purposes. Time has also been mentioned as constraint to engaging in income generating activities. According to the respondents, the constraint emanates from women's extreme engagement in the household chores and the domestic drudgery. As far as mobility concerned, respondents reflected that the local custom has malicious restrictions in allowing women to move from one area to the other for the purpose of trade as it is thought to be the role of the husband.

4.6 Women in the eyes of the traditional sayings and their self image

The societal norms and values bestowed women a relatively inferior status and a diminished position in every aspects of life in spite of their central role within every community. Those paralyzed thought that underestimates women's status within the community is also shaping women to think like others against themselves enslaved by the ideological and normative thoughts that sidetracks them. The following case story (2) shows to what extent women are shaped and molded by the social norms and values.

Case Story 2

During the session of my individual interview, I met a woman named Kedija, and asked her question: who is better, a male or female? She got surprised and answered to me saying, "a male is definitely better than a female!"; reasoning that "a woman has nothing to do in times of calamities and crises except crying, but a male does not do that, he reacts directly and as for him no need to cry. We females are born to give birth".

⁵ These are potential local money lenders working based on the principle of Usury (keep on compounding the interest on monthly basis if the debt is not returned)

I asked: Then, whom do you like to be if you are given a chance to be born again? She replied: “My child, it cannot be!” I continued, “what if, say for the sake of argument?” Then, she said “If that is so, I prefer to be born as a male! Even the eagles become happy when a male baby is born.” She concluded, however:

“...But do not forget that we, females, are the most essential and the creators beneath to God. Look at yourself you are from a female, and look at kings and soldiers, they are all from us. Thus, there is no reason for me to be born as a male. I regret for what I have said above, and I am happy and proud of being a female.”

As the above case study shows, those traditional norms and perceptions that present and portray woman as inferior and an emblem of weakness while elevating the male as a sign of bravery and leader made women adhere willingly that of course she is a failure and inferior. Those generational ill-favored imitations and paralyzed traditional conceptions about the status and rank women in a given society, shaping and molding women themselves to think and judge against themselves that they are of course what they have been portrayed to be. During the case of this study, though women admitted that they are inferior and being a male is preferable, most of the women finally accepted that they are not of course a failure and an emblem of weakness rather an icon of strength.

As regards women's rights, there are many beliefs that undermine women's right and directly or indirectly shape women's attitude to their suffering and that are also related to their reproductive and productive and community management roles (Soetan, 2001).

The traditional sayings and folks have also contributed a lot for a woman to bow her neck in dejection and ignominy. The folks and sayings, having a deep rooted base through generations, framed the society even women themselves think like they've a limited role in the developmental spheres and are incapable of contributing to the development discourse. The following are some of the discouraging sayings to indicating the inferior positions and role of women. The following are some of the traditional sayings that discourage women. These sayings are compiled from the research districts. The researcher tried to interpret some of them as follows;

1. Women and Mule are never to be trusted (can abandon and dispose anyone in the middle of nowhere)
2. Women are children with long legs (Divulging that regardless of age and size, women are always children and needs guidance and cannot stand alone upright and decide upon something)
3. Never show your purse to your wife (denotes women are extravagant and spoil all what you have in vain and cannot be trusted)
4. Women and donkey are ruled by beating (Beating is the only ultimate solution to subdue women)
5. Women and donkey are created for burden (Showing the role of women as a beast of burden not any other)
6. Women have a breast not a heart (Indicating that women are like animals without rationality and free will and peoples of emotion and can easily be deceived)
7. Don't submit to a mule and women
8. The Share of a woman is only a bed (indicating that their sole role is sexual gratification)

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is found out that modern land laws conflict with traditional and religious land regimes and do not reflect local realities. Most importantly, historical marginalization of women contributed a lot for the prevailing ill-favored societal expectation to women and generational disparity between male and female in access to and control over land and financial matters. The absence of rural credit scheme for women is has forced women to borrow from local money lenders with compound interest n monthly basis. As far as inheritance is concerned, the patrilineal form of inheritance has effectively sidetracked female members of the household. The prevailing domestic drudgeries which are hardly possible to delegate are constraining women from engaging in income generating activities as they leave limited space for a free leisure time.

5.2. Recommendations

There is a clear need to define the roles of customary and statutory laws as customary laws continue to overrule statutory laws, a situation that usually leaves women without independent economic security. And also important, launching rural credit scheme by considering the local women's circumstances is essential. While it is important to respect cultural values, sound and critical review is needed as to which values are essential for preserving the cultural diversity in the world, and which values are causing the societies to drop off the global train. Also important is gender mainstreaming in the area of justice and legal systems should be the top priority and building up institutional capacities and launching rural court systems near by the rural areas. Inculcating rural women about the status they have in the statutory laws will help to empower women.

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| Means of Land Acquisition | No of Respondents | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Through marriage | 58 | 73.42% |
| Through land distribution | 8 | 10.13% |
| Through inheritance | 13 | 16.45% |
| Land leasing | – | – |
| Total | 79 | 100% |

Table1. Means of land acquisition by women

Source: *Owns' Survey result in Argoba, 2010*

| Type of law | Sex | | | |
|--|----------|------------|----------|------------|
| | Male | | Female | |
| | Response | Percentage | Response | Percentage |
| Customary/local law | 25 | 32.21% | 19 | 26.76% |
| Religious (⁶ Islamic Sheri' a) | 9 | 12.67% | 17 | 23.64% |
| Statutory law | 0 | 0 | 5 | 7.042% |
| <i>Total</i> 71 | 34 | 47.88% | 41 | 57.75% |

Table2. Relative preference of legal system

Source: *Owens' Survey result in Argoba, 2010*

⁶ Is Islamic law based on the rulings of the Qur'an and the Hadith which are the authentic scriptures of Islam. The former is the direct word of God and the latter is the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed and his examples.

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