



Towards improved translation of gender awareness into practice: Experiences from a nutrition-sensitive agriculture project

In Ethiopia, gender equality is formally embedded into laws and policies since the 1990s. In the agricultural sector, it is mainly addressed through extension work and gender trainings. Next to governmental actions, non-governmental stakeholders (NGOs, research institutions) are approaching issues of gender equality in project interventions. Nevertheless, many women in rural contexts “remain disempowered and marginalized” (Biseswar, 2008:419) and are still facing inequalities in their daily lives. Thus, the adoption of policies and project interventions and the translation of newly gained knowledge and practices into day-to-day routines continue to be key challenges for women’s empowerment in the agricultural sector and beyond.

Introduction

Increasing attention to the role of gender in agriculture (e.g. FAO 2011) has led to a number of gender-sensitive approaches in research and development (R&D). The NutriHAF-Africa project is applying a gender-sensitive approach to investigate the use of African indigenous vegetables (AIV) in a multi-cropping agroforestry system in ancient coffee forests in Yayu, Southwestern Ethiopia. Gendered roles and responsibilities in agricultural territories remain a key issue for vegetable-agroforestry projects. Crops and management activities are often specifically attributed to men or women (Doss, 2002).

While the importance of gender in R&D is widely accepted, there are a number of research and implementation gaps. One important field of interest concerns household labor dynamics. Vegetable production and food preparation are dominantly female domains. Nutrition-sensitive agriculture projects therefore run at risk to further increase women’s workload on the long-run. On the other hand, projects are an opportunity to address issues of household labor inequalities and women’s needs through capacity building and improved extension services. Furthermore, understanding the role of households gender dynamics can contribute to the sustainable adoption of interventions beyond project activities. In this context, the presented research aimed at exploring the following fields of interest:

- Gaining a deeper understanding of the role of gendered labor division for nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions.
- Investigating factors that hinder the translation of gender awareness into daily routines.
- Contributing to an improved integration of gender in the agricultural extension sector and the adoption of policies on the local scale.

Approach

This research used a qualitative approach to investigate the translation of gender awareness into day-to-day routines by looking at gendered workload patterns and pathways to share workload more fairly between couples. Gender-disaggregated data was collected in four *kebeles* in Yayu Biosphere Reserve (Bonda Megela, Gaba, Wabo, Wangegne). A role-playing-game (RPG) was designed to investigate gendered workload and labor division in male-headed households (n=15) and to identify pathways to reduce women’s workload. Semi-structured interviews with the RPG participants (n=30) were conducted to learn about individual background situations. In a second step of the research, a gender training for male and female farmers and extension workers was monitored and evaluated with the help of a questionnaire (n=47). Afterwards, focus group discussions (FGD) (n=4) and individual interviews (n=6) were conducted with the participants.

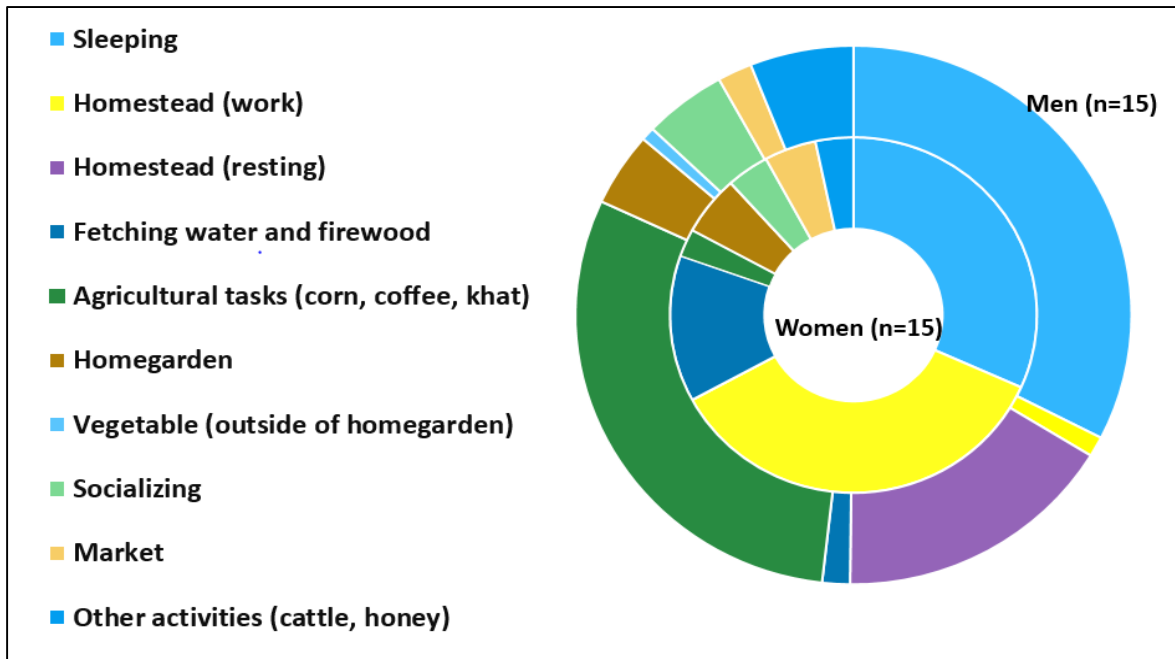


Figure 1: Self-perception of average working hours per sex per day (own study results).

Results: Gendered workload

Work is highly gendered in the project area. Men are generally responsible for productive tasks, while women usually undertake both reproductive and productive tasks. On average, female participants of the RPGs work 3.8 hours more than their spouses. Men spend 10.8 hours on average to do productive tasks and 0.7 hours for reproductive work (total 11.5 hours). Women spend 11.7 hours doing reproductive work and 1.8 hours for productive tasks (total 15.3 hours). Furthermore, men get more time for their recovery and to socialize (see figure 1). Especially women's workload depends on the season. Women are expected to engage in production activities especially during the peak times (e.g. during harvesting). Male respondents tend to work sequentially, while women carry out tasks simultaneously. One of the main reasons for this difference is women's reproductive responsibilities. Even when working on the field, women are e.g. taking care of children. Especially around the homestead, women do a variety of tasks at the same time. Men, on the other hand, are rather passive and define the homestead as a resting space. Contrary to women, male participants also reported longer waiting periods between different tasks (e.g. waiting for food).

High gender awareness can act as a starting point for social transformation processes towards greater gender equality, if translated into day-to-day-routines. Although gender awareness among the participants was found to be high, identifying pathways to share workload more fairly in the household was challenging for most participants. Furthermore, the existing rhetoric on gender issues is not tied to everyday experiences.

The RPG results show almost no difference between self- and external perception of workload, which is pointing towards a high awareness of the spouse's workload and the tasks they do on a daily basis. Interview data reveals that both male and female participants perceive their spouse's workload as high, or even too high. 9 out of 15 men accepted to identify pathways to reduce women's workload, while only 5 out of 15 female participants did so. Male and female participants stated cultural reasons for their rejection. One female participant (age 50) reported: "My husband cannot help me, our culture does not allow it." Another female farmer (age 19) added: "It is not possible to change my workload. It is simply like this." A male farmer (age 36) stated: "The workload of women is very high and it will not become equal, because our culture is difficult."

Results: Gender awareness

When challenged how the workload of women could be reduced, particularly male farmers suggested increased male participation in home garden activities. Female farmers, on the other hand, preferred to get support with other tasks, especially wood fetching. The majority of both male and female participants rejected the idea of male participation in reproductive tasks. Regarding future effects of increased vegetable production, the responses were mixed. Although some women indicated that their workload is already high and will further increase when producing more vegetables, the female perspective on home garden work was mostly positive. Most participating women reported that even if their workload would increase, they enjoy working in the home garden.

The rhetoric on gender issues among the participants is not yet tied to everyday experiences, but rather abstract ideas and ambivalent attitudes. When asked for the meaning of gender equality for their daily lives, the participants first of all emphasized that men and women are equal by law. Only after being challenged with different questions, they started to name examples that are relating to their everyday contexts. Remarkably, there is a strong focus on factors that have led to change. All respondents stressed that there has been *“a big change”* regarding gender equality in their households and community life compared to former times (referring to a period of five to ten years). However, the participating farmers had almost no ideas for future change.

Most participants identified culture as the main restricting factor for changes in household labour dynamics. Although people emphasized that their households can profit from greater gender equality, they described a dilemma. A female participant (age 23) stated: *“How to respect culture, but change it?”* (see figure 2). Attitudes towards culture are highly ambivalent. Although some participants accepted that there is a need for change of cultural norms, they could not identify pathways to do so. The negative outcomes of rigid gender roles in the household and community seem not to outweigh respect for cultural norms and traditions.

Addressing issues of gender through the extension sector and capacity building are ways to improve the translation of awareness into daily routines. Results indicate that gender training availability is low in the research area. For 72% of the questionnaire respondents, it was the first gender training. However, those who received training before perceived it as a useful investment. 54% indicated that the training positively affected their everyday habits. During FGDs, farmers voiced the need for more gender trainings. However, agricultural extension workers mostly perceived gender issues as additional workload and considered them a duty of the *Women’s Affairs Office*. During interviews and FGDs with extension workers, it was stated that culture is one of the biggest challenges, but there is low capacity to address it. Furthermore, extension workers linked *gender* mostly with female-headed households.

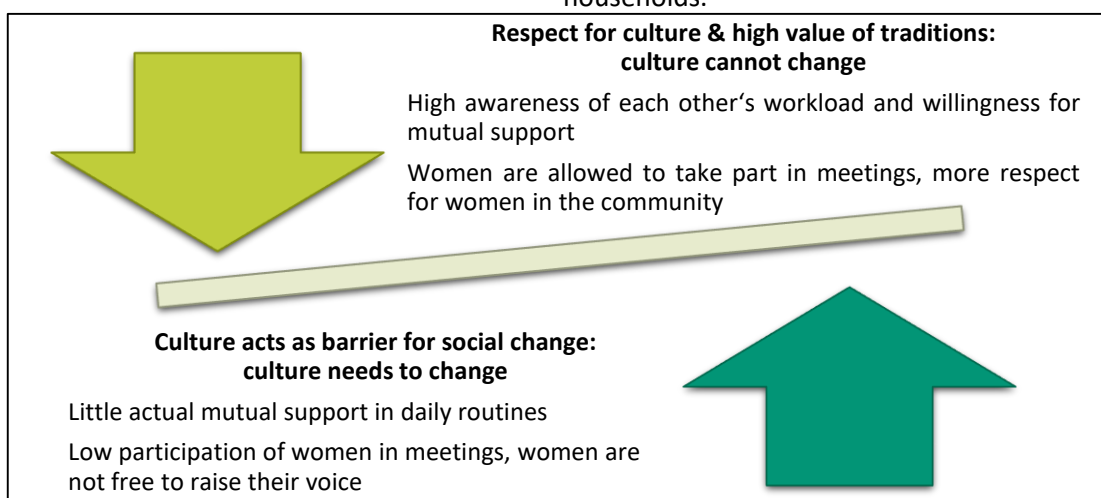


Figure 2: *“How to respect culture, but change it?”* (own design, based on own data)

Policy Recommendations

1. A central reason for the continued existence of rigid gender roles are cultural norms that hinder people to overcome their internalized roles, develop visions of change and adopt new pathways. Extension workers stated not to have enough capacities to approach social and cultural norms in their work: Training for extension workers should therefore specifically address the role of culture in social change.
2. “*Gender matters*”: Gender issues should not be centrally institutionalized (*Women’s Affairs Office*), but need to be understood as a cross-cutting issue and taken more seriously in the currently male-dominated agricultural extension sector. Exchange between the *Agricultural Offices* and the *Women’s Affairs Offices* should be promoted to strengthen the meaning of gender in agricultural development.
3. While addressing female-headed households is vitally important, the agricultural extension sector needs to pay more attention to gender dynamics in male-headed households and specifically approach women in male-headed households.
4. The finding that increased male involvement in vegetable production offers a chance to reduce women’s workload needs to be evaluated by taking into account potential negative outcomes for women’s empowerment and participation in innovations: the active promotion of this pathway runs at risk to act as a barrier for women’s participation in project activities and hinder women’s empowerment through capacity building.
5. Capacity building through nutrition-sensitive project interventions offer the chance to include both men’s and women’s interests and foster a dialogue for continued renegotiation of traditional gender roles. Intensive gender trainings (including reflection and evaluation) should therefore be a fixed component of every intervention.

References

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