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Socio-Cultural Challenges in Accessing Farm Resources: The Case of Women in Female Headed Households in Mender Meter Kebele, West Gojjam Zone, Amhara Regional State, Ethiopia

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Abstract:

Women are essential to economic growth in developing countries. They play different roles including productive works for earning income and food for the family along with their reproductive works. However, they are not free from gender-based discriminations which is experienced since long time. They face tragic socio-cultural challenges to access farm resources (male labour, modern fertilizer, improved seeds, chemicals, agricultural extension services and credit facilities). The rigid cultural practice and the mind-sets of the community in the area presented a strong gender-based division of labour in farming which makes life difficult for those women who take the risk of heading the household lonely. Above all, women in female headed households did not get equal access to farm resources due to their contested identity have got as they are not real farmers. Therefore, it was intended to study the challenges of women in female headed households in accessing farm resources aiming to analyze socio-cultural challenges which are responsible for it. To this end, four Gots were selected purposively. Out of these Gots, 16 women household heads were interviewed. More over focus group discussions and key informant interviews were conducted with male labourers and positioned peoples in the study area respectively. Then, analysis of data was followed and on the basis of this analysis, it was able to come up with a number of findings. The presence of rigid gender division of labour, their low decision-making power as female headed households at the community level, less bargaining power of female headed households to get male laborer and others are found as main challenges. Finally, recommendations follow which is expected to be presented to the whole society in the study area so that they should work for solving the problems of women by creating alternative strategies like promoting the resource accessing opportunities and assuring its implementation.

Keywords: Female headed, house hold, farm resources, Gots

1. Introduction

Agriculture has been recognized as being important to reducing poverty and promoting rural development. The sector has strong linkages with the rest of the economy, and this is one of the most powerful ways in which it aids economic growth and supports nation building. When agriculture grows, so does the economy in general, speeding up the reduction of rural and urban poverty (World Bank 2012).

Rural women represent a tremendous productive resource in the agricultural sector. They are major contributors to the agricultural workforce, either as family members or in their own right as women heading households. They make up to 40% of the world's agricultural labor force, and in developing countries 67% of the agricultural work is done by women (2007).

Now a day the incidence of female headship is believed to have increased worldwide and, in both developed and developing countries, a high proportion of these households are found to suffer from poverty (Chant, 1997). Most countries have between 10 and 30 percent female-headed households. As a group these households are important for agricultural policy makers and implementers because many of them are involved in farming and they share some defining characteristics. They are nearly always disadvantaged in terms of access to land, credit and other productive resources. They also have less labour available because they have fewer male members, which also helps explain why they very often support a higher dependency ratio, in particular of older family members (SOFA Team and Cheryl Doss 2011).

Women's contribution to agricultural production is very high in rural areas of Ethiopia. 50-60% of the agricultural activities require women (Askale, 2005). However, women especially female headed farmers have less access to and control over productive resources such as land, labour, oxen, extension services, rural credit, and others (Yigremew, 1995). Farming systems, customary laws on marital and inheritance rights, gender roles at households and on farms, community, and access to social resources, etc. have influences on women farmers in female headed households in access to and control over farm resources.

Like most Ethiopian women farmers in female headed households, woman of Mender Meter Kebele in Amhara Regional State needs special attention. The socio-cultural influences of the entire community in ignoring them as they are not real farmers which in turn become a challenge to access to productive resources place women farmers in female headed household in disadvantaged position. Therefore, it is imperative that the nature and cause of those limitations of rural female headed women farmers of Mender Meter kebele be subjects of this study. This paper is an attempt to investigate the socio-cultural challenges of women farmers in female headed household in access to farm resources specifically male labour, modern fertilizer, seeds, chemicals, credit and extension services and those factors responsible for the incidence of such conditions with the special reference to crop production in the kebele.

2. Results and Discussions

In the research findings the major socio-cultural challenges were identified. To understand this, in-depth interviews were undertaken with women in female headed households on their social status like contested identity, rigid gender division of labour in farming etc. and how they view the challenges of all these above listed components to them in accessing farm resources.

2.1. Socio-Cultural Challenges of Women in Female Headed Households in Accessing Farm Resources

This section is focused to present the findings of the research participants in terms of the socio-cultural challenges faced in accessing farm resources in terms of: access to male labour, modern fertilizer and improved seeds, agricultural extension services and credit facilities.

2.1.1. Access to Male Labour

Socio-cultural challenges of women in female headed households in accessing male labour is categorized in to: the presence of strict gender division of labour in farm activities, low decision-making power of women in female headed households, low status of women in female headed households in the eyes of the society, low esteem given to women in female headed households and low bargaining power of women in female headed households.

In the study area farm labor is the most critical input in the production process because of the pervasiveness of highly labor intensive agricultural production system. In the study area family labor, hired labor (daily labourers and Kenja in local language) where male laborer resident in employers house with responsibility of feeding him and at the same time the laborer is required to perform non-agricultural activities like roofing besides agricultural activities), share cropping arrangement, labor sharing arrangements and ox sharing arrangements are the most important sources of male labor for women in female headed households since there is rigid gender division of labour that cannot be easily substituted each other.

Interview guide questions that focus on socio-cultural challenges of women in female headed households in accessing male labour in the study area include gender division of labour in agriculture, female household's low value on the eye of the society, management as well as decision making and controlling ability of women in female households on their land.

Although seeking for male labor is the sole source of solution to carry out their agricultural operations (i.e., ploughing) for most women in female-headed households, it is not always abundant and easily accessible for them. Women mentioned several socio-cultural challenges associated with hired labor accessibility during in-depth interviews in an elaborative way.

2.1.1.1. The Presence of Strict Gender Division of Labour in Farm Activities

In most cases the availability of labour in the agricultural household depends on both the amount of family labour that a household can mobilize and the amount of labour that can be hired in local labour markets. However, men labour constraints can be more acute for female-headed households due to the existence of pronounced gender division of labour for particular agricultural tasks, meaning male and female labour or agricultural tasks cannot be easily substituted. Concerning the seriousness of gender division of labour in farming a woman explained her case as:

When my husband was alive he allows me to plough the land during his launch time. My husband was somewhat liberal so that he did not forbid me to do so. However, his friends insulted me how dare you are? Why you became a shame for our brother? If you continue like this we will bring another innocent woman who can keep her women hood to him. But my husband ignored them. I lost him by car accident. We were loved each other. Many individuals asked me to marry another person. But I don't want to marry another man. Instead I decided to manage the entire activities of farming including ploughing by myself. However, things were not easy as I think. My deceased husband's friends always insulted me and shouted at me. Which part of our country and culture lets women to plough? Tell me? Finally, they told me as they will shoot my pair of oxen if I refuse to stop plowing. They did what they plan. Nobody asked them why they did this. Now I am suffering a lot in accessing male labour since I lost my oxen (participant 10).

From the above experience of the woman it is evident that although she tried a lot in ploughing of land, she was not given the opportunity to take the decisions regarding her own farm. The society forcefully took an action. The woman said

that she has given up her choice of ploughing because of rigid socio-cultural values of the society which prevent women to plough the land though she is capable to do it.

Other in-depth interview participants have also similar idea as they highly need male labor for different operations in the farming cycle which are assigned to men's agricultural task. Most of them need male labor for most agricultural operations whereas few of them said that they need male labor for some agricultural operations which are not allowed to perform by the culture by women like plowing.

Information obtained from focus group discussants (kenjas) also agreed with the above view by reflecting male labourer is highly demanded by both male and female headed households reflect male laborer is highly demanded by both male and female headed households. But mostly men want to be employed as agricultural labourers in male headed households than in female headed households. They shared their views on the issue by stating that the society and deep rooted cultural setting prevent them to be employed in female headed households.

Hiring of labor is a must for women in female headed households to survive if they do not have other source of labor like grownup children or any other member of the extended family who is fit enough for the farming operation in question. Ploughing is the exclusive task of male which is perceived as the greatest task of all agricultural activities in the society.

A 34 years old widow who is heading the household and suffered a lot due to male labour shortage explain the issue as follows:

I always asked God why all these things happen to me. Once if God took my husband away from me why he challenged me throughout my life like this? Starting from the year when I lost my husband my plot has never been plowed on time. I am always in trouble by male labor constraint due to absence of adult male labor in my family and the cultural taboo in women's ploughing. The ox-plough technology is female unfriendly in our society. Women hardly manage to plough using those plough equipments even if they make up their minds to break the cultural taboo (participant 8).

Information obtained from most of in-depth-interview participants revealed that in the study area men are typically responsible for the heavier manual tasks such as land preparation and tillage with oxen. Men play a dominant role in seed selection, reflecting their better access to information. With regard to tree crops, men tend to do most of the heavy manual labour that is ploughing and tillage. But women's activities are related with assistance like soil conservation, land clearance, nursery, weeding, pruning, harvesting and management, depending on the situation. Most of the interviewees stated that performing all these above listed agricultural tasks is easy for them. The thing which is assumed very difficult among all women in female households were ploughing, broadcasting of seeds and threshing with flail. They explained that though most of crop seeds are sowed by using row planting in present time, the technology of planting seeds which are very small in their size like teff and sorghum in rows still is not applied in the area.

So here in the study area men are usually responsible for threshing and winnowing cereal crops and broadcasting of seeds besides ploughing. This situation of gender division of agricultural activities creates more problems to access male labour for female headed households as the situation creates male labour shortage and they cannot simply substitute the task of the man due to the rigid cultural value of the society.

From the above finding of this study, it is possible to conclude that though women in female headed households perform lots of agricultural activities of crop production male labour is quite necessary for the completion of preserved tasks in crop production. Because in the study area rigid gender division of tasks in agriculture is continued as usual which further created a great problem to access male labour for women in female headed households since they did not easily perform those farm tasks exclusively given for men by the society's norm. The present study revealed that land ploughing is expected to be performed by men according to the socio-cultural norms of the study area. In agreeing with this norm, a study result from Yilkal (2003) stated that men are expected to do many agricultural tasks including ploughing a major work to be performed by them.

In the aforementioned to the above issue, literature reviewed for this study, Participation of women in agricultural activity is constrained by cultural norms for example, the norm that women should not engage in plowing (Satyavathi et al, 2010)

2.1.1.2. Low Decision-Making Power of Women in Female Headed Households in Their Land Use

In-depth interview participants mentioned that they tried a lot to find a male laborer through different system like sharecropping, ox sharing, labour sharing, searching male relative or family labour and Kenja so as to cultivate their plot. However, socio-cultural challenges were too complicated to access male labour through all these methods. From this the first one is directly related with female house hold heads low decision-making power on the farm activities. During the interview women in female headed households seriously reported their problems to decide their own land which in turn became a challenge to access male labour to get it cultivated. The case story below explains this issue very well.

2.1.1.3. Case story

Yeshumie is a 22 years old woman living in Mender Meter Kebele Tekeran Got. One of the kebele officials introduced me to her to participate in the research by way of sharing her story in accessing male labour. She was willing when I approached her to tell me her story. Her tears drop when she tells multiple problems she faced in her life because she was not

in a position to access share croppers and male labourers (kenja in local language) due to the menace of her ex-husband. She narrated her story as follows

I was born and grew up in this Kebele. After my father passed away, my mother remarried. During the land redistribution of 1996, I and my younger sister were living with our mother in our stepfather's house, where we were both registered as family members. Sometime after, our mother divorced our stepfather and left the house without sharing the property. While the case was under arbitration by the elders, our mother passed away. The issue was thus suspended without being settled.

Meanwhile, I got married the son of my stepfather, and became his second wife. During the land re-distribution, he was living independently and allocated four timade (one hectare) of land. The land holding of my mother and stepfather together was 12 timade out of which they have allocated two timade to the son of my stepfather when he married. My marriage with this man only lasted for a year; he divorced me while I was five months pregnant with his daughter. When my mother passed away, I asked my stepfather for my mother's share. He told me to ask my ex-husband but he refused and even threatened to kill me. I left the place and settled in the nearest Got.

During the arbitration process the stepfather passed away. Meanwhile, the land title registration issue came to the forefront. I claimed my mother's share again, but the Kebele land use administration committee (LUAC) rejected my request. Then I appealed to the Woreda LUAD (land use administration department) and they referred me back to the Kebele administration, which only heard my case when instructed to do so by the Woreda LUAD officer.

When the ex-husband realized the issue was becoming serious and the legal implications of my claim, he re-requested that I should settle the dispute through arbitration by the elders. I accepted and the elders decided that 2 timades of land should be given to me. After the agreement was signed and witnessed by the elders, the Kebele land administration committee approved it. The ex-husband then brought his brother from another region to claim the land. Although I had the document with the agreement, my ex-husband and his brother together illegally proscribed any man not to go to that land to plow as well as not to have any sort of agreement as a sharecropper with me. The land is not still being properly cultivated due to men labour constraint as a result of share cropper's fear of my ex-husband and his brother (participant 7).

* It is not her real name

Yeshumie is not still sure about getting male labour to cultivate her land in the future even. She is bearing the burden of raising her girl child without sufficient crop produce for consumption. Her physical condition and her facial expression tell more than her words.

Problems in decision making especially on their land holdings causes insecurity of accessing male labour for women in female headed households in the study area. Traditional practices that men did on women in female headed households hardly ensures women's possibility of accessing male labour to hire because of patriarchal attitudes and practices which are biased against women's decision making.

Concerning the issue of share cropping arrangements and the challenges to access male labour as a share cropper in the female headed household, socio cultural challenge associated with women household head's low decision-making power is found to be the major one.

The difficulty of women household heads to have a full power and command over their land holdings is frequently reported socio-cultural challenge which indirectly has an effect on accessing of male labour for women in female headed households. Another woman interviewee also could not decide on her land due to

Looking for a share cropper is usually practiced by female headed households like me who can't fully utilize their lands either due to lack of inputs like seed, fertilizer, labor etc. In our local share cropping arrangement, the land owner receives half of the produce after an amount used as a seed and the cost of fertilizer is subtracted from the total produce if the land owner did not contribute fertilizer and seed to her share.

However, giving the land to a share cropper is not without its own problem these days. Some share croppers with a one-year agreement, would not like to leave the land after one year. Firstly, the share copper may refuse to share the produce according to arrangement by making different pretexts, or after utilizing the land for some years he may totally refuse to give any of the produce and in some cases may claim the land for his own. If the owner of the land questioned the share cropper either to give her share of produce back or to leave the land for others, they are not totally willing to do so. Sometimes they beat the land owner. When the land is taken away from share croppers legally by the help of kebele officials, it is impossible to think for that woman to access another male labour as a share cropper. Because the previous share cropper will beat or kill others who need to plow that land (participant 6).

Information obtained from key informant interviews with chair and deputy chair persons of that kebele also revealed that in every year at least ten women in female headed households would experience disagreements and prohibited to decide on their land either by their ex-husbands or by share croppers. However, most of women in female headed households did not bring the issue to the kebele court because they afraid those men's beatings.

In contemplation to feminist theories applied for this study, findings from in-depth interview reveal despite the significant roles women play in agriculture and food security of the family, they continue to have a poorer command over a range of productive resources which is directly a problem to access men labour. Women in the study area did not decide and manage their own important productive resources like land. Women mostly are forced to let their land fallow due to their less control

over it. Findings further reveal that female headed household's denial of decision making right on their own productive resources is also a cultural challenge to access a men labor either as a sharecropper or hired laborer.

2.1.1.4. Low Status of Female Headed Households in the Society

The other socio-cultural challenge of female headed households to access hired labour (Kenja) is associated with low value given to women of female headed household by the society in general and male labourers in particular. Hired labourers never want to be commented by female employers on their work efficiency. According to the in-depth interview participants (participant 13, 2, 7) who have got kenja along time before reported that they were not satisfied with the way men hired laborers perform the assigned work especially during land preparation. On this ground when they gave a comment for them since male labourers have a high value for themselves over their women employers, they used to insult and bombed them with a disgusting word and then automatically leave from their work.

Because of this patriarchal mindset, which resulted a high disagreement between two parties, men labourers most of the time did not prefer to be employed in female headed households. Information obtained from focus group discussion with Kenja's revealed that they will be dissatisfied if their relatives forced them to be employed in female headed households. Their major reason for their dissatisfaction was that women in female headed households are not always satisfied on the activity that male labourers are performing since there is no man who can work together with the hired labor following their footsteps.

From this we can conclude that the image that patriarchal norms in the society gave for women in female headed households is too bad which discourage male labourers to be employed there.

The other challenge was related with accessing hired (wage labourers). This is also directly related to the culture prevalent to the study area, which declares unquestioned supremacy of male over women. This cultural obstacle is worst when it comes to a woman who is heading the household lonely in the context of female headed households, because it is very difficult for a woman to command the respect of hired labor. During the interview most of interview participants disclosed that they feel afraid to control and command the hired laborers as they wish. They explained that if they tighten control over the laborers and commented on their job a lot, they will not be willing to work for those women next year. According to interview participants most of the time they refrain from keeping tight control on the laborers. They rather revert to treating them better with the food and the drink they present them.

During focus group discussion, discussants disclosed that all laborers who need to be employed or hired, first they critically study the back ground and behavior of the employers. If those women have proven with the behavior of giving continuous comment and order for the laborer, then the previous year laborer who was working with that woman would discourage and forbid others to work with them.

A widowed woman participated during the in-depth interview told her story that is related with her low status given from the society and has a direct impact on her in accessing kenja. She explained the issue from her experience as follows:

I am originally from Tigray. I met my husband while he was serving in the military. We were married in 1982 and have three children. All of them are girls. After the fall of the military regime, we came back to his homeland Zendebe. My husband is died of TB in 1998 E.C. So, I left with my three daughters without having a male child to support me.

Since we were together during the land redistribution I was allocated land. The total land holding granted was four timade (1hectare): two in the dega (high land) and two in the kola (low land). However, as is the practice in the area, since woman culturally is prohibited to plough her plot, I was advised by the arbitrators to have a male laborer (Kenja in local language) with annual deal to give one fifth of the produce from each type of crop. However, the land was not cultivated for two consecutive years due to the problem of getting male labour (Kenja). My close male relatives tried a lot to bring Kenja to me and even they made a contact with two men who need to be kenjas. But when they hear that they are going to be employed in female headed house hold, without any precondition whatever the due is, they automatically cancelled their idea and had an accord with male headed households rather.

Their reason most of the time was; Since a woman is living alone in home, they will be seriously blamed with guilty of having sexual intercourse with that woman even if they are innocent. If this unrealistic gossip reached to the deceased husband's relative they will threaten them to death. Second as far as there is no adult man in the house, equipments of ox traction or ploughing implements like yoke, plough-beam, Yoke beam... which are pulled by oxen and used during plowing may not be fulfilled and ready. Third all responsibility will reside on their shoulder due to absence of men household there. I regret that I could not farm the land at all. (Participant 9).

Another in-depth interview participant who faces a lot of challenges due to shortage of male labour testified that low societal values ignored and denied her chance of accessing male laborer. She said:

There is nobody who is lucky beyond a woman living with her husband, daughter and sons. Because a woman could be only respected and valued if she has husband and family. She will not bother about anything in farming. But my life is not pleased by all these gifts. I lost five of my offspring (2 girls and 3 boys) in two years of divorce with my husband. My husband left me with silly reason by suspecting of me with other man which is not true. My husband's family gave me a bad imaginary character as I used magic to take some ones produce from his store and even from farm. Due to this my families condemned and neglected me. Labourers are not willing to be my employees since they hear the bad imaginary character that people

gave to me. When I was a bit strong in my mid age I used to dig by hand to produce crops for my consumption. But now I lost that strength. (Participant1).

Concerning labour sharing arrangements or traditional labor arrangements, these are also an important source of labor in the study area. Male heads of households usually form a group of 2 to 4 men locally known as 'Wonfel' who work on group members' plots turn by turn, during land preparation and other agricultural activities. Since female-headed households cannot be part of such a group they cannot benefit from such arrangements, unless they have a son capable enough to join the work group. Interview participants sadly express their concern as they are not even culturally allowed to be a member of the most important work group (usually known as 'debo' locally). These work groups are supposed to be formed only by a group of married women and its all members are supposed to be women from male headed households. Groups are formed for the purpose of collecting extra male labour from outside of the family to plough the land as a help for their husband. Women in group transport manure from homestead to plots during the period of land preparation and the wife's labour will in turn bring the neighboring woman's husbands as a reciprocal laborer to plough.

According to in-depth interview participants, in the study area the society including their close relatives experienced a long lived cultural belief that consider female headed house hold women as dried wood that can't have twig forever unless she gets married under any of circumstances. Based on the culture whenever female headed women are participated in those working groups and involved in transporting and distributed out the manure on the plots, the plot where she puts the manure will not allow the seeds to grow. It will remain under the soil. During in-depth interview, participant 3 narrated her problem as follows

Two years before my neighbor asked me to help her to transport manure to her plot. I said ok to her by hopping her husband's labour and oxen to plow my plot in return to that. However, she never allows me to enter in to the plot and put the manure there. I only carried the manure up to the plot edge after that either she took it from my back and put it by herself on the plot at one time or ordered me to let the manure around the rim of the plot at another time. For her it is simply a help because she did not recognize it as I am wasting my time and labour since I am not allowed to enter and put the manure that I am carrying by myself on that plot. Her husband did not plow my plot back. This trend honestly speaking deprives our right of accessing man labour to cultivate our farm (participant 3).

Literatures reflect women's access to land doesn't make certain that they gain benefit out of it. Women have to get access to agricultural inputs to make proper use of their lands. Lack of access to farm resources, the farming system and women's economic status affect their benefits from agricultural land (Lemlem et al, 2010, Doss 1999, Askale, 2005).

2.1.1.5. Low Bargaining Power of Women Household Heads

Labor is the most critical variable for agricultural production in the study area since agriculture is labor-intensive and could absorb increased amounts of work. This has long been recognized by the farming community there and the quest for additional labor. Information obtained on the challenges of female headed households in access to hired male labour from interview with rural female headed households reflects that women in female headed households are disadvantaged greatly. Currently the loss of male labor from this highly labor-intensive farming system through migration has created a complex set of problems especially for female headed households due to the fact that high number of adult male out migration creates labour shortage in the area where migrants originally lived. In the study area adult male out migration is common and acceptable even the son is leaving his old parents though they did not agree with. All concerned interview participants stated that the numbers of men labourers who are currently available in the study area are not sufficient for the community as a result of uncontrolled out migration of male labourers from their residence and then female headed households could not bring men laborer from distant areas. Women who took farming activities by themselves are faced with a number of problems due to the very nature of farming business such as high labor demand.

The other issue was about seasonal availability of labour and their low negotiating power with wage labourers or daily labourers. This problem relates to the availability of labor at the right time of the season. Since rain-fed agriculture is a highly seasonally rushed job and fluctuations in the appropriate time of each operation has a repercussion on the final yield, the availability of labor at the right time is a decisive factor for better yield. Most of interviewed female head households reported that they face a chronic problem of accessing hired labor at the right time of the season, especially for ploughing the land due to their low negotiating power. Most of those women are found in Zindeb and Tekeren got where male out migration is higher or the existing male population prefers Fattening of animals and bee keeping business to wage labor. To these areas, wage laborers come from distant areas where the above business is not that common and wage labor is an important source of cash for the farming community. Women in these wage labor deficits got (Zindeb and Tekeren) explained that since the wage laborers came after they were through with their own field, it is natural that they came to the women owned fields late and the women's fields in general happen to be the last to be sown. The women also explained that it is not uncommon that the laborers may not turn up all together, and the land would not be cultivated.

A 38 years old woman who is heading the household on the problems related with negotiating power to hire a laborer noted that:

A big challenge to me is inability to find and negotiate with those male labourers who needs to be employed since I cannot perform men farm tasks by myself due to the existence of gender division of labor in our society to the extent that male and female labor is not substituted. After all farm tasks are seasonal. Labor bottlenecks are common during the

planting and harvesting seasons. Long term contracts seldom exist and hiring in of labor is done on a spot market. Here bargaining about wages is conducted from eye to eye on daily basis. Lacking the experience to negotiate wages on the market is the challenge of mine. Households with access to large amounts of male household labor or the ability to mobilize non-family male labor will have an advantage during those times (participant 11). The present study revealed that negotiation with daily male labourers is expected to be through men based on the socio-cultural norms of the study area. In agreeing with this, a study result from Dolan (2004) stated that men are expected to play a role on hiring in labor because man is more respected and experienced on such markets.

2.1.2. Access to Modern Fertilizer, Seeds and Chemicals

Modern fertilizer, seeds and chemicals are equally demandable as male labour for crop production in the study area because the farm land did not grow up crops in a good way unless farmers added fertilizer and good seeds. As a result of the high demand to apply all these farm resources all the time challenges appear to access it. Challenges are more serious when it comes to women in female headed households. The information obtained from in-depth-interview participants reflects this fact. They explained about the perception of the society and the positioned peoples who are in charge of seed, fertilizer and chemical distribution for farmers in the study area. A widow woman who has three daughters living with her explained that she is not in a position to access fertilizer, seeds and chemicals all the time since the people in charge to distribute it ignored her.

In her words:

In each year whenever summer comes for the sack of formality kebele officials used to register the name of households in line with the exact amount of modern fertilizer, seed and chemicals what they are requesting. We know all it is only for the sack of report to the woreda agricultural and rural development bureau. I always registered but I never got the exact amount that I am requesting. When I asked them why this thing repeatedly happened to me, their response is because you cannot utilize it properly. Probably you are demanding it to sell for other farmers (Participant 5). As we understand from the above conversation the identity of women in female headed households is highly devalued. They are not being recognized as real farmers even by the concerned officials.

Information obtained on widowed and women's access to improved seeds, modern fertilizer and chemicals from the key informant in the Kebele reflect that widowed women did not access the exact amount of seed, fertilizer and chemicals what they requested. The key informant mentioned that widowed and divorced women did not access what she required because we thought they did not utilize it well since they would not have male labour making their plot ready to use all the amount of seed and fertilizer what they are requesting for.

Other key informants from the peasant association cooperative committee admitted the problem. It was not our intention to hurt them. It is due to the society's influence that forced us to give priority to model farmers. But considering the problem that women in female headed households are facing we were asked them to form a group with representative so as to make their voice loud. However, they fail to do that by saying "it is not our culture to women to go out of her home and involve in such a responsibility and let us delegate our male relatives otherwise."

Other in-depth interview participants have also a similar idea. They disclosed that they do not even get information on when inputs are distributed to farmers in their Kebele. They mentioned that they frequently buy fertilizer from markets which is a disadvantage to them because Kebeles sell fertilizer at subsidized price. They mentioned that they do not use fertilizer when they can't afford and they get fewer yields since their land produces fewer yields without fertilizer. So, the possibility of women in female headed household's access to modern fertilizer, seed and chemicals is determined by the good will of peasant association cooperative committee members and assigned officials in each Got. For instance, a widowed woman shared her experience as:

Fertilizer, selected seeds and chemicals are distributed to male farmers primarily. Provision of such inputs is based on good track records on high yield per hectare. So here female headed households are the last to be remembered (participant 9).

Information obtained from interview with women in female headed households on the socio-cultural challenges of women in female headed households to access modern seed, fertilizer and chemicals confirm that female household head's access to these resources is attached with the existence of influential male relative. They also further disclosed a widow without any male relative would not allow to access resources though she had enough money to buy the resource. The process is too complicated and biased. Even higher officials there never noticed the situation.

Findings reflect that widowed and divorced women's access to fertilizers, seeds and chemicals is not realized and none of them have adequate access for what they asked for. In confirmation to literatures reviewed for this study, the majority of male farmers and Peasant association cooperative committees do not see women as capable of engaging in autonomous farming efforts, because women are not farmers. 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. The tradition in the study area gives such right for a man by limiting the rights of women in female headed households (Satyavathi et. al, 2010)

Findings clearly reflect that none of female headed households accessed improved seeds, modern fertilizer and chemicals what they required and this deprived them to make proper use of these inputs which directly affect the quantity of produce they cultivated.

2.1.3. Access to Agricultural Extension Services

Access to basic farm resources provided by governmental or a non-government organization is decisive and crucial to improve productivity and improve the livelihood of poor rural households. However, due to the long-standing male biased and 'male bread winner model' policies of the extension approach rural women are excluded directly or indirectly from the major services offered by different organization.

2.1.3.1. Women Household Heads Subordinated Identity

According to women interviewees there are misperceptions and prejudices about women's actual and ideal roles with the result that they are often excluded from the target group of extension. In the study area farming is traditionally considered as male activity. Women's work in agriculture sector still considered marginal and they are still considered as supportive helpers for men farmers.

Men have more possibility of accessing information through informal sources while they socialize with friends, from indigenous support and social networks and from market places.

As to in-depth interview participants they get information from neighbors while participating in indigenous self-help and social network associations, as well as through their male relatives, school children and friends. The sources are mostly informal, indirect and sometimes provide incomplete information.

In relation with extension service delivery, interview participants asserted that men farmers accessed formal sources to improve their skills and knowledge, even in areas where women do most of the activities. Many women interviewed mentioned that men directly access knowledge from development agents, farmers' conferences, and kebele meetings, although the degree and access differ between rich, middle wealth and poor farmers. Men also exploit indigenous sources to advance their knowledge, such as elders' meetings and councils, visits to distant localities, and socializing with colleagues and relatives.

To consolidate women interviewees' concern on this issue as; women farmers rarely get extension support that would enable them to enhance their knowledge and skills, and thereby improve the performance of their agricultural activities. As a consequence, the traditional extension approach hinders women in female headed households to access that service. The focus on men is based on the assumption that they will pass the knowledge acquired to their wives and other family members. During the in-depth interview women were asked whether their male household neighbors share the knowledge they gained from extension agents to them. They reported that though extension workers told them to do so most of them did not apply it. Because for them it is not sound to share what they gained to their wives and female headed neighbors who are not real farmers. They said that we are the right persons who deserved this knowledge.

2.1.3.2. Service Providers' View toward Women in Female Headed Households

Extension in Ethiopia has long been focused on male farmers, in keeping with the cultural perception that "women do not farm," a perception that ignores the wide range of agricultural activities in which women engage.

According to interview participants, extension traditionally concentrated services on "model" or "progressive" farmers, those who are open to new ideas and innovations. These farmers tended to be male. A divorced woman facing the challenge of accessing agricultural extension service said:

In my experience most of extension agents are evaluated on how many farmers they could get to adopt "packages," and so they preferred to work with man in male headed households. In addition, extension agents were overwhelmingly male, and cultural taboos restricted their interaction with women (participant 14).

A key informant, giving extension service in the study area stated that extension agents in the study area had a great deal of awareness of this gender bias and had employed strategies to get around it. They work with the kebele officials to organize women into extension programs, thereby circumventing cultural taboos on women meeting with men other than men only. The key informant discloses that they tried to work with men and women at the same time. However, kebele officials in the study area were themselves conservative and that there was a great deal of resistance to women's active involvement with male farmers.

The Woreda gender expert, another key informant reported that men frequently hiss women when they are even rarely nominated as a contact farmer with extension agents on the behalf of all women themselves. She asserted that agricultural extension approach principles should indicate availability of female extension agents and supervisors as an important variable to break the cultural variables and facilitate communication with rural women for smooth transfer of agricultural information and to identify problems encountered by rural women. In the study area, although there is more number of female headed households in the kebele, there is no female extension agent. This will definitely reduce the interaction and the initiation of women farmers and extension agents due to cultural problems.

Very few interview participants pointed out that the gender of extension agents does not matter as long as they serve the needs of farmers. However, the rest reported as there are cultural barriers to male extension agents reaching women alone.

In aforementioned issue, literature reviewed reveal that female farmers receive only five percent of all agricultural extension services worldwide and that only 15 per cent of the world's extension agents are women (Habtemariam, 1996). The present study findings clearly showed that there is a considerable evidence of gender bias in the provision of extension services in the study area.

2.1.4. Access to Credit Services

Credit is often important for farmers who cannot find enough money to purchase farm resources in the right time especially for improved seeds and modern fertilizer. Although most farmers used income from off-farm activities to purchase these farm resources in the study area, most of women in female headed household did not have such income earning activities besides agriculture. They still required credit at certain times of the year that is tied to the purchase of a particular farm resource, such as seeds and fertilizer.

As most interview participants mentioned, a farmer's possibility to obtain credit is highly correlated with access or tenure to land and possibility to get collateral. In places where some land is titled, it may be difficult for a farmer whose land is not titled to obtain credit, a common circumstance for many smallholders. They also explain that access to credit is not totally based solely on legal rights. Rather access to credit is determined by the lender's perception of the farmers' ability to repay the loan. Thus, large-scale farmers who produce a surplus for sale have better access to credit than small-scale farmers including women in female headed households, regardless of their tenure status. In theory, the extension of credit to smallholders is cited as one reason for the successful expansion of agricultural production. However, to receive credit, farmers had to document their ability to produce a marketable surplus, usually by showing receipts from past sales. Farmers who subsequently obtained credit were from high producing male households. Since women are perceived as producing for home consumption only and less for the market, they had a harder time to obtain credit.

In accord with what interviewees have been said, the information gained from chief and deputy chair persons of that kebele revealed that there are few women in female headed households who frequently ask for a letter or document showing their ability to produce a marketable surplus production which is not true.

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