

# Gender and Farming in Ethiopia: an Exploration of Discourses and Implications for Policy and Research

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## Abstract

*There is a growing realization that gender matters in African agriculture. However, much of the present scholarly and policy debate concerning gender and farming is rather lacking when it comes to nuanced and contextualized analyses. The positioning of men and women in relation to farming, the spaces they are and are not allowed to occupy, the embodied nature of farming activities, and their implications to gender equality and agricultural policies have not been adequately reflected upon. This paper discusses these issues in the context of small scale plow farming in Ethiopia. We discuss the symbolic construction of 'the farmer' as an essentially masculine subject and reflect on the reasons behind its persistence. We argue that the practical importance of the plow and its placement in the exclusive domain of men have resulted in the construction of a particularly male centric notion of who the farmer is and what he does. Although it has for long been argued that men have certain physical advantages that explain this male centric nature of plow farming, we suggest that notions of embodiment have better explanatory power since there appear to be important differences in the way men's and women's bodies are perceived in relation to farming implements and activities, on the basis of which narratives of what they can and cannot do are constructed.*

**Key words:** embodiment, Ethiopia, farming, gender, plow

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## Introduction

There is a growing realization that gender matters in agriculture in the global south and a lot of attention has been given to addressing the ‘gender gap in agriculture’ in the last few years. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) dedicated its annual flagship report on the state of food and agriculture in its entirety to the issue in 2011. The report points to the existence of a ‘gender gap’ in the agricultural sectors of many developing countries as women’s access to productive resources, modern agricultural inputs, technologies, credit and extension services are severely constrained in much of the developing world (FAO 2011). The report calls for action aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women in agriculture in order to ‘win, sustainably, the fight against hunger and extreme poverty’.

In May of the same year, a controversial paper entitled *On the Origins of Gender Roles: Women and the Plough* was published by the National Bureau of Economic Research (Alesina, Giuliano, and Nunn 2011). The paper grabbed headlines owing to its claim of finding a strong causal link between historical use of the plow and women’s subordination<sup>1</sup>. And in September, the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hosted the UN event ‘Women and Agriculture: A Conversation on Improving Global Food Security’, where she announced a \$5 million new gender program within the Feed the Future food security initiative of the US government to fund further research into and promotion of gender equality in agriculture. The Secretary stated,

We know that women farmers represent a major untapped resource, but we don’t know nearly enough about which approaches will change that. So we need concentrated research about the obstacles facing women farmers worldwide so we know how to remove them, so women can contribute even more.’ (Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, September 19, 2011)<sup>2</sup>

It is perhaps too early to say conclusively whether these events and the spotlight they have put on the issue of gender and agriculture in the developing world have borne any fruit. But in comparison to the manner in which gender and agriculture have meticulously been investigated and documented in the Global North, it is safe to say there is a tremendous knowledge gap in the way the gender gap in agriculture in the Global South

has been approached. While there may be growing realization that gender matters in African agriculture, the focus of much of the scholarly and policy narrative thus far has been on justifying the need to address gender issues in agriculture by calling attention to the untapped potentials and contributions women can make towards food security and raising productivity.

Studies which have dealt with gender and farming in the African context have primarily been concerned with the importance of recognizing the vital but often invisible role of women in African agriculture. A consensus seems to have emerged over the fact that women comprise a substantial, and sometimes even dominant, proportion of the population involved in agriculture in Africa; that their contributions are under-recognized; and that their potential is unrealized due to gendered inequalities in access to and control of key resources and services.

Land rights and reform (Akanji 2013; Daley, Dore-Weeks, & Umuhoza 2010; Doss 2001; Holden, Deininger, & Ghebru 2011; Jackson 2003; Kevane & Gray 1999; Mebrat Gebreslassie 2011a; Razavi 2003; Yngstrom 2002), differences in productivity, technology adoption, and access to services among men and women farmers (Ajani & Igbokwe 2013; Buchy & Basaznew 2005; Carr 2008; Croppenstedt, Goldstein, & Rosas 2013; Doss 2001, 2002; Doss & Morris 2000; Kebede 2009; Mogues et al. 2009; Peterman, Quisumbing, Behrman, & Nkonya 2011; Tiruneh, Tesfaye, Mwangi, & Verkuijl 2001), and the contributions of women farmers to food security (Gawaya 2008; Ibnouf 2013; Kebede 2009; Scanlan 2004) are among the most recurring themes in the literature on gender and agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa.

The construction of gendered bodies, the embodied nature of agricultural activities, the positioning of men and women in relation to farming activities and implements, and their implications for agricultural policy and gender equality interventions have thus far attracted little attention. In this paper, we explore some of these concepts and the narratives that surround them in Ethiopia in light of our own empirical evidence as well as the literature and reflect on directions for further research. We particularly explore the highly gendered cultural and symbolic construction of 'the farmer' as an essentially masculine subject, and reflect

on the reasons behind the continued persistence of this construction and its implications for current agricultural policy and future research.

### **Background and Methods**

This article is based on two qualitative studies of rural youth in three farming communities in Ethiopia conducted in 2011 and 2012. The first study was aimed at exploring the views of rural youth towards a possible future in farming (Tadele and Gella 2012). It explored characteristics and features of agricultural life which make it desirable or undesirable to young men and young women, as well as the possible forces that shape young men's and women's perceptions of agricultural life in general. This study was funded by the Future Agricultures Consortium and covered two rural kebeles<sup>3</sup>, Chertekel in the East Gojjam Zone and Geshgolla in the Duram Zone, selected to represent two different agro-ecological zones and farming traditions. The second study was done as part of an MPhil thesis by the first author and explored the aspirations and imagined futures of rural youth in relation to education and farming in Guaikebele, in the East Gojjam Zone of the Amhara Region (Gella 2013).

A combination of various qualitative methods comprising in-depth and key informant interviews and focus group discussions were used in both sets of studies. Focus group discussions were held with young students who were still attending school, out of school youth who have either discontinued or completed their high school, as well as young and older farmers. Individual interviews were held with selected participants of the focus group discussions to explore issues of interest in greater detail. Key informant interviews were held with local agricultural extension workers known as Development Agents (DAs), kebele administrators and personnel in the respective woreda agricultural development and youth and women's affairs offices and departments. A total of 167 people were interviewed. Informed consent has been secured from all informants and all names included in the text are pseudonyms.

**Table 1: Summary of participants**

	Chertekel		Geshgolla		Guai		Total		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	T
<b>Key informants</b>	3	-	6	-	4	1	<b>13</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Older farmers</b>	6	-	9	8	-	-	<b>15</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Young farmers</b>	7	5	6		11	10	<b>24</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>In-school youth</b>	5	5	7	7	19	8	<b>31</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Out-of-school youth</b>	6	5	8	7	7	7	<b>21</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>167</b>

## Findings

Rain fed smallholder farming in much of Ethiopia is, and has for centuries been, seen as a man's business where women only take part as caretakers and helpers of the men who do the real farming. Sixteenth century accounts of Portuguese travellers as well as studies in the last decade all mention the seemingly time-immune fact that men plow the fields while women take care of their houses (Aboma 2006; Becher 2006; Frank 1999; Kebede 2009; McCann 1995; Mebrat Gebreslassie 2011b). In virtually all Amharic folklore, whether he is portrayed as wise or foolish, hard working or lazy, poor or rich, the farmer is invariably portrayed as a man. This gendering is not just limited to folklore and oral traditions; it is also widely prevalent in the public and political discourse. As (Frank 1999:3) notes,

*...in terms of semantics, throughout Ethiopia, both within government bureaus and communities, the term 'farmer' is used synonymously with the word for 'man'. It is clear that whether rural women contribute to the process of agricultural production to a greater or lesser extent, they are generally perceived as marginal players.*

A similar construction of the farmer emerges from our studies as well. In all three rural communities, participants were asked to describe the farmer in their own words. Descriptions often revolved around phrases that described the farmer as ‘someone who labors to feed others,’ ‘one who toils till death calls upon him,’ ‘someone tied to his land’, ‘someone who lives off his land and labor’ and ‘the base upon which all life is built, the source of all food and hence the source of life’. These descriptions, irrespective of who was speaking, were invariably about the farmer in the masculine. Often, the reference to the farmer as male was very explicit: *he* is this or *he* is not that, *he* can do this or *he* can’t do that, and so on. Even when there were no explicit masculine markers, references to the farmer as a male were visible in more subtle ways. The examples and case stories we were given were invariably about male farmers.

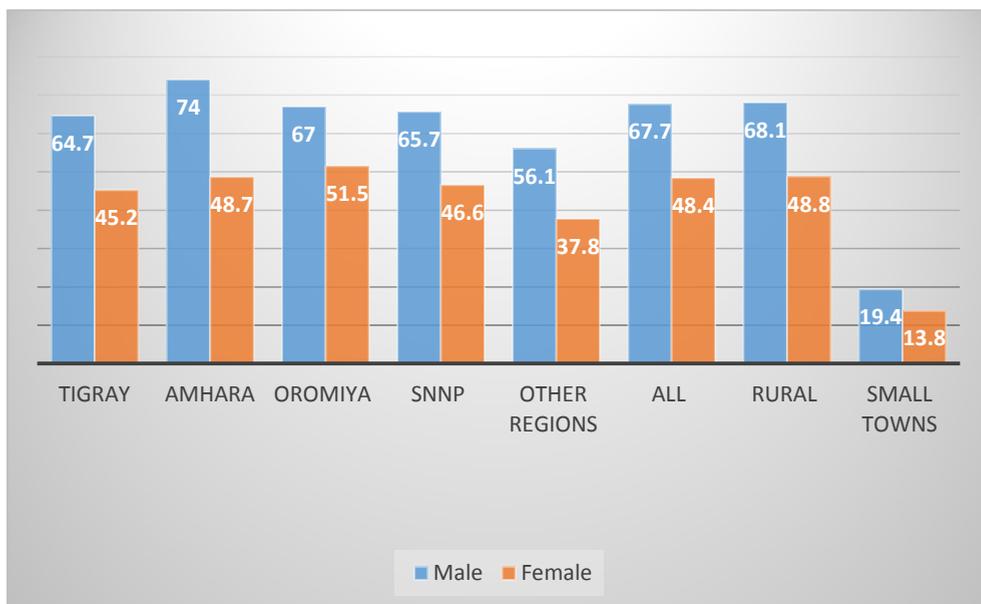
The synonymy of farmer to man is by no means an indication that women do not take part in farming activities. On the contrary, many agricultural activities would not be feasible without the participation and labor of women. In the northern Ethiopian highlands where rain fed, ox drawn plow farming is dominant; women take part in almost all farming activities except a few which are seen as the exclusive domain of men. Plowing, sowing seeds and threshing are the only activities that are considered exclusively masculine. These activities also happen to involve working with oxen.

Many labor intensive agricultural activities such as land preparation, weeding, harvesting and transporting harvests require the active involvement of women alongside men. Women are also primarily, and most often exclusively, responsible for tending to backyard gardens, cleaning animal barns, milking, milk processing and looking after poultry. But their active participation in the vast majority of agricultural activities does not result in their recognition as farmers on equal footing with men. Our own observations echo previous studies which have found that women are rarely recognized as proper farmers. Frank (1999:3) for example observes, ‘many agricultural extension agents refuse to acknowledge the importance of women’s role in agricultural production’. Becher (2006:26) also writes that ‘when asked about the difference between men’s and women’s work, people generally say that men work on the land and women assist them,’ and ‘the

notion of “assisting men in farm work” is a frequently expressed description of women[’s role]’. She concludes that ‘agricultural knowledge and work are considered part of a male-dominated social sphere’ that women find best to leave to their husbands.

This lack of recognition is not limited to men and agricultural extension workers. Given the hegemonic nature of gender structures, women themselves can undervalue their involvement in and contributions to farming. This is apparent in the following data from a rural socioeconomic survey carried out in 2011–2012 where women’s self-reported involvement in agricultural activities is significantly lower than that of men. The fact that the self-reported levels of involvement for women are significantly lower than that of men across all regions despite significant differences in the cultural and technical organization of farming is further testament to the dominance of a male centric understanding of farming.

**Figure 1: Self-reported involvement in agricultural activities in the last 7 days (age >=7)**



Source: CSA (2013, 51)

The question then becomes, why does this happen to be so? It is this question we will try to explore further in the subsequent sections. We will first discuss explanations that emphasize physical and biological differences between men and women in relation to the requirements of plow agriculture and proceed to the notion of social embodiment.

### **Of Men and the Plow: Physical and Cultural Explanations of Male Hegemony in Farming**

Nearly half a century has passed since Ester Boserup (1970) first forwarded the thesis that the change from shifting cultivation to plow agriculture reversed the respective roles of men and women in farming. Despite its age, Boserup's thesis still continues to generate empirical research and debate. The most recent of these first appeared as an NBER working paper in 2011 and later in 2013 in the *Oxford Quarterly Journal of Economics* (Alesina et al. 2011; Nunn, Alesina, and Giuliano 2013). In it the authors set out 'to test the hypothesis that traditional agricultural practices influenced the historical gender division of labor and the evolution of gender norms'. They begin by summarizing the Boserupian argument that 'unlike the hoe or digging stick, the plow requires significant upper body strength, grip strength, and bursts of power, which are needed to either pull the plow or control the animal that pulls it,' and it therefore puts women at a distinct disadvantage in relation to men (Nunn et al., 2013, p. 470). Through a combination of pre-industrial ethnographic data on societies traditionally practicing and not practicing plow agriculture, contemporary measures of individuals' views about gender roles, and measures of female participation in activities outside the home, the authors conclude:

Consistent with Boserup's hypothesis, we find a strong and robust positive relationship between historical plow use and unequal gender roles today. Traditional plow use is positively correlated with attitudes reflecting gender inequality and negatively correlated with female labor force participation, female firm ownership, and female participation in politics (Nunn et al., 2013:471)<sup>4</sup>

Although he does not explicitly attribute it to physical differences, McCann (1995) also notes that women in Ethiopian agriculture are 'structurally distant from the primary act of cultivation' and attributes this

mainly to the dominance of ox plow agriculture in the country. He observes that ‘gender relations and the imprint of ox-plow technology have added further divisions in socioeconomic relations in the economics of highland agriculture by producing household labor patterns dominated by male cultivation, [and] female food processing’ (McCann, 1995:77).

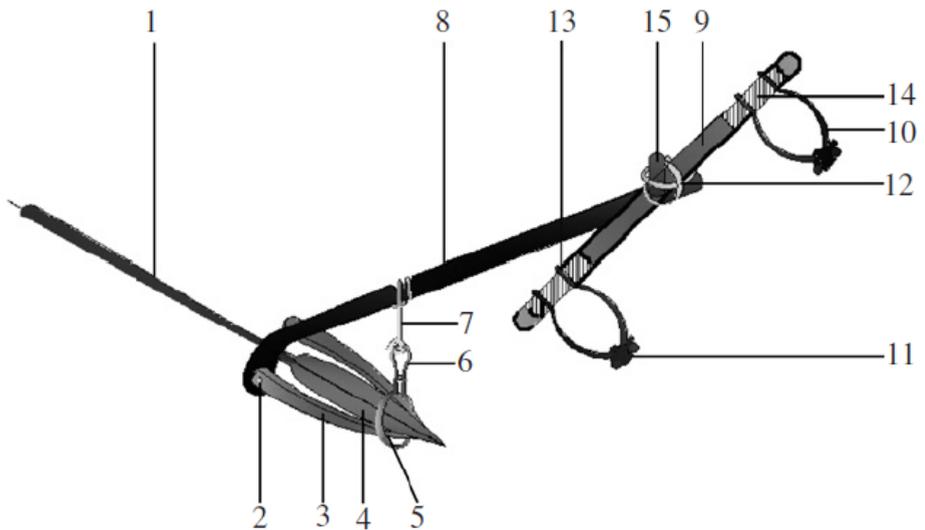
We also frequently encountered similar explanations in our studies which attribute the exclusive masculinity of plowing to the physical differences between men and women and the inability of the latter to properly handle the plow. In our own studies, the explanations often leaned towards the physical. In Chertekel and Guai, men as well as women themselves held the view that plowing with oxen was simply impractical for women since they would either be unable to do it at all or tire too soon. In Geshgolla, the question of why women don’t plow was considered moot; the ox plow was becoming a rarity due to the extremely small plots families had and the orientation towards cash crops such as coffee and *qhat* which do not involve the plow.

The development and dominance of the ox plow technology as the principal form of agricultural production in much of Ethiopia and its placement in the exclusive domain of men are indeed important factors with significant implications for the historic as well as current gender order in farming. Unlike much of sub-Saharan Africa where the plow was introduced by European settlers and missionaries in the early 1920s, the ox plow technology most likely has its origins, or at the very least a very long history, in Ethiopia (Ehret, 1979; Solomon et al. 2006; McCann 1995).<sup>5</sup> Perhaps owing to this long history of use, both the plow and the ox occupy a central place in popular understandings of what it means to be a farmer. Furthermore, their exclusive association with the masculine is an important issue with profound implications for the existing gender order in farming. But we find it quite problematic to reduce the origins and current state of gender relations in farming to the physical requirements of the plow.

First, the Ethiopian ardpow, the *mareshain* Amharic, is significantly different from plows found elsewhere. It is a light, almost entirely wooden implement which can easily be carried in its entirety by a 10-year-old boy (Goe 1987, cited in Solomon Gebregziabher et al. 2006)). While carrying the plow and its actual operation can require quite different levels of

physical strength, we have observed in our own field work that boys as young as 14 were able to plow with the *maresha*.

**Figure 1: Three-dimensional sketch of the Ethiopian ard plough**



**Fig. 1 – Three-dimensional sketch of the Ethiopian ard plough ‘Maresha’:** (1) handle; (2) wooden pin; (3) side-wing; (4) ploughshare; (5) lower metal loop; (6) upper metal loop; (7) leather stripe (8) beam; (9) yoke; (10) neck holder sticks; (11, 12) leather strap or rope; (13) rubber as washer; (14) leather for safety; (15) centring pin.

Source: Solomon et al. (2007, p. 30)

Although the ploughshare size, of the oxen power (size), types of soil and topography varies across Ethiopia, 3D modelling and analysis of the forces

needed to operate the plow seem to indicate that the role of the operator is minimal. A pair of oxen provides the draught needed to pull the plow, the plow itself simply breaks but does not turn the soil. The major operative procedures involved are adjusting the tillage depth (either by modifying the length of the ploughshare or putting greater downward pressure on the handle); applying lateral pressures to the handle to facilitate the breaking and loosening of the soil or when the ploughshare is wedged; guiding the plow to maintain a straight line; and lifting up the ploughshare while turning at both ends of the plot (Solomon Gebregziabher et al. 2006; Mouazen et al.2007; Nyssen et al. 2011). It is often also the case that a single plot requires multiple rounds of tillage, with each successive round requiring less strength.

Given all of this, it is questionable to assert that such a tool, heavily dependent on the power of the draught animal but with minimal requirements of the operator, would place women at a disadvantage – nor lead to the belief that they are unable to plow. In fact, Ehret (1979:173) casts a serious doubt on this ‘widely held idea that men took over cultivation tasks because of the invention of the plow,’ citing that ‘even where the plow never was introduced, among South Cushites in particular, still men are the cultivators’. In addition, local explanations as to why women don’t plow are often symbolic or cultural rather than physical, although the fact that women are physically weaker than men can often form part of the explanation. Bauer (1977:72) in his study of households in Tigray explains that the prohibition against women threshing and plowing is a long-standing one that is based on an indigenous theory that their participation in these activities would decrease the amount of crops produced.

Mebrat Gebreslassie (2011b:50) in her investigation of gender and land rights in the same region attributes the prohibition against women plowing to cultural taboos as well as perceived physical differences between men and women. She reports that 93 percent of women in female headed households and 71 percent in male headed households said they wouldn’t plow even if given oxen and training on how to plow; ‘toughness of the task’ was the primary reason offered for this, with cultural taboos coming second. But Mebrat goes on to explain that ‘toughness of the task’ is often a reference to the near impossibility for women of plowing while at the same time carrying out their other productive and reproductive duties, rather than

physical inability. Overall, she observes, the cultural taboos against women plowing with oxen seem to be losing potency, but women find it impossible to engage in plowing while they are responsible for the care of the entire household at the same time. She notes that the few women who did plow were largely able to do so since they had other women within the household (such as sisters) who took over their responsibilities as caretakers. Aboma (2006:67) in his investigation of gender and agricultural production among the Maqi Oromo indicates that women's involvement in agricultural activities largely depends on the wealth and labor needs of the household. He however notes that plowing and sowing are considered to be exclusively male activities due to the cultural parallels drawn between women and the earth, insofar as both are seen as bearing the man's fruit. A woman plowing the land, he observes, is akin to 'a woman tilling a woman' (Aboma 2006: 71).

We therefore feel that the Boserupian thesis that the plow, and more importantly the physical necessities of the plow, invented gender based divisions which later expanded to the non-agricultural/non-economic sphere is problematic due to the unique history and features of agriculture in Ethiopia. It is also rather problematic, if not essentialist, to try to pin the source of gendered forms of inequality to the alleged physical advantages men have over women in plow agriculture without questioning whether these advantages were in the first place a product of the way men's and women's bodies were socially constructed.

The notion of embodied selves, the links between the body, society and gender relations, and the ways discourses construct certain types of bodies with different powers and abilities represent important advances made in the last three decades to the way we understand gender relations (Brandth 2006; Pini 2005; Saugeres 2002a, 2002b; Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987). Such concepts have usefully been employed to study agricultural work and gender relations in western contexts. For example, Saugeres (2002b) in her discussion of gendered discourse and embodiment in a French farming community argues that the discursive representation of women's and men's bodies in a farming context maintains and legitimates farm women's subordinate positions. She finds that women's bodies are represented as frail, delicate, deficient and lacking; and as a result, "farm women are never

seen as having bodies which enable them to farm in the same terms as men”.

Our studies are limited and we did not directly explore notions of social embodiment. Nevertheless, we believe there are important differences in the way men’s and women’s bodies are perceived in relation to farming activities in Ethiopia, on the basis of which narratives of what they can and cannot do as well as the spaces they can and cannot occupy are constituted. Although it is true that gender identity depends on the performance of gendered tasks rather than having a male or female body, narratives about the male and female body and their differences are an important source for the construction and reproduction of gender identities.<sup>6</sup> As Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987: 25) put it, ‘societies regularly reproduce and socialize the kind of bodies that they need’.

### **Crossing Boundaries and Challenging the Gender Order**

Women are placed in the position of helpers and caretakers to the men who do the ‘real farming’ due to the symbolic and somatic association of the plow (and to a lesser extent, the ox) with the male farmer as well as the ways in which the bodies of men and women are socially constructed. There are often quite strict boundaries between what men and women can and cannot do, as the following extracts from our informants show.

*There is this tradition that has been brought on from the past. For example, you will never see a man baking injera or cooking or a woman plowing land or sowing seeds in the farm. It is just tradition but it still keeps men and women doing different things... Even if a woman had her own land but had no husband, she can’t farm it herself. Maybe she can rent it out to a man who can but she can’t go out with a plow and a pair of oxen to actually farm it herself. (Female high school student, Chertekel)*

Instances where the line between what men’s and women’s bodies can and cannot do and the spaces they can and cannot occupy are crossed do exist both in the literature as well as our own studies. In our own study, we have only been able to get accounts of one widowed woman near Guai who plowed her own land and one young woman in Geshgolla who claimed to be able to plow. Aboma (2006) and Mebrat Gebreslassie (2011b), in their

respective studies of farming in Oromiya and Tigray regions of Ethiopia, also find a few women who broke with tradition and plowed with oxen. But there appears to be one underlying commonality to such instances where women encroach on the domains of men: it only occurs where there is an absence of men in the household. Nowhere in the literature or our own observations did we find married women who plowed alongside their husbands.<sup>7</sup> As a result, although such women are a cause for conversation as bodies out of place, they are tolerated, looked upon sympathetically, or in some instances admired. Although their actions do deviate from the dominant form of femininity in farming, their femininity is not questioned.

Instances where men invade the space of women and perform activities that are considered feminine are rare and this issue does not seem to have been considered a legitimate topic of study thus far. There were instances where the distinction between the activities of men and women were questioned by our participants. Young farmers as well as students often questioned the ‘naturalness’ of the gendered division of tasks and attributed its continued existence to ‘bad culture’ rather than nature. In interviews held with young farmers in Guai, participants brought up two examples of how this traditional division of labor was being challenged by some women. The actions of one local woman, who plowed her own land and sowed it and did everything else a farmer should do, were given as an example of how things ought to be.

*There is this woman in Yetenter [a nearby village]. She plows with her own oxen, even does the sowing herself. People stand still and see her like she is a thing out of this world, but they don't laugh at her or consider her to be a disgrace. And she is doing well as a farmer. She was even given a prize by the government. She was made a model farmer. And some [male] farmers even go back to their wives and mock them saying 'have you seen her, she even does the plowing, maybe you should as well.'* (Yitayih, Male, young farmer)

Another example involved a woman who has become known to many as ‘the investor’.

*We have a woman investor for example; she is a woman who goes by the name Alganesh. She has leased a large amount of land in the desert and started a commercial farm. She has hired so many people who work there. May be we can't say she is a farmer since she is an investor. But the point is, women can also be farmers, and investors. (Chekol, Male, young farmer)*

Interestingly, instances where men challenge the strict division are less apparent. A few of the young farmers expressed their own frustration with the traditional notions of manhood and womanhood.

*I don't know about others but I help my wife. She gave birth a few months back and is nursing right now so if she is baking injera I will peel and chop the onions. And if she is busy I will even make the stew but it doesn't taste as good as the one she makes so I still prefer it if she cooks. But if she is doing something else I will do it. It is all about understanding one another and caring for each other. If he cares about her, why wouldn't the husband help his wife? (Essubalew, Male, young farmer)*

The above narrative was, however, far from the norm, as the young women who have completed school were keen to point out. One of the participants summed it up as follows:

*But there are plenty of men who will say to their wives 'why in the world did I marry you then?' [minwileshlitbey – how then will you earn your keep?] if they asked them to help with the housework. (Bayush, Female, high school graduate)*

What is more, as Ridgeway and Correll (2004:520) argue, it is not unusual for people to personally hold alternative gender beliefs even where a more prevalent hegemonic gender belief is present. 'In contexts where people know or have good reason to presume that the others present share their alternative gender beliefs,' they argue, 'we theorize that it is these alternative gender beliefs that are cognitively primed by sex categorization'. As such, the presence of alternative beliefs does not necessarily imply the weakening power of the hegemonic one.

The key informant from the woreda children, youth and women's affairs office outlined a number of steps that have been taken by the office to change such traditional views and ensure that women take part and benefit from farming on equal basis with men. For example, male farmers

(as household heads) have been organized into kebele-level ‘development teams’ whereby model farmers take three to five other farmers and help them to be as good a farmer as they have become; however, there have been no equivalent teams for women. Nor did women take part in the activities of the male only development teams. In an attempt to rectify this, the office has started establishing women’s development teams. As much as this may seem, on the surface, an attempt to challenge gendered divisions, in reality it may end up further reinforcing them. While the men meet and develop plans about what they will sow on a particular plot and what inputs they will need and expenses they will make and returns they expect, the women are only expected to plan about which children they will send to school and which ones to the local clinic and what they will grow in the backyard or whether or not they will keep a few hens. Such interventions which draw boundaries between women’s spheres are strong indications of the continuing existence of hegemonic gender beliefs and will likely end up further reinforcing these rather than challenging or changing them.

Other interventions have attempted to get women involved in natural resource conservation activities such as the erection of barriers and the planting of trees on areas considered prone to soil erosion. These activities often planned and executed by local kebele administrations, were also exclusively done by men in the past. Yet, it is not clear how adding more burdens to women’s already crowded schedule will help in bringing about gender equality. The potential negative effect of such interventions aimed at promoting gender equality, which add to the work loads of women without any substantial attempts at a redefinition of the existing relations between the sexes, is one that has been recognized for quite a while (for example see Cornwall 2003; Molyneux 1985; Moser 1989; Ridgeway & Correll 2004). The fact that there are no parallel initiatives being undertaken to get men involved in activities that have traditionally been seen as women’s domain is also quite telling in itself.

Limited as they may be, the above efforts by the government as well as the views expressed by participants in the interviews reflect an increasing desire to challenge and change traditionally held views regarding the role of men and women in farming. But in the end, when asked if a young woman by herself can make a living as a farmer (in the same way an unmarried young man could make a living from farming even when he does not own

land and property), the response of participants was always ‘no’; she either needs to be married or hire an *abelegna* – a male helping hand. Although one or two women may have stepped outside the accepted norm, a woman is still considered incapable of doing the two activities at the centre of farming: plowing and sowing. As a result, the supportive role of women in agriculture remains powerful and the recognition of women as farmers in their own right remains an ideal.

### **The Gendered Path to Farming and Implications for Rural Youth**

The gendered nature of agricultural and rural life is also visible in the different ways rural boys and girls grow up, in the differences in the time use of boys and girls, and in the different spaces which are open to them. Although all children participate in agricultural activities actively from an early age, their involvement occurs across distinct gender boundaries. Boys look after cattle grazing in the fields and take part in weeding, harvesting and even plowing. Girls also participate in weeding and harvesting but are not allowed to plow and they rarely are given the task of looking after cattle. Instead, they help their mothers and sisters in cooking food, looking after backyard gardens, feeding and maintaining poultry, milking and milk processing, washing clothes and cleaning the house and animal barns. As a result, boys grow up with much closer association to farming and identify themselves as farmers from an early age. This is clearly visible in the descriptions of rural life and what it means to be a rural boy given by young boys who participated in our studies.

*[As farmers] we get to grow all kinds of things and live of the land. We look after the cattle and help our parents while at the same time attending school. And we can either read our books or play with our friends in the fields while we look after the cattle. (Meseret, Male, 14)*

The availability of wide open spaces (fields) for both play and work (farming) as well as the belief that as farmers (or more specifically, as sons of farmers who took part in farming) they lived from their labor and the land without any dependence on anyone else was emphasized as constituting the better side of living in a rural area by most boys. Girls, on the other hand, appeared to have less time and space for play. Their play times were often limited to weekends (mainly Sunday) and religious

holidays. Even during days they considered to be relatively free of work, the girls said that they have to do a variety of household chores such as washing their clothes and those of their families.

*I come from school and I don't get any time to study. It is do this and do that. We all have to do household chores late in to the night. Perhaps we might get an hour or so late in the night to look at our exercise books but even then our parents may think we are wasting the lamp. And it is back to school the next day without having revised what we have learned the day before. I wish I had more time to study, I wish my parents understood that I needed time for my education. I wish they could allow me to plan my time and put aside some of it for work and some of it for study. But they don't understand this. It is hard.*  
(Young girl, Primary School student, Chertekel)

While boys mentioned playing football and other field games as their favorite and most frequent forms of play, girls said they often play in or around the house with other girls of a similar age during their free time. Such differences in time use and the relative distance girls maintained from farming in comparison with boys may explain why girls were less forthcoming than boys when it comes to identifying what was good about rural life and why they were particularly apprehensive about a future life of farming (see Tadele and Gella 2012).

It has been documented that women's route of entry to farming has significant implications for their later relationship to farming and their relative positioning within the farming family (Shortall 2001:165). In our studies, we find the pathways leading to a life of farming to be significantly different for young men and women. Young girls who have never gone to school tend to be married at an early age, usually to older males who are established farmers and therefore end up becoming farmers themselves. Young girls who complete high school and fail to go beyond also face the same option of entry into farming through marriage once they go back to their families. Young men, whether they have come back after finishing high school or been there their entire childhood, on the other hand get the option to work on their own, either on their parents' plot or for other people as hired helping hands, and accumulate a few assets. Once they accumulate a few assets, they can then decide between getting married and settling for a

life of farming, or venturing into other ways of earning a livelihood such as trade. For young women, such choices are rarely available since there are few to no ways they can accumulate assets by working independently as unmarried young women in the village. The choice is often between getting into a life of farming through marriage, and migrating to the nearest town and trying their luck there.<sup>8</sup> When they do enter into farming, the route they took, that of becoming a farmer by marriage rather than becoming a farmer by their own choice and right, further reinforces their subordinate position.

### **Implications for Current Policy**

In light of our findings, legal and policy reforms have not adequately addressed the issue of gender in farming. The land certification program, which has been hailed as a tremendous achievement, represents a significant step forward in addressing issues of equal ownership. However, it has not challenged the male centric gender order in any way. The importance of the ox plow and its placement as a tool for exclusive use by men and masculine bodies has effectively ruled out the recognition of women as farmers in their own right, thereby ensuring their dependence on men to earn a living from farming. Further interventions directed at challenging this particular construction of the farmer are necessary to fulfil the full benefits of the land certification program.

The agricultural extension program has also thus far mainly focused on men. Two to four agricultural extension workers, referred to as Development Agents (DAs), with expertise in crop cultivation, livestock and dairy and natural resources management are based in each kebele to provide guidance and training to local farmers. In the vast majority of cases, these DAs are men and provide their training and guidance to ‘model farmers’ who also happen to be men. Although the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has developed an alternative package for women in recent years with emphasis on expanding support for women’s agricultural activities, it only deals with activities that traditionally fall under women’s domain such as poultry and backyard vegetable gardens (key informant interviews, Mogues et al. 2009).

Thus, the agricultural extension program and the various initiatives that are underway to empower women seem to be ineffective. The fact that the

extension program is mostly run by men and targets male farmers as household heads is a manifestation of the current gender order in farming. But it also further reinforces the belief that men are the real farmers. The introduction of parallel extension programs targeting women and women's activities pushes women to the margins instead of bringing them to the center stage. Furthermore, activities intended to empower women by promoting their greater involvement in activities such as soil conservation that have little to do with challenging the masculinity of farming carry the risk of placing further burdens on women so long as there are no parallel initiatives intended at promoting men's greater participation in areas that are traditionally seen as the domain of women. There is a need for critical evaluation of the extension program and its various gender empowerment components. Interventions which attempt to bring gender equality into farming which are themselves tailored along gender boundaries could even have the opposite effect and end up reinforcing existing stereotypes and gendered forms of discrimination. The fact that little thought has been given to promoting the involvement of men in what are traditionally seen as women's activities shows not only the lack of a proper understanding of gender and the nature of gender relations but also the lacklustre nature of these interventions.

### **Conclusion**

Due to its likely origin and long history of use in the region, the plow occupies a pivotal and privileged place in the history of farming in Ethiopia. Its practical and symbolic importance and its placement in the exclusive domain of men has resulted in the construction of a particularly male centric notion of what it means to be a farmer, where women are placed in the position of helpers and caretakers despite their involvement in and vital contributions to the vast majority of agricultural activities. Despite claims that have been made regarding the nature of male dominance in plow agriculture, it is highly unlikely that this male dominance is a result of physical advantages. Instead, notions of social embodiment and social

constructions of the masculine and feminine bodies have greater explanatory power.

The gendered division of tasks which pushes women away from the activities that have greater symbolic importance in farming has significant consequences for their pathways into farming and later life as farmers. As Connell (1987) puts it, 'To the extent that some activities and spheres have greater power and prestige than others, a division of labor can also be a division of value'. The fact of women's involvement in the vast majority of agricultural work and the fact that very little if any farming would be possible without their labor have had very little effect on their recognition as farmers for the mere reason that they do not perform the activities that are given high value such as plowing, sowing and harvesting. Women's exclusion from these activities ensures that they have no opportunities to learn them and lead full independent lives as farmers by themselves, even when they are willing to challenge gendered notions of who is and is not a farmer. As a result of these exclusions, young women lack the opportunities that are open to young men through which they can work independently and gradually build their asset bases. This ensures that they do not enter into farming on an equal footing with men and further reinforces their subordinate and supportive positioning in relation to farming.

The nature of male dominance in farming and its implications for the lives of rural men and women does not seem to have been fully understood by policy actors. Perhaps as a result, current interventions aimed at challenging and changing gendered forms of inequality in farming run the risk of doing the exact opposite since they are themselves tailored across and further reinforce the belief that women and men have different spheres and activities. This risk has of course been noted more than a decade ago by Ridgeway and Correll (2004:528) who had pointed out that "anything that preserves a belief in some difference in men's and women's instrumental competence, no matter how narrowed the gap, preserves the fundamental hierarchical character of gender beliefs". Interventions aimed at gender equality ought to be more transformative and need to take into account gender relations, their full implications to the lives of men and women as farmers, and how they should and can be challenged. There needs to be a realization among policy actors that the all too often sought after goal of

transforming the agricultural sector should also involve bringing about transformative changes in gender and gender relations.

As a final point, we want to stress the need for further research on this topic. The existing body of literature dealing with the issue of gender in small scale family farming in Africa is preoccupied with pointing out differences between men and women in productivity and access to resources, and stresses the need to promote a greater recognition of the role of women in farming. We recognize that these are, undoubtedly, valid points but they have already been well established both in the literature and policy discourse. It is important to stress that the recognition of women as farmers will require more than recognition of their contributions to farming. The fact that women are rarely, if at all, seen as farmers on equal terms with men has little to do with the extent of their contributions. Instead, it owes much to the manner in which gendered notions of farming and the farmer are created and maintained and the ways in which these constructs position women in relation to men no matter what their contribution. As such, the time has come to shift the focus of research from an accounting of gendered differences to a more comprehensive, more contextualized investigation of gender and gender relations in farming.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>'Gender inequality? Blame it on the plough', Live Mint and the Wall Street Journal (<http://www.livemint.com/Money/9du3j1RQL5vYLjTEtPIjLL/Gender-inequality-Blame-it-on-the-plough.html>); 'The plough and the now: Deep-seated attitudes to women have roots in ancient agriculture', The Economist (<http://www.economist.com/node/18986073>); 'The root of inequality? It's down to whether you ploughed or hoed...', The Guardian (<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2011/jul/31/equality-hoes-ploughs-women-agriculture>)

<sup>2</sup><http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2011/09/20110920121811su0.2064434.html>

<sup>3</sup>A kebele is the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia, comprising a set of neighbouring hamlets in rural areas. The woredais is the next unit and is made up of a set of adjacent kebeles.

<sup>4</sup>The authors stress that while their findings do support Boserup's hypothesis, they can also be interpreted differently. 'For example,' they state, 'we would observe the same relationships if societies with attitudes favouring gender inequality were more likely to adopt the plough historically, and these attitudes persist today.' It is, however, unfortunate that they follow this quite legitimate concession with an assertion that they have adequately controlled for an exhaustive set of observable characteristics to ensure that traditional plough use is the most important causal factor on subsequent cultural norms.

<sup>5</sup>Although it has long been accepted that Semitic tribes from southern Arabia brought the ard plough with them and introduced it to the Cushitic inhabitants of the Ethiopian highlands, strong arguments have been made to refute this. Both Ehret, C. (1979). On the antiquity of agriculture in Ethiopia. *The Journal of African History*, 20(02), 161-177. and McCann, J. C. (1995). *People of the plow: an agricultural history of Ethiopia, 1800-1990*. Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press. argue that plow agriculture preceded South Arabian influence.

<sup>6</sup>The relevance and applicability of notions of embodiment and the body to the study of African gender relations has been questioned by some. Oyèwùmí, O. (1997). *The invention of women: making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. for example argues that the emphasis on the body in understanding personhood and the self are primarily a reflection of western thought, questions its relevance for the study of African societies, and criticizes western feminism for its preoccupation with the body as a defining principle of difference. We feel that while Oyewumi's critique is valid, it should not rule out the need to explore the applicability of

the concept in *all* African societies. We believe Bakare-Yusuf, B. (2003). Yorubas don't do Gender: Critical Review of Oyeronke Oyewumi's 'The Invention of Women': Making Sense of Western Gender Discourses'. [Book Review]. *African Identities*, 1(1), 119-140. is right in asserting that 'we must reject outright any attempt to assign a particular conceptual category as belonging only to the "West" and therefore inapplicable to the African situation'.

<sup>7</sup>A notable exception here is the Awramba community, which has been described as a place where pregnancy, giving birth and breast feeding remain the only tasks that are unshared between men and women. See article in the Ethiopian Herald (<http://www.ethpress.gov.et/herald/index.php/herald/art-culture/4354-the-awramba-community>) and a review of the available literature ([http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/91/65/51/PDF/Awra\\_Amba\\_RJ\\_300612\\_EN\\_bd.pdf](http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/91/65/51/PDF/Awra_Amba_RJ_300612_EN_bd.pdf)) on this utopian community.

<sup>8</sup>Some young (and a lot of older) women do engage in the preparation and selling of traditional alcoholic drinks, mainly *areqe* (a local alcoholic drink). But this too requires startup capital. The unique advantage of being an *abelgna* is that it requires no startup costs. As long as young men and boys are willing to work for others, even their immediate needs for clothing, shelter and food are covered by the host family. In a way young women lack such choices of beginning from nothing to gradually build up their assets.