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Women's Empowerment in Political Participation and Decision-Making in Ethiopia: Practices and Challenges. The Case of Oromia Regional State

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Abstract: *This study is intended to assess practices of women empowerment and challenges that hinder women's participation in political decision-making in Oromia regional state, Ethiopia. Survey data was collected from 98 sample respondents using a structured questionnaire, key informant interviews and focus group discussion. Descriptive analysis was employed to interpret the collected data. The analysis results revealed that women's participation in political decision-making is impacted by a combination of economic, political, social, cultural and religious factors. More specifically, the gender-based division of work; access to education; access to financial resources; work burden; sexual harassment and certain 'harmful practices' have a direct relationship with and influence on the participation of women in political decision-making. Accordingly, changing perceptions and attitudes of communities toward the role of women; increasing female access to educational facilities; expanding economic and political opportunities for women; development and implementation of gender-responsive policies, including gender mainstreaming in all sectors and adopting a 'quota system' for selection and promotion of women; and strengthening the capacity of GOs, NGOs and charity organizations working on women empowerment are recommended to improve women's participation in political decision-making.*

Keywords: *Women's empowerment; Political participation; Decision-making; Oromia; Ethiopia*

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1. Introduction

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Gender equality and women's empowerment has been a central theme in international development policy and practice, including the millennium development goals and the sustainable development goals. The rights of women were also stipulated in the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution, and strengthening of women's participation in all spheres of life has become a major issue in overall development. In Ethiopia also, women are half of the total population. In Oromia Regional State, they comprise 49.8% of the population. In the last two decades, there has been progress towards the representation of women in decision-making structures on various levels in the country. But in Oromia, unlike at the national level, the number of women leaders at various levels of the government structure is still very low, despite federal and state policy. In contrast to their male counterparts, females remain weakly represented, and their involvement in policy formulation and decision-making processes has been minimal. In general, if half of the population remains vulnerable to economic, political, legal, and social marginalization, the hope of advancing democracy and growth of prosperity and well-being will also be seriously threatened. The study was intended to assess existing practices of women's empowerment and challenges that hinder their participation in political decision-making, focused on Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia. Oromia Regional State is the largest region in Ethiopia in terms of land mass and population number. Survey data was collected from sample respondents using structured questionnaires, key informant interviews and focus group discussions and were interpreted using descriptive analysis. In addition, secondary data were collected from the regional websites, reports and related documents.

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2. Backgrounds: Recent trends of women participation in political decision-making in Ethiopia

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In the last two decades, there has been some progress towards more equal representation of men and women in Ethiopia. The proportion of women members of the Ethiopian parliament increased from only 2.3% in 1995 to 37% in 2015 and 41% in 2021. Moreover, with the new political reform agenda implemented since April 2018 by the Ethiopian government under PM Abiy Ahmed, women's representation in the national Cabinet reached 50%. The State President is a woman, and the Federal Supreme Court President as well (both appointed in 2018). The Oromia regional state council has shown a similar trend towards the improvement of women's political participation: the proportion of women membership was only 3.4% in 1995 but increased to 47% in 2015. However, unlike the federal cabinet and regional council, the representation of women in the political decision-making institutions and bureaux at the Oromia regional level is still low. Women are engaged more in formal administrative employment than in higher management positions. For instance, women constitute 34.3% of formal employees in the region during 2019/20, while the proportion of women in the leadership positions was only 13% during the same period.

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3. Challenges that hinder women's participation in political decision-making

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The research found that women's participation in political decision making is impacted by a combination of social, cultural, religious, economic, educational and political factors. Socio-cultural features are one of the most important set of factors that hinder participation of women in political decision-making in Oromia Regional State. A predominantly 'patriarchal' value system in the region favors sexually segregated roles, and 'traditional, cultural and religious values' militate against the advancement, progress and participation of women in the political process. The major cultural barriers that affect women's confidence to participate in decision-making are open or subtle discrimination, starting from child birth, domestic work burden, and certain 'harmful practices' like genital mutilation, early marriage, abduction, rape and sexual harassment. Key informants indicated that, in all dominant religions, it is considered that women were created as 'subordinate', to support men, and most religions as locally interpreted restrict women from preaching and expressing their ideas and thoughts in public gatherings. Hence, the exclusion of women from religious institutions and religious leadership may have a general negative impact on women's status in society and limit their opportunities in politics and public life.

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Our study results also indicated that women's participation in political life depends largely on their socio-economic status and access to employment, which gives them not only material independence but also greater self-confidence.

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Access to education and political knowledge are other important factors that affect the participation of women in leadership. In Oromia, students in rural areas travel long distances to get to school. They are highly exposed to sexual harassment, and even abduction and rape, when they travel from one area to another for schooling. Thus, the school drop rate is very high for girls as compared to boys. This clearly indicates that access to education has a great and shaping impact on developing/discouraging leadership abilities, professional skills and self-confidence, and thereby has a direct relationship with participation in political leadership. Women also comparatively lack the political knowledge and networks for actively taking part in political party activities and decision-making, including policy-making. The respondents in our survey indicated that a lack of commitment to increasing women's participation and an absence of sufficient political knowledge on or interest in women's representation have been some of the problems responsible for poor participation of women in politics.

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4. Discussion and Recommendations

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Negative social perceptions about the leadership ability of women, their relatively low socio-economic status, low access to educational and political environment, and lack of strong role models all contribute to women's low participation in decision-making structures. More specifically, the gender-based division of work; access to education; access to financial resources; (domestic) work burden; sexual harassment and certain harmful practices thus have a direct relationship with and influence on the participation of women in political decision-making.

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Hence, dealing with the above factors needs more active participation of women on equal terms with men, at all levels of decision-making; the inclusion of their perspectives and experiences into the decision-making processes can provide social, political, legal, and economic solutions for their problems. Accordingly, the following recommendations were drawn up to deal with the challenges that hinder women's participation in decision-making structures.

a) Development and implementation of more gender-responsive policies

The Regional government should develop and implement better gender-responsive policies, strengthen gender mainstreaming in all sectors, and might consider adopting a quota system for the selection and promotion of women leaders. The Oromia leadership academy should work on strengthening women's capacity through the provision of continuous leadership training programs.

b) Changing the perceptions and attitudes of community toward the role of women

A 'patriarchal' value system and traditions favors sexually segregated roles that tends to restrict women's primary roles to reproductive, as a mothers and housewives is still influential. Women are often socially portrayed as weaker and incapable of making 'smart decisions'. Accordingly, realizing gender equality, women empowerment and creating a community from prejudice and violence against women, including genital mutilation, rape, early marriage and other forms of sexual harassment, calls for changing the perceptions and attitudes of the society at all levels.

Empowering women requires understanding and transforming oppressive cultural norms and practices – as reported by women. One key strategy to bring about a cultural shift is to plan and implement participatory gender analysis and gender sensitization programs throughout government agencies. A second one is improving the knowledge and understanding of communities on gender equality, women's empowerment and human rights through the engagement of the local community, and appealing to religious and community leaders. In traditional society, working with religious and community leaders can be one of the most effective strategies to start discussions and disseminate messages to large numbers of people through their own institutional structures down to the community level.

Alleviating time constraints for women by providing services and interventions will reduce the time burden posed by household duties. Such interventions could make more time available for women to dedicate themselves to other productive activities and contribute to closing the gender gap in employment and earnings.

c) Expanding economic opportunities for women

Creating a conducive environment for women to have employment opportunities and paid equal wages for equal work is one of the most important interventions that can enhance their empowerment. This brings the need to identify, plan and implement gender-sensitive projects focused on improving women's participation in decision-making. One important way of assisting women to empower themselves is facilitating circumstances to enable them to be organized and to form associations and interest groups. In this regard, the establishment of women's associations or women's cooperatives for the production, consumption, processing and selling of their products would in many cases create

opportunities for women to mobilize their resources and to work together to share 160
information, build social capital, gain independent income and empower themselves. 161

d) Increasing female educational opportunities 162

Giving women and girls the opportunities to advance their education and develop their skills 163
is crucial and could help narrow the gender gap in gaining employment and earnings 164
comparable to those of men. The major areas to be focused on to improve girls' education 165
are: 166

➢ From an early start, improving their reading skills in schools through providing 167
supplementary reading materials. 168

➢ Encouraging women to attend leadership education and skill-building trainings 169

➢ Exposing women to how government works, through advocating for affirmative action at 170
school clubs and other decision-making bodies at the local level, so that they gain 171
experience in decision-making roles 172

➢ Promoting women to improve their confidence and public speaking skills through 173
conducting workshops for politically active women on how to campaign and government 174
operations, among others. 175

e) *Finally, strengthening the capacity of GOs, NGOs and charity organizations*: these 176
organizations have been playing a vital role to bring gender equality and women's 177
empowerment to the forefront. Enhancing their capacity would help to further empower 178
women and improve their participation in political decision-making. 179

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4. Conclusion 181

While progress has been made in Ethiopia in the advancement of women's representation 182
and roles in state and regional administrations, a lot remains to be done. For various social, 183
cultural, economic and educational reasons, equality of opportunity is not yet achieved, 184
despite recent changes in federal policy, in line with Ethiopia's commitment to the 185
Millennium Development Goals. Unexpected societal problems can sometimes set back 186
achievements gained[1], but still, the line goes slowly upwards. Still, the overall empowerment 187
of women and the improvement of their participation in political decision-making requires 188
the continued collaborative efforts of governmental, non-governmental, and local and 189
international institutions. 190

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[1] In addition to the recent violent conflicts in northern and westen Ethiopia since November 2020, putting huge pressure on the position and rights of women, notably in rural areas of Afar, Amhara, western Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz regional states (Cf. https://www.news24.com/news24/Africa/News/ethiopian-conflicts-impact-on-women-unimaginable-says-un-20220213).

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