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Trajectories of Women, Environmental Degradation and Scarcity: Examining Access to and Control Over Resources in Ethiopia

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Introduction

The degree of access to and control over resources within a society play significant roles in differentiating members of a society in policy and decision-making processes. Not all societies have legal, organizational and political frameworks that promote fair access to and control over resources. Concepts ranging from deprivation to marginalization, exclusions and alienations are employed to indicate the extent of denying latitudes in controlling resources within a society. The extent of the problems of 'who gets what, when and how' (Laswell 1969) is highly critical in agrarian societies with scarce resources where the majority of the population live in highly degraded rural areas. The bargaining power of men and women crucially shapes the resource allocation decisions of rural households (International Food Policy Research Institute 2000: 1). It has been recognized that access to and control over resources molds the bargaining power and status of women (Thomas 1990; Hopkins, Levin and Haddad 1994). The status of women within such a context is more precarious and sordid than that of other members of the society.

Gender analysis refers to a multitude of methods and approaches that look into the roles and relationships between women and men, and their access to and control over resources. It is not only a cognitive tool for structuring and framing the interactions and relations between the sexes, but also a practical tool that cuts across needs assessment, activities and responsibilities, resources, ac-

cess and control, benefits and incentives analysis, and institutional constraints and opportunities. As such gender analysis has passed through a multitude of paradigms and approaches. The past decade witnessed the Gender Roles Framework (GRF); the University College-London Department of Planning Unit (DPU) Framework – ‘triple roles model’; the Social Relations Framework developed by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), Sussex; and the approaches of feminist economics.

In gender analysis access to and control over resources is ‘one of the principal factors determining the economic and social well-being of women, especially in situations of conflict and reconstruction, when their rights are violated on a mass scale’ (United Nations Center For Human Settlements 1999: 4). This is especially true in countries with an arduous and protracted history of war, famine, environmental degradation, resource scarcity and highly conservative and male dominated societies like Ethiopia. However, such calls for resource access and control should focus on feasibilities of deriving benefits from ownership of resources. Rhetorical calls just for the sake of granting titular ownership of resources boil down to zero sum results. From the political dimensions, reforms and policy advocacy need to appreciate the conditions at the micro level and the structures of agrarian societies.

The population of the country was estimated to be 63,494,702 in 2000. Ethiopian society is highly agrarian, with 85 per cent of its people living in rural areas. What is more significant is almost 50 percent of the rural population, 26,876,699, constitutes women (Central Statistics Authority 1994). As a patriarchal society, women’s status and condition is one level worse than that of other members of the society in spite of their significant number and role in the country’s agrarian economy. Women constitute the majority of the population living in absolute poverty. The United Nations reiterated that there is growing evidence that in the past decade, the number of women living in poverty has increased disproportionately to that of men (United Nations 1996). The extent of poverty, the state of the environment and the conditions of women therefore proved to be far more acute, far more deteriorated, and far more precarious than a couple of decades ago despite limited and unsteady positive changes. The trajectories of acute poverty, degraded environment, alienated and deprived women have today become one of the most deplorable trends within the structures of agrarian societies. Such a phenomenon has particularly marked an unprecedented proliferation of cases where acute poverty, access to and control over resources, and degraded environment have significantly been influencing and shaping the role, condition and status of women within agrarian societies like Ethiopia.

Study Objectives

This study aims to look into the paths of access to and control over resources – mainly agricultural land – by women in two rural communities of Tigray and Wello in northern Ethiopia. The study is based on research projects of the Netherlands-Israeli Research Programme (NIRP) and the Peasant Production and Development project in Ethiopia (PPDE). Is it worth calling for access to and control over resources, mainly land, by women in the mainly agrarian society of Ethiopia? Do women with access to and control over land resources have actual control and benefits of land ownership? This study attempts to answer these research questions.

From a multicausal approach, it is believed here that any analysis of the trajectories of access to and control over resources by rural women in Ethiopia should focus on the feasibility and actual benefit of control over and use of land resource. Policy and socio-cultural factors significantly account for the downturn trend, also influenced by the structure of the agrarian Ethiopian society. The multicausal nature of the problem is reflected in women's position and status, which, according to Lawrence Haddad, is formed around a series of cultural and economic factors such as resource use, ownership, control, legal and ideological structures, and education and information (Haddad 1999: 96-97). Acute environmental degradation and resource scarcity also contribute to the increase in the value of land and struggles for its control as a resource. These causalities have been aggravated by the inadequacies of successive governments' practical concern for appropriate gender approaches that could facilitate, as Charlotte Johnson-Welch puts it, 'the process of identification and change of inequities – in power relations, decision-making and resource access and use' (Johnson-Welch 2000: 6).

Study Methodology

This study uses a case study approach. Among others, three major types of case studies may be identified: correlational analysis, controlled-case comparison and process tracing (Van Evera 1997). Specific to the study of trajectories of access to and control over resources, correlational analysis involves collecting large amounts of quantitative data on the extent of practically using and controlling land by women across many societies and over time. In controlled-case comparison, cases are selected that vary on the independent variable, for example political, socio-cultural or environmental degradation and scarcity, but that are essentially the same for all other variables that might affect the incidence of actual benefits and control over resources. Finally in process tracing, cases with a *prima facie* assumption of women with access to land but with limited actual benefits as result of political, socio-cultural and environmental degradation and scarcity are selected for further analysis and examination (Van Evera 1997). In this study,

the case selected is more related to the process tracing methodology of case study.

Primary and secondary sources of data were employed. Intensive interviews, structured questionnaire, informal discussions were held with 250 farmers and women. The study also held interviews and discussion with regional and local government officials, non-governmental representatives and elders. Books, journals, official documents, Internet documents were used as secondary sources of data.

Environmental Degradation and Scarcity: an Overview

Ethiopia is an ancient country, historically dated as 3000 years. However, the writing of history in the country, to use Gebru Tareke's words, 'has been a contested terrain' as recently as the past few decades. Disagreements have been budding between nationalist-hegemonists and cultural pluralists. 'Whereas the first group traced the lineage of the modern state to the ancient Axumite civilization, thereby laying claim to some three thousand years of history,' writes Tareke, 'the latter group dismissed that claim as historical mythology' (Tareke 1996: 217–18). Nonetheless, what is not contested is that the country's history has been full of arduous conflicts, wars, rebellions and famines despite its being portrayed as the cradle of human kind and land of plenty!

Donald Levin captures five general categories of images of Ethiopia over the centuries. The country has been illustrated as a far-off land; a home of pristine piety; a magnificent kingdom; an outpost of savagery; and a bastion of African independence (Levin 1974). Miles Bredin adds to the list as follows: '[t]oday, as then, Ethiopia is a surprising place. Where you expect Live Aid-style deserts and starving children, there are monumental mountain ranges and one of the most ancient cultures in Africa' (Bredin 2000, 48–55). In the eyes of John Markakis, the Ethiopian 'homeland suffers from an age-old process of physical degradation, the work of natural forces abetted by human and animal action.... Continuous cultivation and grazing stripped the earth of its natural cover, leaving it unprotected against the torrential rains that beat on the inclined surfaces of the highlands' (Markakis 1987: 8).

The country suffers from acute environmental degradation and scarcity, understood in the Ethiopian sense broadly as land degradation (Djene 1990: 49). Agricultural produce in the country fails to meet subsistence needs of the population with an annual growth rate of 3 percent (Food and Agricultural Organization 2000). A mix of factors ranging from population pressure to unfavorable land tenure system, over-ploughing, over-grazing of farm lands, mismanagement of land resource, deforestation, soil erosion and inappropriate land use systems are responsible for the deteriorating productivity of land in Ethiopia. For over

one year, the production of major crops such as *teff* (indigenous grass), wheat, maize, barley and sorghum is barely enough to feed the population.

Historically, famine occurs every 6–8 years in northern Ethiopia and every 8–10 years for the whole country (Haile 1988: 90). Richard Pankhurst outlined an average of one famine incidence every decade between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries (Pankhurst 1985: 26). There have been forty major famines and food shortages in total, with fourteen occurring in northern Ethiopia, particularly in Tigray and Wello, areas where this study is focused (Webb & Braun 1994: 20–21). For years, the country has not produced sufficient food to feed its people. Almost 90 percent of the population live in rural areas where the predominant economic activity is rain-fed agriculture.

The ever-increasing population number and the overwhelming dependence on rain-fed agriculture put tremendous pressure on the carrying capacity and productivity of the land. Berry Hughes argues that ‘population prediction at least for a period of 20–30 years tends to be more accurate than predictions in other issue areas’ (Hughes 1993: 15). The present international consensus is that in the next thirty years the world population will swell to at least 8.2 billion (Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development 2000). In the words of Thomas Homer-Dixon, it is not only a mere scarcity of resources that create challenging conditions to sustenance and development without conflicts and instabilities, but also demand sides as a result of population increase (Homer-Dixon 1999).

It is hardly difficult to discern the status of women within a degraded, highly sensitive, conflictual and male dominated agricultural resource of land. It has been an underlying triggering factor for series of peasant revolts against successive governments in the country. Leslie Gray and Michael Kevane show that ‘when land becomes scarce or rises in value, or when rights are formalized through titles or registration, these rights to use land are revealed to be secondary and tenuous’ (Gray & Kevane 1999: 2). The impact of resource degradation and resources on politico-economic factors in Ethiopia is highly debated (Meadows *et al.* 1979; Djene 1990; Lanz 1996; Semait 1989; Rahmato 1999; Homer-Dixon 1999; Wolde Mariam 1984; Cohn 1987; Duetch 1996; Tareke 1996; Young 1997; Kebede 1992; Molver 1991; Tvedt 1993; Myers 1993; Cohn & Anderson 1999; McCann 1991; Picket 1991).

Specifically, impacts through feedback loops on political and policy decisions are very interesting to examine, for they have close relationships with limiting or restricting policy choices in land (re)distributions. The causality is mutual when politico-economic policies bring diverse impacts on the environment. Increased resource degradation and scarcity entails dismal prospects for women. Access to and ownership of agricultural land holds the key to access to other sources of income and assets. The dependence of women on men becomes complete, and

rural households will be seen as unitary thereby discounting and blurring the contributions and conditions of women.

Paradoxically women are more active in environmental and resource conservation activities, which are widely recognized and documented (Merchant 1995; Steel 1996). The United Nations gave credence to women as closely associated with local ecological resources and management of biodiversity on a daily basis (UN 2001: 6). Women play significant roles in intervening against the problem of food insecurity mainly caused by environmental degradation and resource scarcity. Chris Udry's assessments indicate that women's contributions towards increasing food security amount to as much as 15 percent of household income (Udry 1996). Identifying individuals' differential access to and control over resources and benefits is the fundamental feature of gender analysis, and ensuring equitable access and distribution will enhance food security (Johnson *et al.* 2000: 10).

Women And Access to and Control Over Land Resource: Overview of Findings

There appears to be increasing evidence that 'greater gender equality correlates with higher economic growth and ... poverty reduction strategies must pay serious attention to reducing gender disparities' (Zuckerman 2001: 2). Even if the causality needs thorough investigation, the incidence of poverty is highly correlated with lack of access to land (Mearns 1999: 1). Nothing is more important in a society where rural population make up the overwhelming majority than the availability of productive land (Young 1989: 199). Access to and control over land as a resource have received the greatest amount of attention because, as a fixed asset, it is easier to define the boundaries of the resource unit (Meinzen-Dick *et al.* 1997: 13). The World Bank succinctly summarizes the broader importance of owning land. It states that access to and control over land shapes equity because land is still one of the major assets held by households; influences efficiency because land is one of the economy's main productive assets; underlines sustainability of resource use, for it is important for agricultural production and the provision of nationally-important ecosystem services; and affects governance because there is a strong link between land tenure and the prevention of conflict (World Bank 2001).

In many parts of Ethiopia poor access to resources is widely acknowledged as a major cause of food insecurity (Amare *et al.* 2000: 2). The 1975 'land to the tiller' Proclamation No 31 of Ethiopia brought fundamental changes in terms of allowing land 'ownership' to the majority of the rural population. Under the 'Public Ownership of Rural Lands Proclamation' the tenancy system, hired farm labor and private ownership of land were abolished while placing a limit of 10 hectares of cultivatable land for any given farm and making provisions for the establishment of a peasant association (Yefru 2000: 362). The recognition of the

intricate relationships among these factors has led to the growing interest in examining the nature and status of rural women access to and control over resources like land. Consequently, women's access to and control over land, and their property rights have received considerable attention internationally, regionally and locally (United Nations Development Fund for Women 2001: 8). So is a growing interest to address the impediments of women access to and control over resources, as indicated in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (1985) and the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly titled 'Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century'.

However, these calls have unfortunately been mostly rhetorical and political, and really far from the critical questions of locating the real locus of power. In other words, when access to and control over land is problematized, it creates disparities regarding who has real control over the produce of the land. A call for greater access to land ownership is one thing. But addressing and locating concrete problems of power in land ownership, although transcended in many aspects by gender analysis, has been elusive over the past decades. The great majority of women in rural Ethiopia do not have access to and control over resources, mainly land. Even women with access to land ownership do not have actual control over their resources. They receive a significantly lower amount of the produce of their land, for they are dependent on male labor, which is locally termed as 'ye equil'. Feleke Tadele succinctly writes that despite their equal share with men in socio-economic life, Ethiopia women have little decision-making power and a smaller share of resources and benefits. Eighty-seven per cent of women in Ethiopia are engaged in agriculture, contributing about 50 per cent of income based on subsistence agriculture. However, little attention has been given to involving women in rural development efforts and enabling them to benefit directly from agricultural extension services (2001: 16).

In this study, access to and control over resources, mainly agricultural land, is viewed as the right or opportunity to use, manage, or control land and its resources. It includes the ability to reach and make use of the resource and constitutes two parameters: quantitative parameters (such as the nature of tenure, the size of the parcel and its economic value) and qualitative parameters (for example, legal security, and documented, or registered evidence of rights to land). These parameters play an important role in 'measuring' access to land before, during, and after development projects or land administration programs (Komjathy & Nichols 2001: 2). During the study, intensive interviews were conducted with more than 250 farmers and women in the two research regions over a four-year period. In Tigray region Atsbi Wonberta and Humera areas were covered while in Wollo region Kalu 'wereda' (district) was selected as a research site. Almost two third of the respondents (127) were women with access to land resource. The

study mainly aimed to assess the extent to which women with access to land actually have control over their ownership of land. It also attempted to examine the feasibility and viability of increased calls for greater access to and ownership of land by women.

Findings from the studies indicate that recommendations for increased access to and control of resources by women should focus on assessing who actually controls and draws benefits from land. The status and rights of women, in access to and control over resources and other broader aspects, are characterized by duality. Specifically, the issue constitutes both spatial and temporal facets in Ethiopia. Despite national and all-inclusive legal frameworks that profess to provide equal rights to women and men in resource ownership, strong customary and cultural practices dictate the realities of women at the micro level, especially in rural areas. So, from a temporal perspective, rural women are immersed in numerous quagmires indicating highly precarious and unsteady prospects for equality with men. Nationally recognized constitutional rights are influenced by the spatial and diverse customs and beliefs, which in turn are subject to changes and improvements time-wise. The problems of these rural women range from the feminization of poverty to the feminization of agriculture, the feminization of immigration and so on.

The Central Statistical Authority classifies a *de jure* female-headed household (roughly constituting 20–25 percent) as a household where the land is owned and managed by a woman, such as in families headed by widows or by single or divorced women. On the other hand, a *de facto* female-headed household is a household where a woman is responsible for all aspects of managing the household and the farm due to the absence of a husband. One should treat these statistical figures with much skepticism. In fact, in Africa in general, William Cavendish realizes that analysis of rural households and resources is beset by inadequate data (1999). Still, however, as a result of war, sickness and death from HIV/AIDS and migration of men from rural areas to towns and cities, there are trends that signal the decreased role of men in agriculture and the ‘feminization of agriculture’. Such factors in turn have increased the number of female-headed rural households (Food and Agriculture Organization 2000).

Ruth Meinzen-Dick *et al* argue that access to and control over resources ‘include far more than titles and pieces of paper specifying ‘ownership’ of a defined piece of land or other resource. They encompass a diverse set of tenure rules and other aspects of access to and use of resources’ (Ruth Meinzen-Dick *et al.* 1997: 1). The Secretary General’s report of the United Nations underlined that although rural women may have *de jure* rights, they do not have *de facto* rights (2001: 6). Perhaps a common denominator among these variables might be the culturally dominant role of men in the long history of the country. Distinctively the ownership of and succession to land has historically been a fiercely protected

sphere of men. The question of land has been a burning issue leading to protracted peasant revolts. Based on the land question, the manner and nature of warfare have been shaped, where 'whose face have you not disfigured? Whose wife and child have you not captured?' ran rebels' song for a long time (Caulk 1978: 460). Generally in Africa women obtain rights to land through men, mainly through their husbands or sons (Kabutha 1999: 9).

According to the results of this research study, one major problem of women with access to land was their inability to efficiently and effectively use their land. They are highly dependent on men's labor. What is widely known as 'ye equal', which literally translates to as equal share of the produce of the land, was practised in the research areas. 20 percent of the interviewees had an average family size of 6 in which women were responsible for supporting the family, while 15 percent of the respondents constituted women-headed households. The extent of the women's dependence on men's labor is such that in Humera area of Tigray region women with access to big plots of land could not actually use their land. The plots that they received were virgin plots full of acacia trees that needed a community labor force to clear them and put to use. In Kalu area more than 63 percent of the women with access to land did not own oxen, an indispensable component of agriculture in the region. A landless male farmer with a pair of oxen can receive much of the produce of a plot of land if he works on the plot, which actually belongs to a woman. Even if women entrust equal share arrangement to their relatives, any assistance received by the women had to be paid for.

The inability of women to enjoy the benefits of access to land results in a paradoxical exclusion of women from agricultural resources. According to Charles Gore, this includes 'restriction access to land resources and patterns of land poverty; exclusion from access to productive inputs, high value crops and output markets; and processes of land degradation.' Gore emphasized that 'in the past in Africa, some people were poor because they were excluded from livelihood. Now they are poor because they are excluded from livelihood and they are excluded from livelihood because they are poor' (Gore 1994:26,81). For Baden and Milward (1995), it has become common in development circles to talk of the 'feminization of poverty'. The phrase implies that poverty is becoming a female phenomenon, or that women are becoming poorer relative to men. According to Mayra Buvinic (1997) evidence of feminization of poverty is seen when women are consistently found to be more impoverished than men based on their level of well-being. However, based on the income-level definition of poverty, evidence shows that the gap between the two sexes is decreasing in terms of well-being. In Atsbi Wonberta of Tigray, the majority of women own plots of land requiring up to 5 hours of walk from their residences. It was nearly impossible for women farmers to maintain these travel schedules, especially during weeding seasons when they have greater responsibilities. In these conditions, as witnessed in Kalu

area of this research, women were forced to rely on the labor of children as young as 7 years old.

For an agrarian society that suffers from chronic food insecurity like Ethiopia, understanding the link between access to land and actual benefits of land ownership is as essential as searching measures for alleviating the twin problems of food insecurity and poverty (Melmed-Sanjak & Lastarria-Cornhiel 1998: 5). The problems have wider impacts when women are most populous but with the least benefit and control over resources. This is particularly important due to its repercussions on children, the future of society. As Mayra Buvinic argues, women caught in a vicious circle of deprivation are unable to cope with too much work leading them to hand over child-care responsibilities to older daughters, who then must drop out of school. As a result, 'deprivation carries from one generation of women to the next, leading to the feminization of income poverty' (Buvinic 1997: 8).

Some gender analysts envision that just increasing women's access to land will revolutionise agriculture by resolving food insecurity and other agrarian problems of developing countries like Ethiopia. For example, the recommendations of the Kigali Plan of Actions of 1998, among others, called for the adequate and secure rights of women to property ownership, and their independence from men in order to secure or enjoy their rights (United Nations 1998). Given what lies at the micro level within the structure of agrarian societies and cultural hindrances to women's effective ownership and use of land, this study is highly skeptical of such recommendations. We acknowledge that proper intervention in redressing the problem of resource inequality, environmental degradation and scarcity in the country should tackle the problem of rural women. The field works in Atsbi Wonberta, Kalu and Humera indicated that the dependence of women with access to land on men led to series of conflicts between landowners and laborers. In the three areas of this study, more than 65 percent of women reported that they had an average of four incidences of conflicts with men laborers who worked on their farm. Late start by male laborers (144) constituted the highest incidence of conflicts followed by breach of agreements (59) and high demand of produce (42). These problems arise because of the patriarchal structure of the societies and men's commanding influence in the political and social spheres.

Agricultural land in northern Ethiopia has been undergoing tremendous negative changes leading to a sharp decline in food productivity and vicious circle of chronic food insecurity. A mix of factors ranging from population pressure, farming system, overexploitation, government policies, land tenure and its associated problem of security for conservation, soil erosion, culture and knowledge of environmental conservation/protection and the like account for this. There also seems to be a link between productivity and management of agricultural land.

Consequently, agricultural land in the two research areas need well-organized and continuous land management systems. A comparative assessment of land owned by women and leased on to landless men and land owned and managed by male-headed households revealed a disparity in productivity. Rain distribution being a constant factor, a comparison of land productivity within a four-year period between the two land management modes showed an average decline of 12.4 kilograms of produce per year of leased land. Paradoxically women's role in conservation and environmental protection is well documented.

The indispensability of land as a resource base and the need to reconcile the rhetorical call for increased access to and control over land resources constitute one of the major problems facing policy makers and rural development experts in Ethiopia. Evidence from this and other research indicates that the majority of women were not the actual owners of their produce. While different paradigms within gender analysis recommend that gender mainstreaming and empowerment are keys to addressing the problem of women's control over resources, findings of this study shows that the prospects for empowering women in Ethiopia are grim. Nevertheless, empowerment is central to issues of rights and power to own land and its produce. Power here involves four possibilities: power over (controlling power over someone and something); power to (generative or productive power that creates new possibilities and actions without domination); power with (power generating a feeling that the whole is greater than the sum of individuals and action as a group is more effective; and power from within (a sense that there is strength in each and every individual) (Rowlands 1997).

The gender approaches of the two successive regimes in Ethiopia have been too weak to provide either a stimulus for reform or a challenge to the patriarchal structures of the agrarian society. Many respondents in this study believed that despite the positive changes and attempts by the incumbent Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) to address gender issues in resource ownership, women are far from influencing decisions at the local level. The composition of local decision-making organs in Tigray and Wello, where EPRDF has a strong root, showed increasing participation by women. Among the five villages in Atsbi Wonberta, women led two local administrative councils. In Humera, women had strong voices in the tight returnee communities. In Kalu, the influence of Islamic customs proved to be a serious challenge to increased political roles for women. I had the chance of participating in a meeting of two local administrative councils to discuss distribution of seeds and arbitration of conflicts arising out of land management between women owners and men laborers. The experience revealed that women's participation in local councils were directly correlated to the desire to address gender inequalities in the system. Informal discussions with men farmers indicated that they recognized women's need special attention in farm management and produce ownership. Yet, the same men were hesitant to

give women special treatment at the expense of endangering customs and family decision-making. Unfortunately these issues are at the center of de facto land ownership and access to other resources and benefits such as extension services, credit and membership to farmers' organizations (United Nations 2001: 6).

Another finding of this study is that despite efforts to diversify the income of rural communities throughout the country there was still high dependence on incomes derived from land. One major aspect of income diversification projects has been the food-for-work (FFW) and cash-for-work (CFW) programs. These schemes are interchangeably called employment generation schemes (EGS), employment guarantee schemes (EGS) and so on. Such projects help to generate supplementary incomes for peasant farmers. Employment and income generation schemes have become important poverty mitigation strategies by government and non-government organizations in developing countries (The World Bank 1989: 39-66; Zetter 1996: 217; UNRISD 1995: 7; Nyamugasira 1995: 161-64; Hurley 1990). However, these programs have had implementation difficulties arising from overriding problem of deep-rooted poverty, governance deficiencies and drought and conflicts in most of developing countries.

According to the National Policy on Disaster and Preparedness Measure (NPDPM) in Ethiopia, such schemes aim to provide a means of income (in cash or in kind) to the most affected people in disaster affected areas; build up the assets of affected areas in order to improve their resilience to disaster; create conditions for eliminating the root causes of disaster and build up the infrastructures for future development and; reinforce work ethos of the affected population (NPDPM 1993: 22). Ethiopia's income and employment generating projects undertook micro-dam constructions, soil conservation, road constructions and reforestation. The financial, organizational and grass-root advantages of NGOs mobilized peasant farmers for intensive participation. Tigray and Wello areas have benefited from extensive and large-scale income and employment projects since the 1980s, and especially after 1991. One comprehensive study of 24 such projects in the country found them to induce people for 'extensive communal activities for the first time in many areas, and that farmers, necessarily cautious people, are at least open-minded and often positive about the benefits of the *physical works*, but will finally judge them by the test of time' (emphasis added, Solomon & Yeraswork, 1984:94). The contribution – material, financial and labor – of NGOs and the community in employment and income generating projects was in the ratio of 70:30. Whilst a number of NGOs' projects pay in the form of food - 3 kegs per person per day, few NGOs, like the Adigrat Catholic Secretariat in Eastern Tigray, paid cash. In the 1980s UNICEF undertook similar cash-for-work project in Ethiopia (Webb & Von Braun 1993).

Selections in such important employment and income generating projects mainly give priority to landless peasants. Interviews and discussions at three project

sites, Haresaw, Debre Selam (Rubafelege) and Atsbi Endesilassie, and the payment distribution center at Atsbi Wonberta, in addition to supplementary interviews conducted for other projects in Irob and Saese Tsadamba of Tigray showed that women registered as owners of land could not participate in the projects. This was especially true in cases of fallow plots where women could not clear the plots and put them in use. On the other hand, landless male peasants working on women-owned plots, were selected to participate in FFW/CFW projects and could derive incomes from both sides. Cases like this indicate that selection criteria in project participation do not look beyond titular ownership of land towards examining the nature of the claims to access in the same way that calls for access to and ownership of resources fail short of dissecting who really controls the produce.

Rural Ethiopian women only have recourse to long and arduous mechanisms to realize equal control over agricultural land. These involve political and social aspects, which show limited improvements with time. At the international and regional levels, donors, non-governmental organizations and women advocates brought the issue to the macro policy level. A case in point is the formulation of a new Family Law in 2000 substituting the 1960 Family Law whereby the husband was recognized as the head of the family. The interest in women's participation as an integral part of any successful policy for tackling the problems of food insecurity and poverty is encouraging. However, while positive, the changes are too limited to bring real women's control over resources without impediments.

Another factor is the impact of environmental degradation and scarcity in aggravating the problem of land availability. Research reports and findings point to a declining role of land as resource and income base for rural households. They argue that since rural households are not able to support themselves exclusively on land-based activities, they seek additional income from different sources. Consequently, most rural households are undergoing significant income diversification. The strategy a household can adopt depends, among other factors, on access to productive resources such as land, capital, education and skills (United Nations, 2001). In studying peasant households in Ethiopia and Tanzania, Stephan Dercon and Pramila Krishana indicate the various productive resources available to a household: a plot of land, consumer goods for sale in local markets, crops for subsistence and/or cash. In addition, 'the household might engage in local crafts and trades, hire out its labor and keep livestock. The household might receive remittances from relatives away in town and help in a crisis from neighbors' (Dercon and Krishnan 1996: 850). These findings are worth noting, especially when 'diversification' come with negative implications. For example, when rural households encourage the trafficking of their young daughters for prostitution (Atsbi and Humera) or illegally cut trees for sale or increase forced child labour (as high as 27 cases in Kalu area of Wello), then the strategies need to be recon-

sidered thoroughly. Eventually, it appears that all strategies become double-edged swords.

Conclusion

The indispensability of land resources for the livelihood of millions of rural people in Africa is tremendous. Agrarian societies are facing increasing problems of environmental degradation and resource scarcity. Acute environmental degradation and resource scarcity are producing impacts that seriously challenge the capacity to provide enough agricultural land for an increasing world population with various needs. A mix of factors such as population increase, politico-economic policies, resource use management and approaches, soil erosion and other account for the intensity of the problem. African governments are faced with challenges in responding to demands for resource distribution amid acute scarcity. The overwhelming war and famine-ridden agrarian society of Ethiopia is a litmus test of the challenges. The livelihood of the great majority of rural women depends on access to and control over land resource, which in turn substantially influences access to other resources and assets. However, we find that women's actual control over land, despite constituting almost 50 per cent of the rural population, is deplorably poor.

Some gender analysts envision that just giving women access to land will revolutionise agriculture by resolving food insecurity and other agrarian problems of developing countries like Ethiopia. Given what lies at the micro level within the structure of agrarian societies and the extent of women's status to effectively use ownership of land, this study is very skeptical of just calling for women's access to land resource. Increased calls for resource access and control should focus on feasibilities of extracting benefits from ownership of resources. Rhetorical calls just for the sake of granting titular ownership of resources amount to zero sum results. From the political dimensions, reforms and policy advocacy need to appreciate the conditions at the micro level and the structures of agrarian societies.

This study explored the trajectories of access to and control over resources by rural women in Ethiopia, with a focus on the feasibility and actual benefit of control over and use of land resource. It attempted to show that women's ownership of land and its products in Ethiopia is currently an illusion. Women do not actually own their resources!. The failure to bring about special and realistic considerations of women's conditions in land (re)distribution programs, conflict in the management of leased agricultural land, a decline in the productivity of leased land, inability to benefit from public projects, and an extensive and almost absolute dependence on agricultural land, as well as the corresponding challenges of income diversification constitute major themes that this research tried elucidate. Women's access to and control over resources, mainly agricultural land, needs to

be problematised. Mainstream gender analysis should focus on critically questioning the pros and cons of addressing the role and status of women within access to and control over agricultural land. By way of conclusion, there is a need to redirect the attention from changing fashions to fashioning changes in shaping the almost conflictual gender relations to follow a conflictual-cooperative dimension in resource management and ownership.

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