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

By

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Acronyms

CSA	Central Statistical Agency
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
GO	Government Organization
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MOWCY	Ministry of Women Children and Youth
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
OSU	Oromia State University
OWCAB	Oromia Women and Children Affairs Bureau
PM	Prime Minister
PSHRDBO	Public Service and Human Resource Development Bureau of Oromia
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SPSS	Statistical Packages for Social Science
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Abstract

In the last two decades, there has been progress towards equal representation of men and women in decision-making structures in Ethiopia. Despite progress towards achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, the desired goals have not been met over time. This study is intended to assess practices of women's empowerment and challenges that hinder their participation in political decision-making in Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia. To realize those objectives, secondary data were collected from regional offices, zonal and city administrations to assess the trends and status of women participation in the region. Moreover, the secondary data were supported by survey data collected from 98 sample respondents using a structured questionnaire, key informant interviews and focus group discussion. Descriptive analysis was employed to analyze the collected data. The results of the analysis revealed that the overall participation of women in decision making position in the region is still low and there is significant variation among the three government branches. The participation of women in regional legislative, executive and judiciary body was 47, 18.8 and 8.3% respectively. Women participation in judiciary and executive organs were very low as compared to the legislative branch. Their participation was 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 burdens; 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 the community towards the role of women; increasing female access to educational facilities; expanding economic 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 government, non-government and charity organizations working on women's empowerment are recommended to improve women's participation in political decision-making.

Keywords: Women's empowerment; Political participation; Political decision-making; Governance; Oromia Region; Ethiopia.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Women constitute half of the Ethiopian population. They also comprise 49.8% of the total population in Oromia regional state and are actively involved in all aspects of society (CSA, 2013). The strengthening of women's participation in all spheres of life has become a major issue in overall development, and socioeconomic development cannot be fully achieved without the active involvement of women. But they have been hindered from taking part in power structures, regardless of the knowledge and experience they have, e.g., of nurturing, protecting, working and cooperating with the other half of the population. Women themselves often have feelings of disadvantage and inferiority (Ayferam, 2015).

Within the last two decades, women's empowerment has been a central theme in international development policy and practice. Gender equality and female empowerment are now core development objectives, fundamental for the realization of human rights and key to effective and sustainable development outcomes of a nation. The millennium development goals (MDGs) as well as the sustainable development goals (SDGs), declared by the UN in 2000 and 2015 respectively, have underlined this. No society can develop successfully without providing equal opportunities, resources, and life prospects for males and females so that they can shape their own lives and contribute to their families, communities and society (Geleta et al., 2017).

In various laws and initiatives, notably since April 2018, the government of Ethiopia has declared its commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. The rights of women were already stipulated in the 1995 Constitution, but they were by far not fully implemented. The Oromia regional government's Women, Children and Youth Affairs Bureau is committed to strengthening the participation of women and youths in political, economic and social activities in Oromia Region. Proclamation no. 213/2018, enacted to re-organize the powers and duties of executive organs, showed that the Bureau was given powers and duties to co-ordinate governmental and non-governmental organizations working on women's affairs and create awareness to protect rights and interests of women, and thereby avoid discrimination committed based on sex, as well as put the discussion of 'harmful traditional practices' on the agenda.

In the last two decades, there has, however, been progress towards equal access to primary and secondary education and towards representation of men and women in decision-making on

various levels. These trends indicate that women's representation in political decision-making has increased over the past years; hence their voices gradually gain in strength. However, in contrast to their male counterparts and voters, females still remain somewhat weakly represented and female leadership skills undeveloped restricting their ability to challenge and influence decisions that affect women's lives (Dea, 2016).

Similarly, Ethiopian women are usually in subordinate positions and many occupy low formal status in society. Their involvement in policy formulation and decision-making processes has been minimal. In general, if half of the world's population remains vulnerable to economic, political, legal and social marginalization, the hope of advancing democracy and prosperity (two core aims of government policy) will also be seriously threatened. Thus, the democratic process is able to grow and develop effectively when all people are given equal encouragement and chances to exercise their democratic rights, and when women can experience benefits equally with their male counter-parts. The active participation of women, on equal terms with men, at all levels of decision-making is essential to the achievement of equality, sustainable development, peace and democracy (Kassa, 2015).

Hence, this study mainly focuses on an assessment of the practices of women's participation in political decision-making in Oromia Regional State and on the challenges that hinder their participation. In this paper we address the issue from a policy-oriented perspective, based on the regional situation, so as to heighten awareness, contribute to developing better policies towards realizing women's overall empowerment in decision-making bodies, and enhance role models for young females in the region in general.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The concrete participation of women in Oromia has been minimal at the public policy and decision-making levels. Women are engaged more in formal administrative employment than in management positions. For instance, women constitute for 34.33% of formal employees in the region during 2019/20, while the proportion of women in leadership positions was only 18.8% during the same period (PSHRDBO, 2019). In line with national and international (MDG and SDG) developmental goals, the role of women in society and decision-making has to be increased so as to enhance overall societal development. For this reason, analyzing the practices of women's participation in Oromia in political decision-making and exploring challenges that

hinder their participation in this context is helpful in explaining the problem in more depth and can provide more information on possible solutions.

2. Objectives of the study

2.1. General Objective

As already hinted above, the general objective of the study is to assess practices of women's empowerment and challenges that hinder women's participation in political decision-making, focused on Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia, and to come up with recommendations to address the problems encountered.

2.2. Specific Objectives

This study has the following specific objectives:

- ✓ to assess the place and current practices of women's participation in political decision-making structures in Oromia.
- ✓ to identify the challenges that hinder women's participation in political decision-making
- ✓ to suggest possible solutions to address the challenge to enhance women's participation and impact.

3. Significance of the study

As women constitute half of the population of Ethiopia and in Oromia regional state but are not equally represented in social and political life as measured by their participation in decision-making structures, more attention to this problem is needed. Even though efforts have been made to improve women's participation in economic, political and social domains, it is still very low as compared to men. Hence, identifying practical experiences of women's empowerment and challenges that hinder women's participation in political decision-making would help as an input for government, NGOs and policy makers to design more gender-sensitive and/or responsive policies and strategies that enhance women's participation in these fields. In addition, the findings of this study will give insights for researchers and students interested in similar research themes for further investigation in other areas of Ethiopia.

4. Literature Review

4.1 The Concepts of 'Participation' and 'Empowerment'

Endale (2012) has, defined 'participation' as a development approach which recognizes the need to involve disadvantaged segments of population in the design and implementation of policies concerning their wellbeing. The acts of active engagement include voting, standing for office, joining a political party, taking part the political campaigns of the political parties, and exerting influence in the decision-making process through public debate, and dialogue with the representatives they elected, or through their capacity to organize themselves, or exercise public power by holding public office at different levels of administrations - local, regional, national and international (Kassa, 2015).

According to MOWCY 2019, the concepts of gender equality and women's empowerment are complex and multidimensional, with no commonly known frameworks that define them holistically. Our definition relies on international conventions and other instruments on children's and women's rights to define and select parameters and indicators of gender equality, women's empowerment, and child wellbeing outcomes. Accordingly, women's empowerment is seen here (following Hunt and Samman 2016: 7) as: "the process of achieving women's equal access to and control over resources, and ensuring they can use them to exert increased control over other areas of their lives".

4.2 Trends and Importance of Women's Participation in Political Decision-Making

Dea (2016) has indicated that women's representation in political decision-making has increased over the past years; hence their voices gradually gain in strength. In contrast to their male counterparts, however, female representation still remains somewhat weak and female leadership skills undeveloped restricting their ability to challenge and influence decisions that affect women's lives.

According to Haque (2013), ensuring women's political participation is essential to bring legitimacy to government and establish democracy in its real and practical manner, as validity and trustworthiness of democracy can be in question if females, stay marginalized or segregated from the political and public institutions in society. In addition to this, "the degree and level of women's representation in the government has considerable and significant impacts on the lives of the people in any operational political and public milieu" (Kassa 2015, p. 6).

Okumo and Melesse (2014:102) also clearly noted that increasing women's representation and participation in the political and public decision-making positions is a question of democracy, democratic process, and equality as well as a question of political and civil rights that have been declared by international organizations' (UN) agreements, treaties, covenants and conventions. Equality in political decision-making performs a leverage function without which it is highly unlikely that a real integration of the equality dimension in government policy-making is feasible. In this respect, women's equal participation in political life will play a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women.

Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy promotion but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved (Miranda, 2015). It may be difficult to determine a homogenous picture of what 'women's perspectives' are - as with those of men, they can differ significantly across sub-groups and social strata. But a focus on choice stresses the importance for women of being able to make meaningful decisions on critical areas and key aspects of their lives. This includes recognizing their agency, which is the ability to be an active partner/agent of change through the ability to "define one's goals" and the ability to influence the political agenda. Also, the participation dimension covers women's presence in sufficient numbers to engage in overt conflict or influencing during decision-making (Kabeer, 2010).

4.3 Challenges that Hinder Women's Political Participation in Ethiopia

An important part of the reason for women's backlog in rights acquisition and exercise is economic. Some of the factors that have been hindering notably rural women from increasing their income to secure their livelihoods include: weak institutional structures to support women's cooperatives and microfinance institutions, lack of integrating gender into the planning and implementation of developmental activities to support women, and low numbers of women in the leadership of such institutions (UNICEF, 2019).

As regards management positions, Gidudu et al. (2014), indicated that socio-cultural factors are among the factors that hinder women's access. Women more often than not have to do the house duties, the home-gardening, laundry, etc., while men go out for work and public duties/activities and also more often go for further studies outside the family. Women usually stay

behind to take charge of the family. Cultural beliefs are another factor strongly affecting women's participation in public decision making. In fact, stereotyped notions about women constitute major barriers; societal perceptions about (lack of) leadership ability of women and, women's lack of assertiveness are some barriers that hinder the participation of women. In this regard, traditional attitudes towards gender inequality clearly influence women's advancement in political participation (MOWCY, 2019).

Empowering women economically is now widely seen as a key to reducing poverty, to a growing economy, and building healthy and safe communities (ICRW, 2016). The social-economic status of women to a great extent plays a significant role in enhancing their participation and representation in political decision-making bodies. In fact, women's participation in political life depends largely on how they have been able to access employment, which gives them not only material independence, but also certain professional skills and greater self-confidence. Access to means of production and financial resource has a direct relationship to and influence on the participation of women in political institutions (Kassa, 2015).

Additionally, the Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (2016) showed that 'harmful traditional practices', such as early marriage and childbearing, female genital operation/mutilation and gender-based violence, have adverse effects on Ethiopian women. Many development professionals consider early marriage to be the most significant harmful traditional practice for women in Ethiopia, as it negatively impacts on women's physical and psychological well-being and curtails their education and future income-earning potential. Not only do women who married young bear more children over time, but an adolescent mother is also less prepared to care for her children and to manage a household (Alemu et al., 2007).

In Oromia, 84% of women aged 15-49 stop school, which is the highest rate in the country. Gender parity in Oromia secondary schools, at 0.76, demonstrates that girls are left behind in secondary education. Grade repetition and high dropout rates in Oromia Region are particularly worrying, as they affect a huge number of children. Some of the causes include the high demand for child labour by rural households, child marriage, abduction of girls, the long distances to school, and internal and external conflicts resulting in displacement (UNICEF, 2019).

In rural areas, 'traditional' norms, values, and elements of the social structure appear to have constrained the application of laws and state-administrative provisions designed to promote gender equality. Male children are generally preferred over female children. These practices tend to discourage, if not explicitly forbid, a woman's inheritance of her parents' property. The

dominance of men in economic, legal, and political spheres is obvious. Although one cannot make absolute generalizations about men's domination and women's subordination in all spheres of life, men make the major decisions regarding property (e.g., selling, gifting, and inheriting), and the culture generally places males at the top of the social hierarchy. Thus, the customs favor men over women and thereby perpetuate inequality (Hebo and Shigeta, 2014).

Generally, women's status is generally poorer than men because they earn less; they are less educated; they are increasingly becoming heads of households, with no resources to support their dependents; they do not enjoy due acknowledgment for their labour contributions, particularly in agriculture, and (they do not have decision-making powers (Beyene, 2019).

4.4. Importance of Tackling Challenges that Hinder Women's Participation

As prelude to the conclusion and recommendations, in general we may note that the existence of gender equality has a paramount importance in enhancing the overall process of development in its social and economic aspects. Countries with high gender gap in different sectors could face a big challenge in realizing the goals of human development. In Ethiopia, unless collective efforts are made to narrow or if possible close the gender gap, the country could potentially face development challenges and as a result even widen the gender gap. This gap at present is reflected in the fact that women are less educated, less paid for similar jobs at similar age, are more vulnerable to health risks, are unequally represented in politics and highly exposed for violence (Dea, 2016).

In Ethiopia specifically, to tackle challenges of women participation in political decision-making, there is a need to better support the continued education of the next generation of female Ethiopian leaders, for example, in our Ethiopia READTA program activities focuses on improving reading skills in primary schools. We provide supplementary reading materials and purposefully support girls' participation in reading clubs to enhance learning performance and increase retention. In business opportunities, women often face different & more basic economic constraints than men, including less access to credit and more limited market access. To support women's ability to create businesses and secure their own livelihoods, we encourage financing for female-owned businesses through the Development Credit Authority (Beyene, 2019).

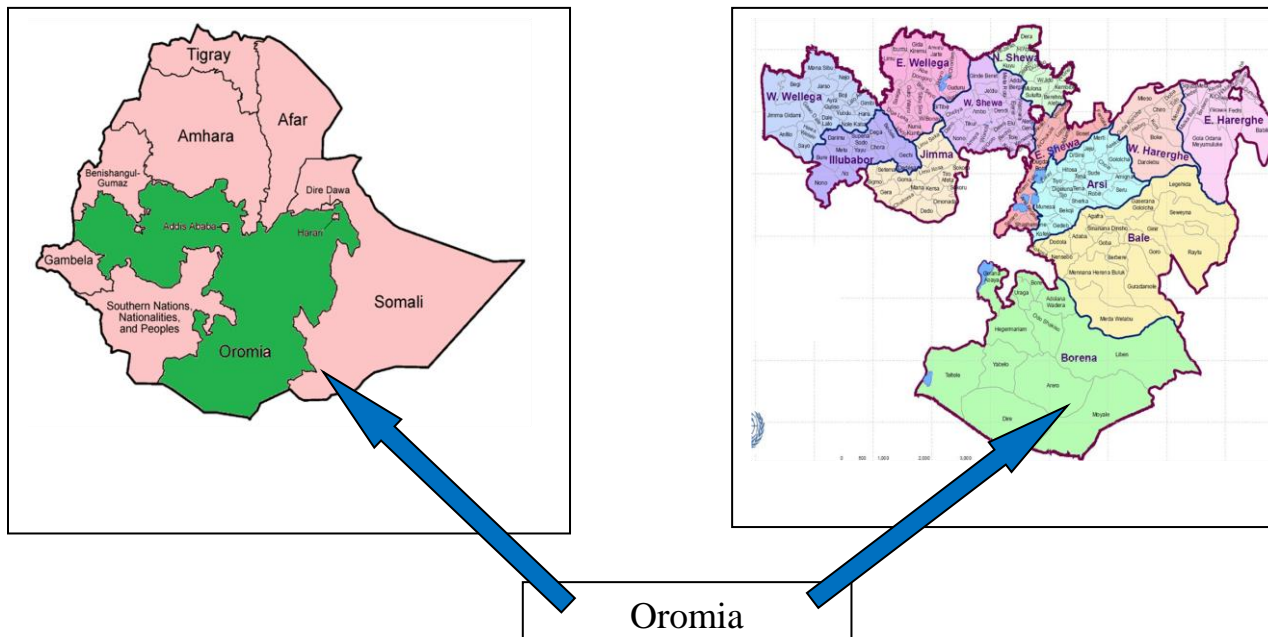
Mlambo and Kapingura (2019) noted that there is also a need to engage women through awareness campaigns. This would include providing women information on how they can become more engaged politically, not just through participating in election campaigns.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Description of the Study Area

Data-gathering for this study was done in Oromia, the largest region in Ethiopia in terms of land mass and population number. It occupies 34% of the land in Ethiopia and accounts for 37% of the population. In absolute numbers, this represents over 37 million people: 18,683,000 males and 18,584,000 females (CSA, 2013). The region is divided into 21 zones and 19 city administrations. It has diverse agro-ecological zones. The highland areas are characterized by sedentary rain-fed agriculture and livestock production, while the lowlands are largely inhabited by pastoralist communities who depend on livestock production. Oromia has experienced high economic growth, which is mostly attributable to the agricultural sector. There are limited off-farm job opportunities in the region (Dejene, 2020). In Oromia 49.8 % of the total population is female (CSA, 2013). However, the number of women leaders at the various level of government structure is still relatively low. For instance, women constitute for 34.33 % of formal employees in the region during 2019/20, while the proportion of women in the leadership position was only 18.8 % during the same period (PSHRDBO, 2020).

Figure 1. Map of Oromia National Regional State



5.2. Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis

Data collected from primary and secondary sources were employed for this study. Secondary data from regional offices, zonal and city administration were used to assess the trends and status of women participation in the region. Moreover, the secondary data were supported by survey data collected from 98 sample respondents using a structured questionnaire, key informant interviews and focus group discussion. Purposive and stratified sampling methods were used to select sample respondents. The study area was divided to 4 strata (Region, Zone, Town and Woreda) and the sample area was selected purposively from the strata due to security problem and COVID-19 pandemic. Sample size from each stratum was determined in proportion to the number of sectorial offices in the strata. Finally, sample respondents were randomly selected from the population of leaders in the selected area based on list of the leaders obtained from the Oromia Public Service and Human Resource Development Bureau (as indicated in Table 1).

Table 1. Samples taken from the study area

Sample	Region	Town Admin.	Zones	Woredas	Total	Sampling Method
Total area	1	19	21	292	333	Strata
Sampled area	1	7	8	16	32	Purposive
Number of sectorial offices in the selected areas	56	224	256	512	1048	
Sample taken	10	21	22	45	98	Random sampling

Structured questionnaires were translated to the local language (Afan Oromo) and distributed to sample respondents through their offices in January 2021. A total of 98 respondents were participated in the study, out of which 10.2% were from regional, 21.4% from town, 22.4% from zone and 45.9% from the woreda offices. Out of a total sample taken, 39.8% were women and 60.2 were men respondents. Regarding the educational background of the sample respondents:, 22.4, 69.4 and 8.2% were M.Sc. degree, 1st degree and diploma holders, respectively. As to marital status 89.8% was married and the remaining 102 % was single. The occupation of respondents

showed that all were from government offices at different level with 45.9 % currently in a leadership position and 54.1% currently working as public servants (Table 2).

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of respondents (Survey data)

No	Item / Characteristics		Number of respondents	% %
1	Sex	Women	39	39.8
		Men	59	60.2
		Total	98	100
2	Age	18-30	30	30.6
		31-50	67	68.4
		51 and above	1	1
		Total	98	100
3	Education level	Diploma	8	8.2
		1st degree	68	69.4
		M.Sc. degree	22	22.4
		Total	98	100
4	Marital status	Married	88	89.8
		Single	10	10.2
		Total	98	100
5	Work place	Region	10	10.2
		Town	21	21.43
		Zone	22	22.45
		Woreda	45	45.92
		Total	98	100

Source: Survey results

The primary data collected from sample respondents was supported by key informant interviews (experts from office of women and children affairs and experienced researchers) and focus group discussions conducted at one town and two administrative zones. In this study the quantitative data were analyzed using different descriptive and inferential statistical tools. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used as a tool for data entry and analysis.

6. Results and Discussion

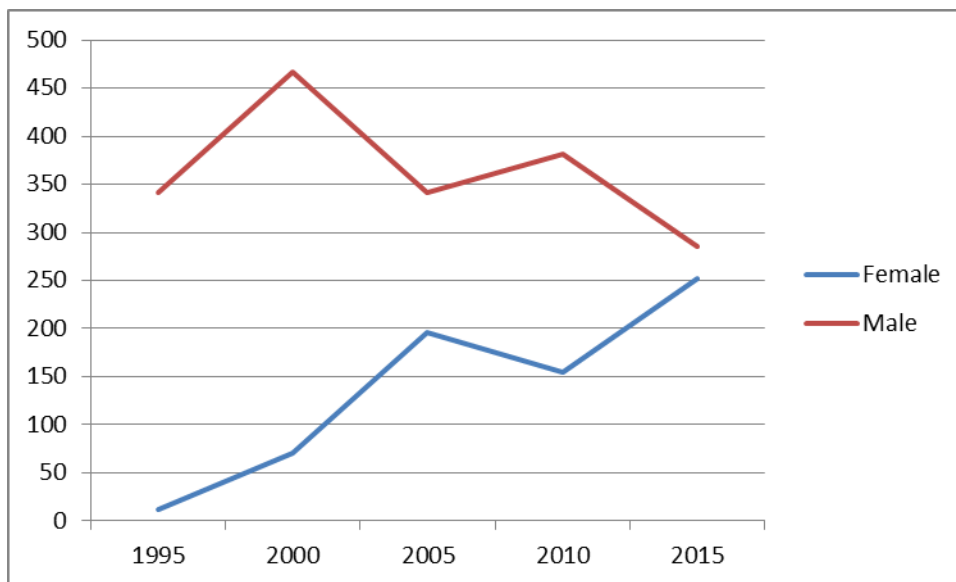
An analysis of the results of primary data are presented and discussed in this Chapter.

6.1 Trends of Women's Participation in Political Decision-Making

In Ethiopia, women's presence in the political and public sector is a very recent phenomenon and they are still largely underrepresented in decision-making positions at all levels (Kassa, 2015). In the last two decades, there has been some progress towards more equal representation of men and women in such positions, especially at lower levels. The exception on the national level: the proportion of women members of Ethiopian parliament: from only 2.3% in 1995 it increased to 37% during 2015. 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 (ministers and state ministers) reached 50%.

Similarly, the Oromia regional legislative organ, house of the regional council (Chaffe Oromia), has shown a similar trend towards improvement in women's inclusion and political participation. The annual report of the Oromia Regional Council of 2019 indicated that the proportion of women was only 3.4% in 1995, but increased to 47% in 2015 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Trends of women's participation in the regional legislative body



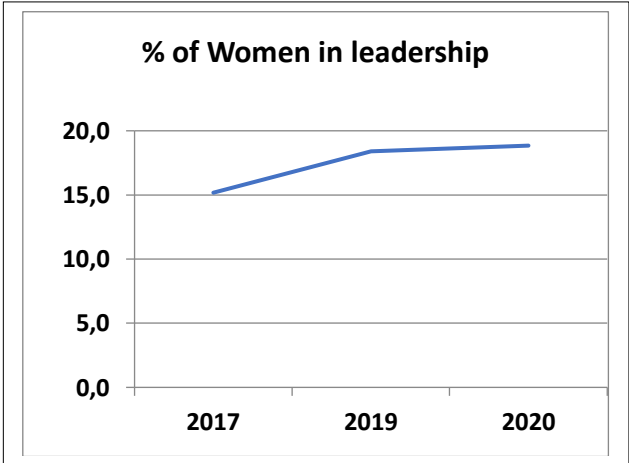
Source: Oromia Regional Council report (Chaffe, 2019).

In contrast to the legislative organ, the participation of women in executive organ is still low. The trend analysis showed that there is a slight change in women’s participation in decision-making positions in executive organs of the region. As Table 3 shows, their participation, which was 15.5 percent in 2017, increased to 18.8 in 2020.

Table 3. Trends of women’s participation in executive bodies of the region

Year	Men	Women	Total	% of Women
2017	15024	2688	17712	15.2
2019	12245	2760	15005	18.4
2020	12246	2836	15050	18.8

Fig. 3. Trends of women’s participation executive bodies of the region



Source: OWCAB, 2020

The survey results also showed that there is a positive trend in women’s political participation in certain political domains. Accordingly, 91.8% of our respondents confirmed that there is an increasing trend in women’s representation and participation in political decision-making in the

region. Remarkably, and in contrast to the figures, 2.7 and 5.5% respectively said there is ‘decreasing participation’ and ‘no change’.

6.2 The Status of Women’s Participation in Decision-Making in the Three Government Branches

There is significant variation in women’s participation among the three government branches. As indicated in the table 4, during 2020 the participation of women in the regional legislative, executive and judiciary bodies was 47, 18.8 and 8.3% respectively.

Table 4. Representation of women in the three government branches

Regional Government branches	Total Positions	Number of Men	Number of Women	% of women
Legislative	20648	10901	9747	47
Executive	15050	12246	2836	18.8
Judiciary	2227	2043	184	8.3

Source: OSU, 2020

Figure 4. Graphic: Percentage of Women in leadership in the three government branches

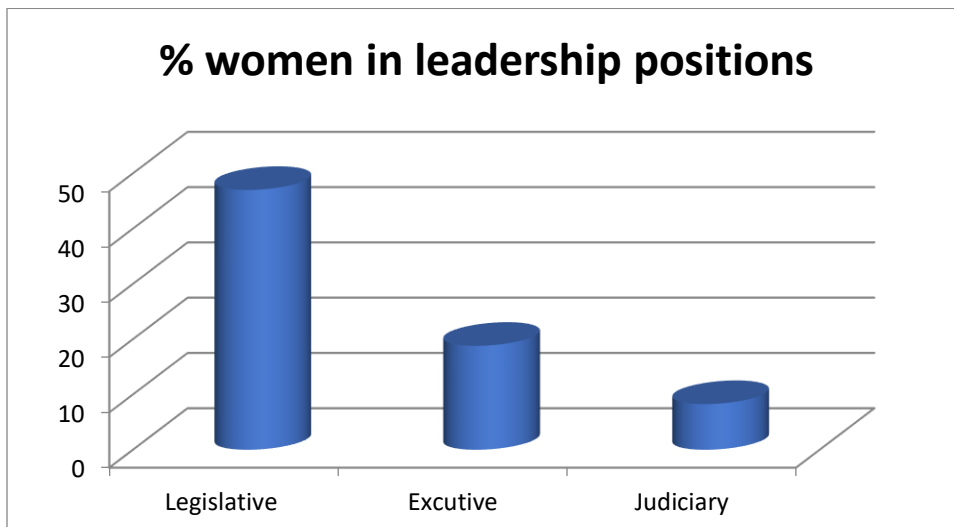


Table 5 below illustrates that the representation of women in the law-making organs, i.e., the *Ch'affee* Oromia, City Councils and *Woreda* Councils, was 46, 52 and 47% respectively in the year 2020. It is encouraging to see that from the total 20,648 members of the councils, 9747 (47%) members are women.

Table 5. Representation of women in the law-making organs

SN	Name of Council	Members of council		
		Total members	Number of Women	%
1	<i>Ch'affee</i> Oromia	530	246	46
2	City Councils	1112	575	52
3	<i>Woreda</i> Councils	19006	8926	47
	Total	20648	9747	47

Source: OSU, 2020

Unlike in the legislative body, the representation of women in political decision-making in executive organs of Oromia region is still low. According to the survey results, 67.1% of the respondents perceived that women do not have equal opportunity to participate in political leadership as compared to their male counterparts. The results of the analyzed, key informants and focus group discussion data revealed that women's participation in political decision-making is low at regional level as compared to governance structures at the zone, city and *woreda* level.

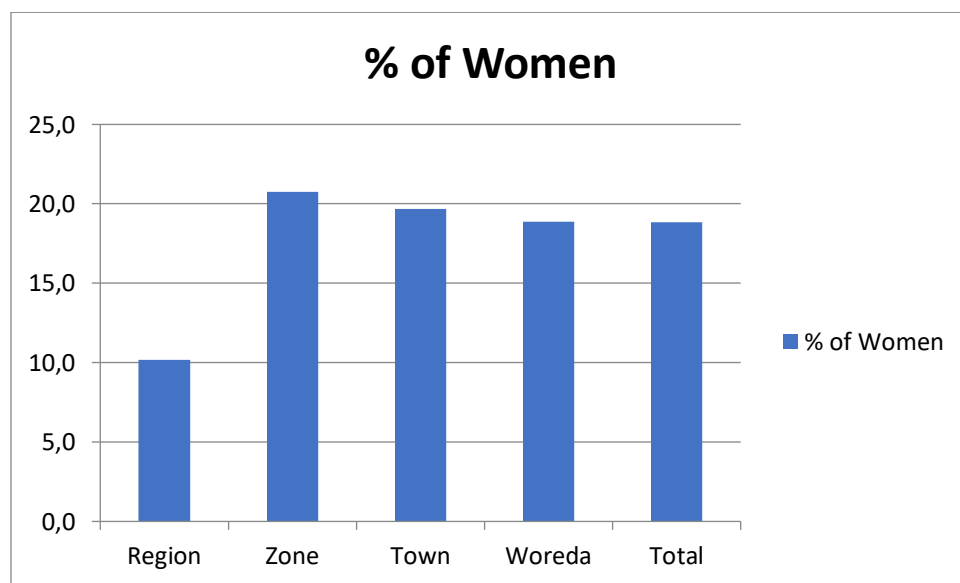
Table 6 below illustrates that the proportion of women leaders in the executive branch at Regional level is only 10.2%. This means from the total of 334 leaders only 34 (10.2%) were women. This shows that women's representation in the senior level of leadership and decision-making positions in Oromia region is very low. In the 21 Zonal administrations, from the total 993 leaders, the proportion of women were 206 (20.7%). In the history of the region, two women were appointed as zonal administrators in 2021. Similarly, the proportions of women at city and *woreda* administration level were 19.7 and 18.9% respectively.

Table 6. Women’s Representation in the Oromia Regional Executive Organ

Administration Structure	Participation of			% of Women
	Men	Women	Total	
Region	300	34	334	10.2
Zone	787	206	993	20.7
City	567	139	706	19.7
Woreda	10592	2457	13017	18.9
Total	12246	2836	15050	18.8

Source: OWCAB, 2020

Figure 5. Women’s Representation in the Oromia Regional Executive Organ



As clearly seen from Table 7 below, representation of women in judiciary organs is also very low. It is clear that of the total 328 presidential positions starting from regional supreme court to *woreda* first instance court, only 8 (2%) of the presidents were women. Similarly, from 1899 total judges in the region, only 176 (9%) were female judges. This shows that women’s representation in the judicial organ of the region at all level of administration is severely hampered. Key informants indicated that low participation of women in judiciary organs emanates from their low interest to join and/or from the limited number of graduates from law departments in the universities - which needs further investigation.

Table 7. Women’s Representation in the Judicial Organs

SN	Name of the court	Total Number of Women in Leadership Positions					
		Presidents			Judges		
		Total Presidents	Women presidents	%	Total judges	Number of Women judges	%
1	Oromia Supreme Court	2	0	0	86	4	5
2	Zonal High Court	22	1	5	310	33	11
3	Woreda First Instance Court	304	7	2	1503	139	9
Total		328	8	2	1899	176	9

Source: OSU, 2020

6.3. Experiences of Women’s Political Participation in Oromia Region

In Oromia Region, despite the low percentage of women in the decision-making positions, the performance of those who get a leadership opportunity has demonstrated their talents in all positions, including in the legislative and executive body. For instance, remarkable achievements were seen by those women who hold higher positions, like Speaker of the Regional Council, Deputy Regional President, Cabinet member and City mayor, among others.

In our study, respondents were asked the question “How do you evaluate the performance of women who are currently in leadership positions as compared to men in similar positions?”, about 49.3% indicated that women perform equally to men, 45.2% said “better than men”, 2.7% said “less than men” and similarly 2.7% said “difficult to compare”. Those who responded “women perform better than men” indicated that “this is because, women feel more responsibility, are less corrupt, and stick more to law and regulations than their men counterparts”.

Results of group discussions and key informant interviews also indicated that equal participation of women and men in politics was seen as having many positive effects that could improve the lives of both. Bringing more women to leadership positions would probably help to enhance the service delivery system be a positive development in education, health and infrastructure, and ultimately bring a more equitable society and perhaps also higher standards of living.

6.4 Challenges that Hinder Women's Participation in Political Decision-Making

We noted that in spite of women making up 49.8 % of the population in Oromia region, their concrete participation has been minimal at the public policy and decision-making levels. As of 2019-20, in Oromia, women are engaged more in formal lower administrative employment than in management positions, and the proportion of women in leadership positions was only 13% during the same period (PSHRDBO, 2020). The concrete challenges that hinder women's participation in political leadership will be discussed below.

6.4.1 Socio-Cultural Factors

In Ethiopia, as in many other countries, certain perceptions and traditions continue to restrict women's primary roles to 'reproductive roles', as mothers and housewives. A predominantly 'patriarchal' value system favors sexually segregated roles, and 'traditional, cultural and religious values' militate against the advancement, progress and participation of women in any political process (FDRE, 2006). Similarly, 62% of the sample respondents confirmed that participation of women in leadership positions in the region is low. The major reasons indicated by the 53 and 47 % of the respondents were 'cultural barriers' and 'lack of equal opportunity' respectively. According to the study, the major cultural barriers that affect women's confidence to participate in decision-making are discrimination starting from child birth, domestic work burden and harmful practices like genital mutilation, early marriage, abduction and rape and other sexual harassment.

The dominant social division of labor and the work burden are among the major socio-cultural factors that limit women's participation in political decision-making. Results of group discussions and key informant interviews showed that there is an ingrained perception of a social division of work between men and women, which means home activities, are always seen as belonging to women, and outside home activities primarily belong to men. Women are also overburdened with the different household activities, like cooking, taking care of children, being responsible for the laundry, the cleaning and so on. These activities make women busier in the household and impede their involvement in the politics of the country. The situation is more visible for those women who are poor and resided in the rural areas.

6.4.2 Religious Factors

Arguments about women's alleged inferiority to men are present across all dominant religions, and religion has long been used to exclude women from aspects of social, political, or religious

life around the world (Kassa, 2015). In many mainstream religions, power and authority in the public sphere are divinely bestowed on men. Women are considered subordinate to men both in the family and in the society, especially in most rural areas (Dejene, 2020).

Key informants indicated that religion is indeed still one of the most important factors that affect (perceptions of) participation of women in social, economic and political affairs. In all major religions (although in varying degrees), women are usually restricted in preaching and expressing their ideas and thoughts in public gatherings. Hence, the exclusion of women from religious institutions and religious leadership and beyond may have a general negative impact on women's status in society and limit their opportunities in politics, the workplace, and public life.

6.4.3 Economic Factors

The socio-economic status of women also plays a significant role in influencing their participation and representation in political decision-making bodies. It has already been noted that Ethiopian women in general are poorer and less educated than men. Many women are financially dependent on their husbands or relatives. In addition, women in Ethiopia struggle to attain basic rights, such as property rights, access to land, and credit. Women's historical experience of discrimination puts them at a disadvantage position economically (Dejene, 2020).

Our study results also indicated that women's participation in political life is seen as depending largely on their socio-economic status and access to employment, which would give them not only material independence, but also greater self-confidence. So access to the job market and their own finances has a direct relationship and influence on the participation of women in political institutions.

6.4.4 Educational Factors

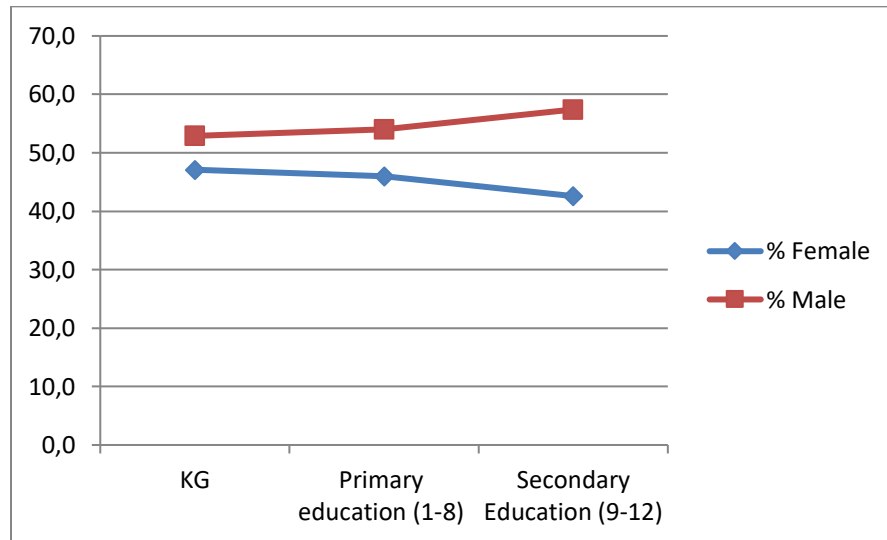
In Oromia, the proportion of girls that have access to formal education is low as compared to boys. A report of the Central Statistics Agency (2018) indicated that there is a significant difference in male and female literacy rates in the region, with the overall female rate (22.8%) at less than half the males' rate (49.4%).

Although the primary school enrollment rate of girls has increased in the last two decades, the majority are unable to transition to secondary and tertiary school due to distance, personal security issue and economic challenges. Females make up 49 and 41% of the primary and secondary school population, respectively. Only 35% of undergraduate university students are

female, out of which a quarter of those who joined university will drop out before graduation (Beyene, 2019).

Similarly, key informants indicated that students travel long distance to get to school in rural areas. The problem becomes more visible as one goes higher up the educational ladder. The report of the Oromia Bureau of Education (2019) mentioned that the percentage of female students declines as the level of education increases (See Figure 5). Girls in the rural areas are highly exposed to sexual harassment, and 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. Access to education has a great and shaping impact on developing leadership abilities, professional skills and self-confidence, and thereby has a direct relationship with participation in political leadership.

Figure 6. Percentage of female and male students in different levels of education in Oromia Region



Source: Oromia Bureau of Education, 2019/20

6.4.5 Political Factors

Women comparatively lack the political knowledge and networks for actively taking part in political party activities and decision-making, including policy-making. Male-dominated leadership structures in the parties lead to the subordination of women’s issues, needs and perspectives. Parties have the ability to promote women’s involvement in internal executive leadership positions but often limit or deny them this opportunity (Dessie and Verma, 2018).

The respondents in our survey also 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 the politics. Although women's political representation has improved over the years, lingering negative social perceptions about the leadership ability of women, their low socio-economic status, low educational and skills levels, and lack of strong role models all contribute to women low participation in decision-making structures.

6.4.6 Institutional Factors

Institutional factors are one among those that challenge the participation and representation of women in leadership and decision-making positions. Public institutions have the power of changing the economic, political and social lives of a particular society. The Oromia regional government's Women, Children and Youth Affairs Bureau is the key institution that was given the responsibility to strengthen the participation of women and youths in political, economic and social activities in the Region. Regional proclamation no. 213/2018, enacted to re-organize the powers and duties of executive organs, showed that the Bureau was given powers and duties to co-ordinate governmental and non-governmental organizations working on women's affairs and create awareness to protect rights and interests of women, and thereby avoid discrimination committed based on sex, as well as put the discussion of 'harmful traditional practices' on the agenda.

There is attempt to mainstream gender issues in all government institutions with defined structure and responsibilities to ensure gender sensitivity by public regulations and interventions. However, lack of manpower in different institutions, improper implementation of affirmative action, lack of comprehensive women-focused strategies and continuous capacity-building programmes, and less access to institutional information are the major institutional factors identified by this study that hinder further progress.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

Women's political participation is one of the common ideals of modern states and part of the UN-declared Sustainable Development Goals (goal nr. 5). It is a key indicator for an inclusive, democratic, participatory society. It is getting due attention from the worldwide community and has been showing improvement even in developing countries. The government of Ethiopia has also declared its commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment by stipulating the rights of women in its 1995 constitution and in several additional laws. In the last two decades, there has been progress towards equal opportunity creation, and more equal representation of men and women in decision-making. As a result, the proportion of women members of parliament and their representation in the national cabinet and council of ministers has significantly improved. However, women in general are still largely underrepresented in political decision-making particularly at regional and lower government structures.

In Oromia, unlike at the national level, the number of women leaders at the various levels of government structure is still very low. Women are engaged more in formal administrative employment than in management positions. The results of the analysis revealed that the overall participation of women in decision making position in the region is still low and there is significant variation among the three government branches. The participation of women in regional legislative, executive and judiciary body was 47, 18.8 and 8.3% respectively. Women participation in judiciary and executive organs were very low as compared to the legislative branch. Their participation in political decision-making in the region is impacted by a combination of economic, political, social, cultural and religious factors.

'*Culture*' is often said to be one of the most important factors that restrict women from participation in major decision-making bodies. A 'patriarchal' value system and traditions favor sexually segregated roles that restrict women's primary roles to reproductive ones, as a mothers and housewives. There is a social division of labour between men and women, which means home activities are seen to belong to the responsibilities of women, and outside home activities as belonging to men. Moreover, work burden, sexual harassment and other harmful practices (like genital mutilation, early marriage, abduction of young females, and rape) are relatively common cultural practices in rural areas, affecting women's confidence to participate in decision-making structures.

Religious values also affect access to and participation of women in social, economic and political affairs. We noted that in all major religions women seen as subordinate to men, and barred from leadership, preaching and expressing their ideas in public. While there have been differences across religions (e.g., some have female preachers and religious officiators) and recent developments have contested this heritage, the traditional exclusion of women from religious institutions and religious leadership may have had a negative impact on women's status in society and limited their opportunities in politics and public life.

Similarly, *access to the job market and finances* has a direct relationship and influence on the access to and participation of women in political institutions. 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. Furthermore, *access to education* has a great impact on developing leadership abilities, professional skills and self-confidence. An educated girl is more likely to postpone marriage, raise a smaller family, have healthier children, and send her children to school. She has more opportunities to earn an income and to participate in political processes, and she is less likely to become infected with different diseases. Lack of political knowledge and networks for women to actively taking part in political party activities is also another factor that limits women's participation in political leadership.

Institutional factors are one among the factors that challenge the participation and representation of women in leadership and decision-making positions. Public institutions have the power of changing the economic, political and social lives of a particular society. Therefore, lack of manpower in different institutions, improper implementation of affirmative action, lack of comprehensive women-focused strategies and continuous capacity-building programmes, and less access to institutional information, are the major institutional bottlenecks that need to be improved.

Hence, dealing with all the above factors needs active participation of women, on equal terms with men, at all levels of decision-making, and the inclusion of their perspectives and experiences into the decision-making processes can provide social, political, legal, and economic solutions for their problems.

7.2 Recommendations

In the last two decades, there has been progress towards realizing equal opportunities and more equal representation of men and women in decision-making structures in Ethiopia. Despite

progress towards achieving gender equality and women's empowerment the goals have not been met over time. This study was conducted to assess the practices of women's political participation in Oromia Region and identify challenges that hinder their participation in political decision-making. Women's interest and ability to participate in the political process is impacted by a combination of political, social, economic and cultural challenges. Accordingly, the following recommendations are drawn up to deal with the challenges that hinder women's participation in decision-making structures.

1. 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. Women are often socially portrayed as weak and incapable of making smart decisions. Accordingly, gender equality, women's empowerment and creating a community that is free from prejudice and violence against women, including genital mutilation, rape, early marriage and other forms of sexual harassment calls for changing the perception and attitudes of the society at all levels.

Empowering women requires understanding and transforming oppressive cultural norms and practices. One key strategy to bring about a cultural shift is to plan and implement participatory gender analysis and gender sensitization programs. The second one is improving the knowledge and understanding of communities on gender equality, women's empowerment and human rights through engagement of the local community, religious and community leaders. In traditional society, working with religious and community leaders can be one of the most effective strategies to disseminate messages to large numbers of people through their own institutional structures down to 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 to other productive activities and contribute to closing the gender gap in employment and earnings.

2. Expanding Economic Opportunities for Women

Creating a conducive environment for women to have employment opportunities and paid equal wages is one of the most important interventions that can enhance women's 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, 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 create opportunities for women to mobilize their resources and to work together to share information, build social capital, and empower themselves.

3. Increasing Female Educational Opportunities

Giving women and girls the opportunities to advance their education help them to develop their skills and competence which could narrow the gender gap not only in employment and earnings but also their participation in decision making. The major areas to be focused on to improve women's participation are:

- Encouraging women's to attend leadership education and skill-building trainings
- Exposing women to how government works, through advocating for affirmative action at school clubs and other decision-making bodies at the local level so that they gain experience in decision-making roles.
- Promote women to improve their confidence and public speaking skills through conducting workshops for politically active women on how to campaign and government operations, among others and
- From an early start improving their reading skills in schools through providing supplementary reading materials.

4. 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 state university should work on strengthening women's capacity through the provision of continuous leadership training programs.

5. Strengthening the capacity of Public institutions, NGOs and charity organizations:

These organizations have been playing a vital role to bring gender equality and women's empowerment to the forefront. Enhancing their capacity would help to further empower women and improve their participation in political decision-making. To solve institutional problems, the

improvement of manpower in different institutions, proper implementation of affirmative action and continuous capacity building programmes are very important.

Finally, while progress has been made in Ethiopia in the advancement of women's representation and roles in state and regional administrations, a lot remains to be done. For various social, cultural, economic and educational reasons, equality of opportunity is not yet achieved, despite recent changes in federal policy, in line with Ethiopia's commitment to the Millennium Development Goals. Unexpected societal problems can sometimes set back achievements gained², but still, the line goes slowly upwards. Still, the overall empowerment of women and the improvement of their participation in political decision-making requires the continued collaborative efforts of governmental, non-governmental, and local and international institutions.

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² In addition to the recent violent conflicts in northern and western 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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Appendix 1.

Structured Questionnaire for Assessment of Women's empowerment in Political Participation and Decision Making in Oromia Region.

A. Personal information

1. Work Place of Respondent 1= Region 2= Zone 3= Town Admin 4=Woreda
2. Age of respondent_____ (in year)
3. Sex of respondent 1=Female 2=Male
4. Marital status 1= Married 2= Single 3= Divorced 4= Widowed
5. Family size in number _____
6. Education level 1= below 12 2= Certificate and diploma 3= 1st degree 4= M.Sc. 5= PhD
7. Education type _____
8. Work experience _____ (Years), Experience in leadership in years (if any) _____
9. Work type 1= Leadership 2= Public servant 3= Private 4= Others (if any) _____
10. Are you member of any political party? 1= Yes 2= No
11. If "yes" for Question 10 years of membership _____

B. Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

12. Do you think there is gender equality in your community? 1= yes 2= No
13. If "yes" for Question number 12, how do you express? 1= Equality in property utilization 2= Equality in property ownership 3= Give equal respect to boys and girls 4= 1 and 2 5= all
14. Property ownership and utilization
 - 14.1. Land and asset ownership, who owns land and major assets in the family?
1= Women 2= Men 3= Both
 - 14.2. Land and asset use right, who uses land and major assets in your family?
1= Women 2= Men 3= Both
15. What is the trend of gender discrimination in your area?
1= Increasing 2= Decreasing 3= No Change

C. Women Participation in Leadership

16. Do Women and men have equal opportunity to participate in political leadership?
1= Yes 2= No
17. What is the proportion of women and men in leadership in your Zone/Town/Woreda?
Number of Men _____ Women _____
18. Level of women participation in political leadership at different level

No	Government structure	Level of participation				
		V. High (5)	High (4)	Medium (3)	Low (2)	V. Low (1)
18.1	Regional level					
18.2	Zone level					
18.3	Town Admin. Level					
18.4	Woreda level					

19. If response for question number 18 is low or very low, Why? Multiple answer possible,
 1= Lack of opportunity 2= Lack of educated women 3= Lack of leadership ability
 4= Cultural barrier 5= Work burden

20. If women get equal opportunity in leadership, they can work_____
 1= Equal to men 2= More than men 3= Less than men 4= Difficult to compare

21. If answer to question 20 is “2”, why?
 1= women are more loyal than men 2= They have more patient and committed
 3= They are better decision makers 4= They are kind than men 5= a, b & c 6= all

22. If answer to question 20 is “3”, why? 1= Low natural ability 2= Work Burden
 3= Fear of making strong decisions 4= cultural barriers 5= Others_____

23. What are factors contributing to women’s lack of self-confidence? Multiple responses possible
 1= Family influence starting from birth 2= Low access to education
 3= Work Burden (triple role) 4= Sexual harassment from their counter parts
 5= Traditional harmful practices like genital mutilation, early marriage, rape and abduction

24. What are possible solutions to bring a number of women’s to political leadership? Rank.
 1= Awareness creation- showing as women can work equal to men if get opportunity
 2= Encouraging them to focus on their education by reducing their work burden
 3= Avoiding early marriage and reducing school drop
 4= Encouraging and supporting women to attend leadership education
 5= Motivating those talented girls by participating in school clubs & arranging public speech
 6= Others if any _____

25. Additional comments _____
