

GENDER ROLE IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION IN SOME PARTS OF ETHIOPIA: A BRIEF REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This essay briefly discussed the roles that men and women played in agricultural activities in Ethiopia. Gender roles are the different tasks and responsibilities of men and women determined by a particular society. Ethiopia is a country where more than 85% percent of the people's livelihood mainly depends on agriculture. Since there are cultural differences among various societies, the gender roles also vary. In some parts of the country such as Menz of Amhara region women did not plough where as in that of Awra Amba they were equally taking part in all agricultural tasks with men. Among the Sidama, women were taking part in agricultural activities such as manuring, harvesting, storing but they were culturally prohibited from ploughing, hoeing, sowing and weeding. Agriculture among the Maqi Oromos was mainly carried out by men. Harvesting and threshing were all the activities of men while women were confined in cooking food, milking and keeping the house.

KEYWORDS: Gender, Gender Role, Agriculture, Ethiopia

INTRODUCTION

Some time has already passed since gender has been becoming a topic of discussion among scholars in many societies especially those of developing countries. It is mainly because of the disparities in access to social services, resources, participation in community affairs and decision making and so on. The factors could vary depending on the time and context. The main gender concern in a society may not be the same in another. I believe that one of the ways that gender issues can be better explained is by considering the roles that women and men play in their societies.

In Ethiopia, where about 85% of the people depend on agriculture, gender plays its own role in regard to different activities of agriculture. Gender refers to the relation that exists between women and men no matter what form the relation takes. According to Moore (2001:78), gender is 'the way society expects people to behave on the basis of their physical difference'. Moreover, the other scholars Estegenet, Fanaye and Hirut (1999) state that, gender describes all the socially given attributes, roles and activities connected to being a male or female.

To Lorber and Susan (1991:11) gender is not stable and unchanging. Instead, they consider it as something that is being produced with a given social and historical context consisting of potential for change. Therefore, gender is a social construction created with specific social and historical locations that could be changed through time. Thus, every community has its own peculiar and specific gender issues so that it is appropriate to see them in its own context.

In many societies people think that there are different kinds of activities performed which are assigned to men and women. Some tasks are exclusively left to women and others to men. Moore (2001) explains that learning gender roles begins as a baby in the family. Thus, we can understand that gender roles are experiences that we have had since childhood. Etsgenet, Fanaye and Hirut (1999) also argue that, gender roles are the different tasks and responsibilities of men and women determined by a particular society.

Various researches have been conducted on the role of women and men in the agricultural sector. These researches show that both women and men take part in spite of some differences among different regions. Thus, the roles of both women and men in agriculture in some regions of the country will be discussed in this essay.

GENDER ROLE AND AGRICULTURE

Gender role among agriculturalists has its own long history. Scholars indicated that women were originally in charge of gathering food and since they spent much of their time at home, they came to know means of planting their own food. Though women were considered to have started cultivation, through time, the situation has been changed and it became the duty of men. According to Martin and Voorhies (1975) in Kottak (2002) 'As horticulture developed into agriculture, women lost their role as primary cultivators' (289). As to them certain agricultural techniques such as ploughing were assigned to men because of their greater average body size and strength. In addition, there were other suggestions about why women were cut off from agricultural production. Kottak (2002) assumes the reason to be the need of women to stay closer to home to care the large number of children that typify agriculture, compared to less labor intensive economies.

In regard to gender role in agriculture, Boserup (1970) classified it into two bases, the level of population density and the level of agricultural technology. On the basis of these variables, the gender role in agricultural production varies from place to place. According to her, female role in agricultural production is dominant in African because the continent is sparsely populated and the agricultural technology is based on simple hand tools that are hoes, sickle, axe and iron tipped digging stick. As to Boserup, women, in Africa, carry out nearly all farming activities except tree felling. This is illustrated in her own words as follow:-

Africa is the region of female farming par-excellence. In many African tribes, nearly all the tasks connected with food production continue to be left to women..... Tree felling is always done by men, most often by young boys of 15 to 18 years...(1970:16).

In the places where plough cultivation prevails, men plough the land by using draught animals and women are expected to do the work by using their hands. To Boserup, the plough cultivation system exempts women from the work of agriculture and enables them to concentrate on the domestic duties.

Gender division of labor among farming communities of Ethiopia has also been common. Ethiopia is a country where more than 85% of its population depend on rain fed agriculture. Agriculture is the back bone of the national economy. Both men and women have been playing a significant role in the development of agricultural production. The role and the contribution of both male and female, in the agricultural activities, is not necessarily the same in all parts of the country. Since Ethiopia is the country of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural groups, all ethnic and cultural groups have different gender roles in agriculture.

Research findings show the active participation of women in agricultural production. According to Frank (1999) women do almost half of the labor required for agricultural production in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, in spite of some variations, it is common to see women assist their husbands in various agricultural activities as soil preparation, manuring, weeding and harvesting. When men spend their time in the farm, women engage on the breeding of livestock. According to Hanna (1990), women in Ethiopia participate in all aspects of agricultural production except ploughing. Despite their active role in agricultural production, they get little value due to their lower position in the society. Hence, it is the men that the society considers as producers.

The work of Helen (1992:78) shows that among the community of Menz, in Northern Shoa of the Amhara region of Ethiopia, women do not plough agricultural land. Rather, they assist their husbands in supportive tasks except harvesting. They feed their husbands, fetch water to men and livestock during agricultural field work, help men during threshing and make grain seeds ready for sowing. Moreover, Frank (1999) indicated that land preparation, weeding, harvesting, threshing and storing have been some of women's primary responsibilities. In Amhara Region According to her, they are also in charge of herding, tending sick animals, watering, barn cleaning, milking and milk processing.

Unlike the women of the Menz community, the people in Awra Amba, Southern Gonder of the Amhara region, have no specific gender role in agricultural production. The women of the Awra Amba community equally participate with men in agricultural production. The women plough the land with oxen while men perform domestic activities at home. The division of labor, in this area, is based on age rather than sex. Hence, both women and men are equally considered as producers and have equal position and value in both agricultural production and decision making (Tadele, 1994)

In the case of Sidama, which is found in Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region, the participation of women in agricultural activities is common. According to Sintayehu (2000), manuring, harvesting, storing are exclusively the task of women. However, women are culturally prohibited from agricultural practices such as ploughing, hoeing, sowing and weeding. They are not also allowed to use farm instruments like plows, hoes and sickles. In the area men are engaged in production of both food and cash crops.

Huntingford (1969:30) explains that most agricultural works among the Oromos of Ethiopia are carried out by men. As he mentions, cultivation, harvesting and threshing are all the activities of men while women are confined in cooking food, milking and keeping the house. Similarly, the findings of Regassa (2000) assert the validity of the work of Huntingford. According to Regassa, agricultural activities are predominantly men's task among the Maqi oromo, South East Shoa administrative zone of Ormiya region. In this zone, women's involvement in agricultural production, like the Menz community of the Amhara region, is not much different despite variations from one household to the other. Ploughing is entirely men's activity. Women never try it. There is a belief in the community that goes, 'If women cultivate, there will be no rain fall'. They have a strong belief about it. The people in the community believe that father is analogous to God (Waqoo) and mother is to earth (lafa). God gives rain to the earth so that earth bears different kinds of plants just as mother bears off springs after receiving the father's semen. So, if a mother is similar to earth, it is shame that, by analogy, a woman cannot till the earth. It is considered like a woman having sexual intercourse with another woman.

Among the Maqi oromo, clearing the farming land, removing the bush, tilling, sowing, preparing the threshing-floor and farm implements are all carried out by men. Other agricultural activities like weeding, digging and storing to some extent are shared with women. However, weeding is the most common task of women. Women participation in the field of agricultural production does not seem a norm in the area though not strictly forbidden.

CONCLUSIONS

Gender is a crosscutting issue that attracts the attention of development professionals, policy makers and politicians to mention some. It is due the fact that in any development interventions involvement of women has become compulsory. To this end, considering the roles of men and women is very important, and gender roles vary across culture. In Ethiopia where agriculture is the backbone of the economy, the participation of women in the field is very high. It is, however, clear that the roles men and women play in agriculture differs from region to region. Though men are taking the lion's share in agricultural production, the contribution of women has also been an undeniable fact.

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