



# Empowerment of Women: A Comparative Analysis of Experiences from Rural Communities in Ethiopia

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**Abstract** Empowering women and reducing gender disparities are key challenges of 21st century. This is more pressing in rural areas of developing countries like Ethiopia. The problem is prevalent in intra-household relationships. However, most initiatives of women empowerment have been transitory and externally imposed without considering structural causes of gender inequality hence they have been less effective. We reviewed and compared rural women's empowerment under widely occurring traditional systems versus community-led initiative, specifically the case of the Awra Amba community in northwest Ethiopia. The comparison was made on the bases of key indicators including division of labor, access to information, and resources, leadership and decision-making and gender-based violence. There exist number of studies assessing gender relations in rural areas under traditional systems. The studies showed that rural women have more workload involving both household and farm activities compared to men who are tasked to mainly outside home activities. Moreover, limited accesses to information, services and control over resources, low decision-making power, lack of opportunities to self-development such as education and training are key challenges to rural women. However, the above observed gaps seem to have been relatively tackled in the case of the Awra Amba community. This community owns a unique self-organized system with the goal of addressing socio-economic problems through the principle of egalitarianism. Woman's inferior position in the community is believed to be eliminated by destroying the traditional gender roles and patriarchal gender ideology. As a result, some of the community values and principles have been replicated to other Ethiopian rural communities through own initiated exchange visits. But the actual implementation of the community-led initiative in Awara Amba is not immune to criticism. Therefore, in-depth scientific research, and upscaling of successful community-led empowerment practices should be encouraged to understand how locally organized collective actions help to realize inclusive development.

**Keywords** community-led initiative, decision-making, division of labor, women empowerment, Ethiopia

## INTRODUCTION

Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) is indispensable component for sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction (Global Health 50/50 and IFPRI, 2021; UN Women, 2018). It exists where women and men, boys and girls have equality in all aspects of life including, education, health, nutrition, access to economic assets and control over resources, and possessing equal decision power at all levels. However, persistent challenges such as unpaid workloads and lower recognition of women's work; an unequal balance of power in the home and community; lack of access to and control over resources; and gender-based violence remain significant barriers

to gender equality. On the other hand, if rural women had equal access to production factors, yields from their fields would increase by 20 to 30% total agricultural output by up to 4% in developing countries, that will lead to better child health and education, food security and improved nutrition (FAO, 2011; Alkire et al., 2013). In general, greater participation and empowerment of women in the home, community and organizations lead to more inclusive development and representative institutions, and build resilience and peace, which in turn contributes for development.

While promoting GEWE as one of the major pillars of the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in many parts of the developing world, gender inequalities continue to be extreme. These gender inequality problems are particularly severe in Sub-Saharan Africa where population is expanding rapidly. For Sub-Saharan Africa to leverage its demographic dividend, it is vital to include all segments of society, including the poor, marginalized men and women into the development process. Without inclusive and transformative development, it is hard to ensure socio-economic development, enhance productivity and improve welfare of future generation in the region (World Bank, 2020). To curb the challenges of gender equality, many donors and programs implement instrumental approaches to address inequitable gender norms such as men's dominance in decision-making, constraints that limit women's access to resources and services, among others. However, these efforts often are transitory and imposed from outside while overlooking the significance of existing community-led practices, social norms and values. Unless structural causes of gender inequality are addressed, instrumental approaches alone cannot build empowerment and enhance resilience (Minne et al., 2018).

Ethiopia is one of the Sub-Saharan African countries which has adopted global agreements and endorsed country-specific laws and policies that are stated in the country's constitution Article 35, such as equality in matters related to employment, equality in acquisition and management of property, equal participation in policy and decision making, and right of women to plan their family (FDRE, 1995). The reforms on family code implemented in 2000 and the community-based land registration, undertaken since 2003 have shown progress little by little (Kumar and Quisumbing, 2015). However, there are still huge gaps and challenges in implementation that can be witnessed by the gender gap index that shows Ethiopia placed at 97th rank out of 156 countries (WEF, 2021). Ethiopia being a country characterized by traditional, conservative and patriarchy culture that ascribes a low status to women in all dimensions, however in some self-organized rural communities such as Awra Amba, women's inferior position in the society is believed to be eliminated by destroying the traditional gender roles and patriarchal gender ideology (Emirie and Teferi, 2013; Mengesha et al., 2015; Joumard, 2021). Thus, to understand these two contrasting phenomena that exist in one country, literature review and investigation of the present situation were conducted to identify areas for future research.

## **OBJECTIVE**

This study reviewed existing literatures and compared gender roles and relations under widely occurring traditional systems versus community-led women empowerment initiative such as the case of the Awra Amba community in northwest Ethiopia.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Literature Search Method**

A systematic search of articles published in peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, reports, and books between January 2001 - December 2021 was conducted using Web of Science and Google Scholar databases. Particularly Google Scholar was used to search studies related to Awra Amba community (as most of the studies exist in master's thesis and report form). The keywords used were 'rural women', 'gender' and 'Ethiopia'. The specific time period was selected for two reasons; 1) to incorporate up to date literatures, and 2) as it aligns with the period when Awra Amba

became publicly known through Ethiopian Television documentary about the village aired in 2001 (Joumard, 2021; Østebø, 2021). The documentary narrated the story of a self-sustained and gender-equal community in contrast to the traditional gender-conservative society in Ethiopia.

The search results were vast. However, a review of the studies was made based on studies explicitly focus on gender roles and relations including division of labor, access to information, services and resources, leadership and decision-making role and gender-based violence in rural Ethiopia. Only studies that were a good fit with the research objective and accessible online were included. Besides, title, abstract and conclusion of each study were checked to decide the relevancy. Out of 124 articles accessed in Web of Science and 16 dissertations, articles and reports in Google Scholar, we only screened and used 23 studies. We did not conduct quantitative analysis rather main findings of the selected studies are qualitatively synthesized, summarized, and presented. As women's empowerment is hard to measure conceptually and contextually, the focus of this review paper is only to compare gender relations in a traditional versus community honored as a model for gender equality in published and unpublished literature, national and international media outlets, among others. However, it does not mean gender relations cannot show the situation of women empowerment. Gender relations are critical aspects of culture that shapes the way daily life is lived in the family and community as a result it can serve as a cornerstone for empowerment.

### Description of Target Groups of the Study

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the target groups of this review paper, specifically: rural women in locations where traditional systems are commonly practiced, and Awra Amba community, where gender equality is advocated and implemented. This section can serve as a basis to understand the remaining parts of the paper.

Over 80% of Ethiopian women reside in rural areas, where households are engaged primarily in subsistence agriculture. In the countryside, women are integrated into the rural economy, which is often labor-intensive and demands a heavy physical force in agriculture and domestic chores. As in other traditional societies, in Ethiopia, a woman's worth is measured in terms of her role both as a mother and wife. Women are rarely perceived for their hard work, and most of the time a man decides in their lives and limits their access to resources and opportunities (Demissie and Abebe, 2017; Gebrehiwot et al, 2018). As a result of patriarchal gender ideology, most rural women are generally submissive to men.

**Table 1 Characteristics of target groups**

Characteristics	Women in the traditional system	Women in Awra Amba community
Demography	About 80% reside in rural areas	Consists of about 500 people
Livelihood	Subsistence farming	Agriculture, weaving, small trade, and tourism
Gender ideology	Patriarchal (conservative)	Non-patriarchal
Religion	Exist	Non-exist

Awra Amba is a small rural village in Ethiopia, comprises about 500 people (weaving cooperative community). It is located 73 km East of Bahir Dar in the Fogera district of South Gonder Zone, Ethiopia. The people share a strong ideology and culture, which differentiates them from other communities. Number of studies show the community advocates and have codified rules and regulations: gender equality, children's rights, solidarity, the golden rule (treat others as you would like to be treated yourself), the value of work, absence of religion or institutionalized religion, and democracy (Gelana, 2009; Teferi, 2013; Ambawu, 2015; Joumard, 2021). They believe in hard work and being good to all people.

The next section presents how the above two contrasting social norms that exist in one country have been devoted to ensuring gender equality through women's empowerment based on indicators mentioned in the first part of methodology section.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## Gender Based Division of Labor

Since the 1970s, there have been ongoing discussions over the ways in which gender roles in the home and outside are assigned and recognized. Division of labor, gender roles and inequality in a society depend on its cultural beliefs about the nature and social values of gender differences in competencies and traits (O'Connor, 2019). This fact is a common phenomenon in Ethiopia where gender roles and division of labor is dictated by cultural and social norms. Women are traditionally expected to work hard and are responsible for all reproductive and household related activities, on top of their active role in farm activities except ploughing which is considered as a man's task in Ethiopia (Elias et al., 2015; Badstue et al., 2020; Joumard, 2021). Women have greater workload than men but viewed as auxiliaries who provide labor (Petros et al., 2018; Badstue et al., 2020) and their workload is estimated between 13-17 hours a day, which is comparatively more than twice that of men (OECD, 2014; Elias et al., 2015; World Bank, 2020). As a result, women's workload (time poverty) is main disempowerment factor in agriculture and beyond (Petros et al., 2018; Belete and Melak, 2020). Generally, in rural areas of Ethiopia, women are solely responsible for household chores, while men are responsible for tasks outside the home. It is culturally dishonor for men to be involved in reproductive activities (domestic chores) (Gebrehiwot et al., 2018). Discriminatory social institutions/ norms and stereotypes on gender roles exacerbate unequal distribution of responsibilities and therefore, remain one of the constraints to ensure gender equality that in turn enable women to be active participants in social and economic development of rural areas.

**Table 2 Brief summary of gender relations in traditional system and Awra Amba community**

Indicators	Women in the traditional system	Women in Awra Amba community
Division of labor	-Gender based division of labor exist. -Women are traditionally responsible for all domestic chores on top of their active role in farming.	-Gender roles do not exist. -Men do domestic chores including childcare, cooking, etc. Women do productive activities and vice versa.
Decision making power and leadership role	-Women have nil to limited voice in decision making, participation and leadership role in household and public rural organizations.	-Women have the right to take leadership role and decision-making power and exercise it at both at household and community levels.
Access to and control over benefits of resources, information, and services	-Limited access to and control over resources, including land, and use of credit, improved technologies, education, and training.	Equal access to education, health services, possession, and control over benefits of resources including land and household assets.
Gender-based violence	-Nearly half of Ethiopian women experience lifetime GBV.	Their non-violent treatment of women makes them different from others.

*Source; Authors compiled from reviewed literature*

Contrary to the above facts, in Awra Amba community which has distinct gender relations, there is almost no marginalization and discrimination of women and gender-based division of labor. Nearly all reviewed studies revealed that gender roles and relations are guided by the principle of mutual understanding among all members of the community. The community rule and regulation states in its article 5 that both men and women must share equally all their responsibilities inside and outside the home (Joumard, 2021) they should share works on a strict basis of ability and efficiency guided by discussions and mutual understandings (Emirie and Teferi, 2013; Ambawu, 2015) both the Awra Amba females and males have androgynous and nontraditional gender role perception (Ebrie, 2015). However, according to Ebrie (2015) and Cherie (2012), the absence of stereotypic gender role is not the basic element of gender equality in Awra Amba, rather it is the result of active participation of women in decision-making and maintain shared equality of assumptions among themselves.

## **Women’s Decision-Making Power and Leadership Role**

The Beijing conference agreement, known as the Platform for Action, named women in power and decision-making one of the 12 critical areas of concern. Though progresses have been made little by little in Ethiopia after the Family Code adopted in 2000, and currently 50% of the cabinet is occupied by women, but women still have far to go towards equal representation in power and leadership in general and rural areas in particular. According to Gebrehiwot et al. (2018); Petros et al. (2018) and Badstue et al. (2020), men have a dominant position in rural society, while women have nil to limited voice in decision processes at the household level, and participation and representation in public rural organizations. Generally, men are viewed as the primary farmers and controlling major decisions including land use, the use of credit, and control over income and expenditure. Furthermore, women’s right to participate in reproductive health decision ranges from 40-60% (Alemayehu and Meskele, 2017; Tadele et al., 2019).

Whereas in Awra Amba community, women have the right to take leadership role and decision-making power both at household and community levels (Emirie and Teferi, 2013; Ambawu, 2015). Their participation and representation rate in the development committee (the main administrative structure) which consists of about 15 sub-committees has increased from 36% in 2004 to 64% in 2011 to 70%, and to 81% in sub-committees in 2020. Though, it does not mean equality was achieved in the studied years, rather tremendous improvements have made in terms of women’s participation and representation in institutions found in the community (Joumard, 2021). Moreover, Ambawu (2015) depicted that the number and timing of children are decided by mutual understanding of both husband and wife; women also fully exercise their sexual rights with the absence of pressure and autonomous to access reproductive health services (Teferi, 2013). In general, traditional stereotypes that hinder women’s decision-making role have disappeared (Teferi, 2013). Human dignity and impartiality are fundamental values for women’s and men’s active participation in decision-making and democratic power relationship in Awra Amba (Mengesha, et al., 2015) relative to the traditional system that favors the superiority of men and restricts the rights of women in multiple dimensions.

## **Women’s Access to Resources, Information and Services**

Eliminating barriers that prevent women from having the same access to education, economic opportunities and productive inputs can address structural, gender-based inequalities (Lea et al., 2018; UN Women, 2018). However, in many developing countries including Ethiopia, rural women have limited access to and control over a range of resources, including land, access to and use of credit, cash, improved technologies, information and extension services that are essential to increase their farm productivity and income (Elias et al., 2015; Demissie and Abebe, 2017; Petros et al., 2018; Badstue et al., 2020; World Bank, 2020). It is main disempowerment factor in agriculture at large and other income-generating activities in particular (Belete and Melak, 2020). Gebrehiwot et al. (2018) revealed that customary and traditional institutions and practices restrict women’s access to land, market and trading, resource related decision-making at the household and community levels.

However, in Awra Amba, men and women have the rights to involve in any economic activities to earn their own income and participate in social activities (Emirie and Teferi, 2013; Yassine, 2008). Women have equal access to health services, possession, and control over benefits of resources including land and household assets and other opportunities (Gelana, 2009; Endale, 2013; Ambawu, 2015). According to the reviewed literature, boys and girls have equal access to education. For instance, Joumard (2021) revealed that girls’ enrollment rate at university increased from 46% in 2013 to nearly 100% in 2020. There is no prioritization of son’s education over daughters. Moreover, women are economically independent and can engage in their own income generating activities other than the income earned from community’s share (Teferi, 2013). Women and men have equal access to and control over the benefits gained from land and non-land related resources (Ambawu, 2015). Besides, during divorce, women can equally share asset and property

acquired throughout marriage (Joumard, 2021) which is uncommon and source of dispute in other parts of rural Ethiopia.

### **Gender-Based Violence Against Women**

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a serious violation of human rights and a life-threatening health problem globally. According to the WHO (2021), it is estimated that one in three women will have experienced GBV, and the incidence is particularly severe in developing countries including Ethiopia. A meta-analysis review by Kassa and Abajobir (2018) indicated that nearly half of Ethiopian women experience lifetime GBV including physical, sexual and psychological violence. Mainly women and girls in rural areas are victims of various harmful traditional practices such as wife-beating (Gurmu and Endale, 2017; Muche et al., 2014), early marriage, female genital mutilation (Demissie and Abebe, 2017), prioritize son's education over daughters' (Gelana, 2009), etc. On the other hand, Muche et al. (2014) and Deyessa et al. (2010) depicted that GBVs are acceptable and tolerable in rural than urban areas due to socio-cultural and traditional norms; mild consequences towards the person accountable to the offence; low education level, among others.

On the contrary, GBV is not acceptable and condemned in Awra Amba community. Their social norms and non-violent treatment of women make them different from the surrounding society (Teferi, 2013; Ambawu, 2015). Unlike their neighbor, women are not beaten; no discrimination towards single or divorced women (Yassin, 2008); marital relationship is solely based on free consent of the couples; sexual relations are considered a common good and not a shameful act to discuss about it (Joumard, 2021). As a result, women are free to deal with reproductive health issues. In general, Teferi (2013) explained this situation as a result of cultural values like truth, love, non-violence, and peaceful co-existence reinforced by the community's moral standards- "do as you would be done by", contributed to the internal and external peace processes in Awra Amba.

However, in a stark contrast to the above studies, a recent study conducted by Østebø (2021) criticizes the communities gendered exclusion tendency that comes due to false accusations. The author challenges the narratives of the communities' origin, especially on the viewpoint of religion, potential of power concentration and questioned the promotion of the community as a 'model to alleviate poverty'. But the author almost acknowledged the absence of gender-based division of labor. Though, the study is a thorough investigation of 'understanding the spread of policy models in a digital age' using Awra Amba as a case, yet the arguments and conclusions are based on generalized theoretical concepts that did not consider local contexts, exhaustive and balanced investigation of the two sides of the stories told by individuals. It requires further multidisciplinary quantitative and qualitative studies to refute and/or prove the conclusions made. On the other hand, according to Awra Amba community public relations (2020) there are about 9 communities replicating Awra Amba values and principles since 2004 to ensure gender equality and eliminate poverty. But to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that investigate how the values and principles are replicated in other areas.

### **CONCLUSION**

This review depicts that rural woman in developing countries like Ethiopia are still facing a multitude of empowerment-related challenges such as: gender-based division of labor that leads to more workload to women; lack of decision-making power and leadership role; poor access to resources and services including health and education; and frequent gender-based violence and its prevalence. Past efforts done to address these challenges often are transitory and imposed from outside while overlooking the structural causes of inequality embedded in values and social norms. These challenges, if not addressed, will remain bottlenecks to the UN's Sustainable development goals to ensure all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. However, community-led gender sensitive initiatives like the experience of Awra Amba can have potential to unlock these challenges, even if such initiatives are not immune to criticism (e.g., Østebø, 2021). More study on

their role for local and global development has been largely overlooked and this merits future study. Hence, in-depth multidisciplinary research remains important to understand how community-led women empowerment practices help to realize inclusive development.

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