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An Assessment of Women's Empowerment in Amhara National Regional State, Ethiopia

by

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Abstract: *This study assessed the level of women's empowerment in Amhara Region, Ethiopia, at the household level. Primary data was collected from 424 households through a structured household survey (December 2021-February 2022). Two broad dimensions (decision-making and asset ownership) of women's empowerment were created, using various indicators relevant to measure and constitute a women's empowerment index. In addition to the overall empowerment results, women's participation in health-related decision-making and asset ownership showed a higher value among the indicators employed to measure the empowerment level. Moreover, administrative zone, residence, husband's educational status and participation in community meetings were identified as determinant factors of women empowerment in the study area. The findings indicated that 91% of respondents are 'empowered' (in our definition). But, economic decision-making and interpersonal decision-making of women are still areas that might require interventions. Finally, in order to bring about and maintain the desired level of women's empowerment it is important to implement policy interventions aimed at improving the education of both women and men, improving the economic status of women and changing socio-cultural beliefs undermining women.*

Key Words: *Women; social and economic empowerment; household decision-making; household asset management; Amhara Region, Ethiopia*

1. Introduction

Women in developing countries, including in Africa, are generally silent in the public sphere and their voice has often been stifled due to economic and cultural factors (UNFPA 2008). While women constitute around 50% of the population, often there is an absence or denial of rights of equal participation with men in societal and national affairs. Women's empowerment has been a central theme of discussion in recent international development policy and practice.

Women's participation in social, economic and political affairs is important for the overall development of a society, and for this women need to have equal chances compared to men. Like in many other developing countries, women in Ethiopia face socio-cultural and political challenges that hinder or undermine their societal role, and often their human worth and dignity (Tefera, 2018). Considering this fact, the government of Ethiopia has taken initiatives to improve women's position. Among the legal initiatives are the incorporation of important provisions in the Ethiopian Constitution of 1995, the 2000 Family Law, and the adoption of the MDGs..

However, there is still continued inequality and vulnerability of women. The status of women's empowerment in Ethiopia, including the Amhara Region, appears to be low: women are generally poorer than men, less educated, increasingly becoming heads of households with little or no resources to support their dependents, and do not enjoy due acknowledgment for their labor contributions, particularly in agriculture. Finally, they do not have major decision-making powers (cf. UN Women, 2014). Current data show that the representation in the Amhara Regional Council is 262 (63%) male and 94 (37%) female. Women in leadership positions (as head and deputy) in the executive organs is 83% male and 17% female at the regional level; 78% male and 22% female at the zonal level; and 77% male and 23% female at district level (Office of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, 2022). The data tells us that the higher the level of administration goes, the lower the number women in such positions. Hence, there is no doubt that there are still gaps in terms of representation in political and administrative positions. Here we define women's empowerment in terms of opportunities for women to choose what is best for them in all aspects of their life, specifically via their ability to make their own decisions and their ability to have control over their own resources and life choices.

Considering the 'gaps', women need to be more socially, economically and politically empowered. The process of women's empowerment is complex and requires multidimensional interventions. Against this background, the main purpose of this study was to assess the status of women's empowerment in the Amhara Regional State.

2. Methodology used

This study was conducted in Amhara National Regional State, Ethiopia. According to the CSA (2013) population estimations, the region in 2017 had a total population 21,136,526 (male: 10,586,829 and female: 10,549,697). Our study followed a quantitative approach. Primary sources of data were collected from households (especially from married women). Secondary data was gathered from available published documents, international institutions' reports and scholarly articles.

We employed a probable sampling technique with multi-stage sampling to select the households. To determine the number of respondents, the Kothari 2004 formula (single population proportion) was used. The total sample size for this study with a 10% possible non-response rate during the actual data collection was 424 sample households. To examine the disparity in the levels of women’s empowerment, households from rural and urban *qebeles* were included into the analysis. To collect the data a household survey questionnaire was administered. In order to determine the level of women’s empowerment on the household level two main indicators were used, i.e., *decision-making* and *ownership of assets*. These broad indicators then had their own separate variables used to compute empowerment. To analyze the data both descriptive and inferential analysis were employed. A logistic regression analysis was also conducted.

3. Results and Discussion

Women’s empowerment index of households

A total of 289 (68.2%) of women participated in economic decisions on their own and jointly with their husband; 383 (90.3%) participated in health-related decisions; and 272 (64.2%) participated in interpersonal decisions. Finally, 343 (80.9%) involved in this study were involved in decisions related to ownership of assets/properties.

The results indicated that the majority, 386 (91%) of respondents/women, were empowered under our definition. This is quite a positive result. The overall empowerment level result is the cumulative computation of the four dimensions (as shown in Table 1 below).

Table 1. Percentage of empowerment indicators

Indicator	N	Percentage
Economic decision-making	289	68.2
Health related decision-making	383	90.3
Interpersonal decision-making	272	64.2
Property ownership	343	80.9
Overall	386	91.03%

Source: Own survey, 2022

Decision-making

Related to the indicator of economic decision-making, 330 (77.8%) of the women did *not* have their own bank account. This shows that a large number of women in the study area were financially disadvantaged.

Moreover, about 57.1% of women were not currently engaged in any kind of income-generating activity, out of which 76% were from rural and 38.6% were from urban areas. This shows the real picture that where women lack economic independence this directly affects their economic empowerment.

A significant number of respondents in this study – 146 (34.4%) - said that they were not allowed or did not have the right to buy things like clothes or jewelry for themselves by the

money they earned. This might be related to the socio-cultural influences, that women in a largely patriarchal society like Ethiopia have still little or limited freedom to make major financial decisions in the household. Particularly in rural areas, the situation was not so good. A respondent in West Gojjam explained:

“...as my husband is a breadwinner for the family I don't have a say on any of the decisions, especially economic decisions made in the household”.

The result clearly indicates that women's involvement in financial issues is very minimal. This gives an indication that, despite the overall results of empowerment, a lot should be done on specific areas of economic empowerment, particularly in rural households.

Regarding the decisions on buying food and the amount of money to spend on food items: these were mostly decided jointly by 265 (62.5%), followed by 'husband's decision', 99 (23.3%) and wife's decision, 59 (13.9%). This result is contrary to the findings of Ngome (2003), where women took a larger share in deciding on the budgetary issues regarding food items in the household.

The respondents mentioned that the decisions regarding the buying, selling and replacing of large items and assets, like cattle, sheep, goats, household movable items like TV, sofa, bed, refrigerator, etc., mostly were taken jointly 291 (68.6%), followed by 'husband's decision' 109 (25.7%). On this parameter, 24 (5.7%) of the women had little say in the household. This shows that women were not involved in decision-making where the costs of the household items were high.

Ownership of assets

In this study, the vast majority of women did not independently own essential property like land, a house or cattle. Regarding the ownership of land, it was the husband who owned the land 55 (15.28%), compared to a minimal number of wives, 24 (6.67%) owning land.

It gets even worse when it comes to ownership of properties like a house or cattle, mainly owned jointly by 324 (76.4%), followed by 'husband's' and lastly 'wife's ownership': 38 (9%) and 9 (2.1%), respectively. Although it is expected that such kinds of assets be considered as joint property among married couples, it is reasonable to assume a serious gap between husband and wife in their independent ownership of those assets.

Determinants of women empowerment: residence

Administrative zone

'Administrative zone (residence) is one significant determinant of women's empowerment. Overall, the data shows that respondents/women from the Central Gondar zone were relatively more empowered than respondents in South Gondar and West Gojjam, with the highest number of non-empowered respondents found in South Gondar. The descriptive result shows the details, with women in South Gondar participating in economic decisions 26% of the time, while this was 45.5% in Central Gondar and 29% in the West Gojjam zone. On health-related decision-making, women in South Gondar participated in 28% of the cases, whereas it was 37% and 34% in Central Gondar and West Gojjam, respectively. This was evidenced by the regression model result: women living in Central Gondar zone were 9.056 times 'more empowered' compared to women living in West Gojjam zone (AOR= 9.056; CI=2.426-33.807).

Urban or rural residence

Residence affected women empowerment. The results revealed that 211 women (95.9%) in urban areas were empowered, while this was 175 (85.8%) from the rural areas. Overall, the empowerment index shows that respondents residing in urban areas were relatively more empowered than women living in rural areas. This was also evidenced by the regression model result: women in urban areas are 2.976 times 'more empowered' than women living in rural areas (AOR= 2.976; CI= (1.005-7.776)). This is likely because of the better access to services, education, information, awareness and job opportunities available in urban areas. The studies by Brajesh (2015) on Asian countries and Musonera and Heshmati (2017) on Rwanda revealed similar results, which proved that urban residence plays a significant role in enhancing women's empowerment.

Husband's education

Husband's education is another of the significant determinants of women's empowerment. Our descriptive results showed that the women of husbands who had attended college/university (116, or 27.4%) were for 96.6% 'empowered'. Looking at other empirical results, women whose husbands could read and write were 3.079 times 'more empowered' than women whose husbands were illiterate (AOR= 3.079; CI=1.1086-8.727). This might be because education in general improves certain attitudes and thinking of people. In our case, educated husbands may have a better understanding about the equality and rights of men and women; hence, respect the interest, rights and freedom of their wives in the household. This in turn increases women's empowerment. The findings of the study are consistent with Donta *et al.* (2016), who in a study on Mumbai slums (India), concluded that education of both spouses revealed a significant positive association with women's empowerment.

Participation in community meetings

Participation in community meetings is also one of the determinant factors of women's empowerment. Participation in social or community associations in the study areas includes being a member of informal saving groups, religious groups, self-help groups, and other community networks. The descriptive result shows that about 255 (60%) women in sampled households in the study area were members in at least one social group. The empirical result in more detail showed that women who participated in community meetings were 3.532 times more empowered than women who did not participate (AOR= 3.532; CI=1.253-9.896). This might be related to the fact that participation in community meetings creates a chance for women to express their views in public as well as increases their confidence, knowledge, exposure to information exchange, and awareness.

3. Conclusion and recommendations

This exploratory study was aimed at assessing the level of women's empowerment at the household level. Primary data was collected in Amhara National Regional State from 424 households through a structured household survey. Two broad dimensions (decision-making and asset ownership) of women's empowerment were explored, using various indicators relevant to measure and constitute a women's empowerment index. To address the second objective - identifying the determinant factors affecting empowerment - logistic regression analysis was employed.

Important insights on the status of women's empowerment and its determinant factors in the study area were provided by this study. A significant share (91%) of women in the study area were 'empowered' in our definition. Despite the overall results of empowerment, it has been identified that participation of women in economic and interpersonal decision-making still requires enforcement of additional policies that can improve the socio-economic life of women.

The study also demonstrated the rural-urban disparity in empowerment: women living in rural areas are less empowered than those in urban areas. Administrative zone, residence, husband's education and participation in community meetings are significant determinants of women's empowerment in the study area. Clearly, women are not as equally treated as men and there is still much room for improvement in terms of women's empowerment.

Recommendations

- ✓ As rural-urban and zonal disparities in women's empowerment are observed, national and regional development policies should start from the community level aimed at improving the status of rural women.
- ✓ Empowerment of women cannot be effective without the involvement of men. This study confirmed that women's empowerment increases significantly with the husband's higher educational level. Concomitant investment in men's education is thus also important for the empowerment process of women. Therefore, policy makers and future research should address ways to involve men more in the process of empowering women.
- ✓ There are still deficiencies in the overall economic empowerment of women in general and on certain economic indicators at the household level in particular. This implies that a lot could be done in the economic domain, and the effectiveness of the current efforts and initiatives in place should be examined.
- ✓ The study revealed that the role of women as decision-makers in the household is limited, particularly on financial and major household management decisions. This suggests that trainings, awareness raising activities and interventions aimed at changing the attitudes of the community and cultural beliefs undermining women are important.

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