

# Gender Relations in Access to and Control over Resources in Awra Amba Community of Amhara Region, Ethiopia

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## Abstract

*This paper explores gender relations in access to and control over resources in Awra Amba Community of Amhara Region, Ethiopia. The study employed primary and secondary data sources. The primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with selected community members and key informants, focus group discussions with selected community and committee members and non-participant observation of gender roles and relations in the study community. Secondary data were obtained through a critical review of related literature and documents. Both primary and secondary data were organized thematically and analyzed through systematic interpretation and triangulation of various sources. The study found that locally available resources are collectively owned and administered by the 'Development Committee' and income is equally distributed to all household heads at the end of each fiscal year. Gender relations in the study community are guided by the principle of mutual understanding among all the members of the community. Women, like their men counterparts, make important decisions through their membership and leadership in different administrative committees. Women members of the community fulfill their basic needs as self-reliant workers, but not as being dependent upon their husbands. In general, the local economic and administrative structures, cultural values and principles promote equitable gender relations in division of labor and in access to educational opportunities, economic resources, leadership and decision-making at the household and community levels. This finding reveals that the existing gender relations in Awra Amba community are contrary to gender relations in other communities of Amhara Region, where the patriarchal gender ideology is most prevalent.*

**Key Words:** *Gender, gender relations, access to and control over resource, Awra Amba Community*

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## Introduction

In Ethiopia, equitable gender relations in access to and control over resources are critical to women since women are responsible to ensure household food security by their community assigned gender roles. However, related empirical studies show that equitable gender relation in Ethiopia has not been achieved since women do not enjoy equal rights with men in accessing and having control over resources due to socio-cultural norms.

Of course, there are some scholarly studies conducted on gender roles and women's access to and control over productive resources in some parts of Ethiopia. For instance, Wessen (2008) examined the issue of gender based division of labor among the Majangir community of South Western Ethiopia which, according to his study, remained intact in spite of the socio-economic transformation that the community undertook. With a view to test Boserup's generalization of women's dominant role in the hoe-based agricultural system, Wessen's study mainly focused on the system of inheritance, the community's attitude towards women's contribution and its effect upon them. Berhane (2010) also tried to examine matrilineality and the position of women among the Kunama people of North Western Ethiopia. However, his study examined chiefly the role of matrilineality in women's social roles, access to resources, decision-making and authority from the view point of Engels' materialistic explanation. Furthermore, Almaz (2007) argued that inequalities of opportunities in access to and control over resources have made women more vulnerable to poverty than men in her study communities of Oromia Region. She further argued that farming systems, customary laws on marital and inheritance rights, gender roles in households and on farms, household assets ownership and control, control over household income and expenditures, access to social resources, etc, should be seriously considered to enhance the formulation of land policies, and the implementation of regulations that could effectively address gender inequalities in her study communities.

In Amhara Region, where the present study community is found, some studies<sup>3</sup> have been conducted on the roles of rural women in agricultural production, their access to and control over agricultural resources, the long-term effects of women's exclusion from the general social system, and women's 'low' status within the society and the socio-cultural features of rural female-headed households. For instance, Yared (1999) dealt with resources and livelihood strategies among households in north Shewa of Amhara Region, where he found

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<sup>3</sup> e.g. Yared 1999, 1997; Dejene 1994; Tiruwork 1998; Yigremew 2001; Dessalegn 1991; Ali 2000; Zenebework 2000; Mossa 2006; etc.

that men and women maintain “joint control of resources in households that normatively function as unitary economic and social entities.” (Yared 1999: 45) also found that men and women have equal decision-making power on certain issues though “the decision over what, when, and how much to plan is the prerogative of the male”. However, only a relatively few studies (e.g. Solomon 2005 and Merhatsadik 2009) have addressed gender issues in Awra Amba community. Solomon’s (2005) study focused on social transformation, sources of change in gender roles and value system, the stigma of neighboring communities to such changes, and ways through which the community survived the social and economic pressures. Merhatsadik (2009), on the other hand, mainly examined the sources of family disputes and the Awra Amba’s ways of handling and mediating such disputes.

In general, despite a growing body of scholarship emphasizing the importance of understanding women’s access to and control over resources, relatively little work has been undertaken to explore the different cultural dimensions operating behind the dynamics of gender relations in access to and control over resources in Ethiopia. Moreover, the few scholarly studies conducted in the study community did not pay attention to gender relations in access to and control over resources. In other words, the reviewed related studies reveal the lack of scholarly studies on gender relations in access to and control over resources in Awra Amba community, which has gender relations distinct from other communities of Amhara Region in particular and that of Ethiopia in general. Despite its distinct gender relations in access to and control over resources, as to the knowledge of the researchers, there is no scholarly empirical study on the issue at hand. Therefore, this study attempts to address this gap.

With the general objective of exploring and analyzing the existing gender relations in access to and control over resources in Awra Amba community, this study attempts to investigate the following specific objectives: (1) the economic and administrative structures as well as cultural values and principles; (2) the existing gender relations; and (3) the contributions of the economic and administrative structures as well as cultural values and principles in promoting equitable gender relations in access to and control over locally available resources in the study community.

## **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework and Review of Related Empirical Studies**

### **Theoretical Approaches to Gender Studies**

This study critically reviews *sex differences*, *sex role*, and *gender as a system of social stratification*. The first approach argues that there is a natural and biological difference between male and female gender development and it directs its effort to measure the importance of those differences, which according to it, are natural and biological (Kurtz 1999:43). This approach ignores the influence of socialization. The second approach argues that there are “masculine and feminine roles that males and females take on early in childhood through a process of socialization” (Ibid). However, both the first and the second approaches are highly criticized for depicting gender to look as “if it happens naturally or, equally problematic, as a matter of individual choice”. Moreover, “[t]he pressure and constraints operating in society and throughout our lives are virtually ignored” by these perspectives (Ibid). Taking into account the limitations of the first and the second approaches, the third approach (*gender as a system of stratification*) argues that “gender is constantly produced and reproduced as a means of maintaining a system of inequality. Socialization thus, becomes a means for maintaining gender differences rather than an analytic end” (Ferree and Hall 1996: 6). This approach connects “the micro-level to the meso-level of groups and the macro-level of social structures of the political economy to help understand the creation and maintenance of gender.

### **Conceptualization of Gender and Gender Relation**

Different scholars in gender studies conceptualized “gender” from *symbolic*, *socio-cultural* and *structural-relational* theoretical perspectives. From a *symbolic perspective*, “gender” is conceptualized in relation to biologically determined men’s and women’s roles or responsibilities, which are assumed to be static and universal (Nightingale 2006). This view is misleading because gender roles or responsibilities are neither universally uniform nor static (Agarwal 1992, Barry 2007). Theoreticians with a *socio-cultural perspective* conceptualize “gender” as a socio-cultural construction that shapes roles and behaviors of men and women, which enables them to act in accordance with such construction (Barry 2007). According to this perspective, “gender is dynamic and culturally determined social patterns created by men and women to define their relationships with each other and with their environment” (Lwanga 2002: 1). From a *structural-relational*

*perspective*, “gender” is conceptualized as “a social relation, which links men and women in complex ways, in which the structure and inequalities exist between men and women on the one hand and women’s subordinate position within a given society on the other hand” (Dixon and Jones 2006:42). The proponents of *structural-relational perspective* argue that “gender” should be understood in terms of its social, economic and political structural relationships between men and women. The social relationship is about the status that men and women are attached with and it is the socialization process, which creates structural relationship between the two (Verma 2001:19). The economic relation of gender is about the division of labor between men and women to secure their means of survival, resource management, and other roles or responsibilities related to the production and reproduction processes (Ibid:19-20). The political relation of gender is concerned with the “power relations between men and women over the economy, for instance, decision-making power and the right over resources, income, livelihood and other properties (Resurrection and Elmhirst 2008: 5). In this study, “gender” can be conceptualized and analyzed in the light of the socio-cultural perspective and the power relations between men and women within the existing socio-cultural, economic and political contexts of Awra Amba community.

In gender studies, “gender relation” can be conceptualized based on *gender stratification*, *gender asymmetry* or *gender equality*. *Gender relation as gender stratification* connotes the system of unequal access of men and women to a society’s resources, privileges and opportunities, and the differential control over these resources and privileges accorded by sex and this hierarchical system reflects the expectations of a particular society or sub-culture (Marcia-Lees and Black 2000, Guday 2005). *Gender relation as gender asymmetry* refers to the situation in which men’s and women’s roles are not the same and their positions in society are not equal. The degree and character of social asymmetry between the sexes are highly variable both between cultures and between different domains within a single culture (Whyte 1978, Collier and Rasaldo 1980, Leacock 1981, in Hirut 2000). *Gender relation as gender equality* implies that both men and women should have access to equal possibilities and opportunities since both genders are valued as equal human beings, but it does not mean that, at the end of the day, what applies to one will also apply to the other due to differences that are intrinsic to each (Guday 2005). In this study, “gender relation” can be conceptualized as equitable gender relations in access to and control over resources in Awra Amba community.

## **Gender Analysis Framework for Access to and Control over Resources**

Gender analysis is a broad and complex activity that involves careful examination of gender relations in different socio-economic and cultural settings. Among the various gender analysis frameworks, the *Harvard gender analysis framework* partially explains gender relations in access to and control over resources in Awra Amba community. This framework consists of three main components (March *et al* 1999, WIC 2005). The first is the activity profile which deals with the identification of the productive and reproductive activities of men and women. It examines not only the gender-based division of labor but also the percentage of time allocated for each activity, whether the activity is carried out seasonally or daily and specification of the place where the activity is performed. As reproductive activities, the roles of men and women to ensure the welfare of the family are also analyzed. The second component is the access and control profile. It indicates the gender-based access to resources, control over the use of resources and the benefits of the use of resources. The third component includes influencing factors which enable the assessment of factors that determine different opportunities and constraints for men and women, and shape gender relations. These include general economic conditions, institutional structures, demographic and socio-cultural factors, community norms, legal parameters, education and training and political events (Almaz 1991, March *et al* 1999). However, this framework is too generic and it does not tackle gender issues within the target population since it merely focuses on the welfare aspects of development and leaves out the strategic needs of men and women (WIC 2005). Taking into account its limitation, this framework partially explains gender relations in access to and control over resources in the study community. In order to have a clear understanding of the locally available resources and the nature of access to and control over these resources, the terms “resources”, “access to resources” and “control over resources” can be conceptualized as follows.

**Resources** are means and goods including those that are economic such as household income, productive (e.g., land, equipment, agricultural inputs including labor) and opportunity to leadership and decision-making, information, organization and time. Hence, resources go beyond financial or physical wealth to include other forms of power and at times political representation (Abdul-Jelil 2008:28). In this study, *resources* refer to education, labor, land and other productive resources, income, and leadership and decision-making power.

**Access to resources** refers to the ability to use resources and/or benefits and to make short-term decisions on these resources (Beatrice 2004, in Almaz 2007).

In this study, *access to resources* connotes access to equitable division of activities, educational opportunities, economic resources/income and opportunity to leadership and decision-making both at the household and community levels.

*Control over resources* implies the ability to use and even dispose a resource or benefit. In this study, *control over resources* refers to gender equitable use and management of economic resources/incomes as well as holding power to lead and make decisions both at household and community levels.

Finally, it should be noted that “gender relations” in access to and control over resources cannot be analyzed apart from “gender roles”, which refer to sexual division of labor or activities which are generally categorized into *productive, reproductive, and community activities*. In most cultures, reproductive activities are defined to be the roles of women, whereas productive and community activities are heavily dominated by men. However, in Awra Amba community only child bearing and nursing are the natural gender roles of women, while other activities are equitably divided among men and women members of the community based on their ability and efficiency.

### **Review of Related Empirical Studies**

This sub-section briefly reviews the general highlights of scholarly studies on gender roles and relations in Ethiopia as a whole and in some parts of Amhara Region in particular. In Ethiopia, the emphasis on gender studies is always related to women because of women’s ‘low’ status in the social, economic and political spheres of life. ‘Gender’ in Ethiopia, according to Narro (2004:3), is most often ‘women.’ There is no doubt that some of the focus on ‘women’ is justified because the problems of women in Ethiopia are enormous: there are far too few girls in schools and universities, and of those who begin, too few finish school; there are too few in the work force and in politics, and far too many are still undergoing female genital mutilation, rape, abduction, early marriage and abuse in many contexts (Haregewoin and Embet 2003, Narro 2004, SCD and MoE 2008).

Many scholars<sup>4</sup> have characterized the Ethiopian society as patriarchal according to which women’s activities are within the home and involve cooking, bearing and rearing children, and taking care of the household. Scholars further argued that socialized by patriarchal thinking, many women have developed a

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<sup>4</sup> (e.g. Genet 1991; Teshai 1991; Pankhurst 1992; Dicks and Eddle-Senay 1995; Hanna 1990; Hirut 2000, 2002, 2004; Benzing 2000; Original 1997, 2002; Zenebework 2000; Haregewoin & Emebet 2003; Guday 2002, 2005; Poluha 2007; Zelalem 2012; etc.)

withdrawn view about their capacities and potentials in participating in education. In this regard, Genet (1991:96) argued that, “sex stereotyped education; parental discouragement and early marriage are directly linked with social values and attitudes, which seriously affect the education of women in Ethiopia.” This has brought about and maintained disparities between men and women, in division of labor, share of benefits, in how households are organized, and how these disparities are interrelated. The impact of patriarchal thinking has made women reluctant to become involved in activities outside their homes, because they fear that they cannot achieve equally with men (MacLean 1967, in Dicks and Eddle-Senay 1995:90). Concerning the effect of the patriarchal system on girls’ and women’s access to education in Ethiopia, Hirut (2000:26) noted that, “An important factor explaining the low access of girls and women to the educational system is the traditional value system placing greater premium on men. Since resources are scarce, parents often decide to use the limited resources available to them in sending boys to school...” Guday (2002, 2005) also found that among the peasant communities of Amhara Region, parents prefer to invest on sons’ education than that of girls because the girl-child will get married and live in her husband’s village.

Of course, the lack of access to productive resources, education, employment opportunities, basic health services, and protection of basic human rights; low decision-making power; violence and harmful traditional practices are some of the indicators of the socio-economic marginalization of women in the country and such gender gap between men and women in socio-economic indicators has a negative impact on the overall development of the country in general and on demographic and health outcomes of individuals in particular (ESPS 2009). MEDaC (1999) and CSA (1999) further pointed out socio-cultural and economic discriminations of women in Ethiopia, exacerbated by the overall poor economic situation in the country, as a ruthless shatter in women’s opportunity for personal growth, education and employment in the short-term, and for national economic growth and development in the medium and in the long-term. Hence, the reports depicted a vicious cycle in which historical, cultural and religious factors together with the poor economic conditions in the country constructed a deep-rooted gender inequality which, in turn, deepens and produces further poverty, impoverishment, economic insecurity, vulnerability and poor social service provisions, etc. that affect the entire population nationwide, but place a disproportionate burden on women.

With regard to the nature of gender roles in Amhara societies, McCann (1995:74) argued that the gendered division of labor is “rigid” mainly due to the agricultural revolution that took place in the areas. According to McCann (1995), at the time of the agricultural revolution, men “dominated the process of plowing

and sowing”, while women were engaged mainly in the process of harvesting that made the women a disadvantaged group. McCann further argued that, after the agricultural revolution, women’s marginality has been facilitated by two interrelated factors: (1) “The fluidity of household”, i.e., divorce and death of spouses, the processes that mostly affect women; and (2) Men’s control of the resources and the means of production, which benefits men. McCann’s argument is similar with the Marxist approach to the historical evolution of gender stratification in which women were “excluded from control of property” (Lewellen 2003). However, McCann (1995), who primarily focused on the evolution of technological advancement (i.e., agricultural revolution) and the process of men’s control of economic means of production, overlooks historical, socio-cultural, political, and demographic factors influencing the roles and responsibilities of men and women. With regard to the historical context of gender roles and relations among some selected peasant societies of Tigray, Gojjam and Bale in Ethiopia, Gebru (1996) noted that among the peasants both men and women contribute to secure households’ and societies’ livelihoods, though women’s contribution is never considered as important. This indicates that peasant women are subordinate to men. Gebru (1996:59-60) attributed the origin of women’s subordinate positions and their reproductive roles to the cultural construction of men and the “Judo-Christian religion discourse” though he did not explain how these factors contributed to women’s subordinate position among peasant communities in Ethiopia as a whole.

Among the peasant communities of Amhara Region, men are fully involved in agricultural activities such as farming, sowing and harvesting with the help of some hired workers/relatives or their own sons; whereas women are fully involved in domestic and reproductive activities such as preparing food for the family and bearing and rearing children (Guday 2005:111). Women also assist their husbands in weeding, harrowing, and preparing the threshing ground with dung during peak agricultural seasons. However, men cannot help their wives in domestic activities. Hence, women have more work than men do since women perform triple roles though women’s reproductive roles and labor within the household obscure the fact that women also have essential productive (income-generating work) and community enhancing roles. Furthermore, most of the domestic works such as cooking food for the household members need a lot of precious processing of agricultural products, and are performed everyday and cannot be avoided. These types of work force women and girls to be near the homestead for a longer time than men and boys. Guday (2005) also found that women have little effective decision-making power in the family and they are marginalized in all spheres of decisions involving personal, family and community affairs.

In general, various studies on gender issues in Ethiopia indicate that women and men do perform or take responsibilities, which tend to vary enormously from society to society, within a society, from culture to culture, and sometimes from community to community (Fetenu 1997, CCIC 1991, Hirut 2002). Almaz (1991:3) further noted that women's subordination existing in societies of every degree of complexity is neither static nor something that can be changed by rearranging certain tasks and roles in the social system. Instead, the potential for change lies in changing the social institutions and the cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions that determine such a subordinate status through consciousness raising and cultural transformation (Ibid). However, most of the reviewed empirical studies highlighted the patriarchal gender relations in Ethiopia as a whole and in some parts of Amhara Region in particular. This generalization is contrary to gender relations in Awra Amba community of Amhara Region, where the cultural values and principles promote equitable gender relations in all spheres of life in general and in access to and control over resources in particular.

## **The Study Area and Research Methods**

### **Description of the Study Area**

This study was conducted in Awra Amba community of Amhara Region of Ethiopia. The region is composed of eleven *zones*<sup>5</sup>, 113 *Woredas*<sup>6</sup> and 3,216 *Kebeles*<sup>7</sup> (ANRS BoFED 2010). Fogera *Woreda*, where the study community is found, embraces 29 *Kebeles* with an area of about 117,414 hectares of land (Eguavoen *et al* 2011). Woreta, the capital town of the *Woreda*, is located some 58 kilometers North of Bahir Dar, the capital of Amhara Region.

Awra Amba community is a cooperative agricultural village in Fogera *Woreda* of Amhara Region, where the overwhelming majority (87.4%) of the population resides in rural areas and is engaged mainly in agriculture (ANRS BoFED 2010: 4). In Awra Amba community, however, the contribution of agricultural activities to the community's economic sector is very low due to the small size of farmland, which is about 17.5 hectares of rangeland provided for settlement (IIRR RNE and IGS 2009:1). According to the Awra Amba community

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<sup>5</sup> *Zone* refers to an administrative division found immediately below the region. It is usually responsible for coordination of the activities of the *Woreda* and the regional executive.

<sup>6</sup> *Woreda* is an Amharic term which means a formal governmental administrative structure similar to district and is found below the *Zone*.

<sup>7</sup> *Kebele* is also an Amharic term referring to local governmental administrative unit at grass-root level and is found below the *Woreda*.

information center (2011), the total number of households in the community is 123, with 431 household members in 2010/11. Out of the total of 123 households, 47 are headed by women and 76 are headed by men. Among the total of 431 household members, 222 (51.5%) are females and 209 (48.5%) are males. Demographically, out of the total household members, 245 (56.84%) constitute an active labor force (between 15-64 years old), 22 (5.1%) of them are elders (>65 years old), and the remaining 164(38.05%) are children (<15 years old). This implies that the active and productive labor force composition in the study community exceeds the non-productive labor forces by 13.69 percent. In other words, the labor dependency ratio in Awra Amba community is 76 percent. This is to mean that for every 10 working adults, there are 7.6 people that need to be supported (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1: The Awra Amba Community Population Size by Sex, Age and Dependency Ratio**

Sex	Population Size by Sex and Age Group			Dependency Ratio
	<15 years old	15-64 years old	>64 years old	
Male	82	117	10	0.78
Female	82	128	12	0.73
<b>Total</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>0.76</b>

**Source:** The Awra Amba Community Information Center, Nov. 2011

The labor dependency ratio in Awra Amba community is lower than the Amhara Region's average (87%) (ANRS BoFED 2010). The average household family size (3.5) in this community is also lower than the Amhara Region's average (5.1) in the same year (Ibid). This implies that there is a relatively better awareness and practice of family planning in the study community compared to other communities of Amhara Region as a whole (see Astawesegn *et al* 2009).

Here, it should be noted that Awra Amba community is a place where Zumra Nuru, the founder of the community, started to make serious observation on the systematic arrangement of his family and community since his early childhood (Astawesegn *et al* 2009). In the 1980s, Zumra launched the society he dreamed of with 19 other people who adopted his vision. In 2009, Awra Amba community had some 400 members and was considered as a model to alleviate poverty and promote gender equality, with a model center for reproductive health, area of best practices of leadership in a country where women generally hold a subservient status to men (Ibid). In 2010/11, the community had 431 members and its members work together, women have equal rights as men and there is no gender-

based division of labor. Hence, this community was selected as a research site because of its distinct features in ways of life in general and gender relations in access to and control over resources in particular.

## Research Methods

To explore gender relations in access to and control over resources in Awra Amba Community of Amhara Region of Ethiopia, the study employed both secondary and primary data sources. The secondary data were gathered through critical review of related literature and document analysis. The study is predominantly based on primary data gathered through three weeks fieldwork (18<sup>th</sup> Nov.-8<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2011) conducted in Awra Amba community. The primary data sources include 54 individuals purposively<sup>8</sup> selected from among about 431 residents of the study community and five key informants selected from among relevant officers of Fogera *Woreda*, where Awra Amba community is found.

The primary data were gathered through a combination of qualitative research methods involving in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and non-participant systematic observation. Semi-structured interviews were used to extract detailed information related to gender relations, decision-making process in domestic and public spheres, access to and control over locally available resources. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 informants who were selected through a stratified sampling technique of a proportional number from each sex and age category among the residents (431) of the community. Semi-structured interviews were also held with 13 key informants (five<sup>9</sup> *Woreda* officials and eight<sup>10</sup> committee members of the study community). The interviews with selected community members, committee members, and *Woreda* officials were conducted in Amharic (the local language) based on interview guides. The

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<sup>8</sup> The research participants in this study were selected based on age, sex and position in the community.

<sup>9</sup> The five informants from among the study *Woreda* authorities include the *Woreda* Economic Development Officer, the Women Affairs Officer, head of the *Woreda* Education Bureau, the *Woreda* Culture and Tourism Officer, and the *Woreda* Security Affairs Officer, who were purposively selected to generate in-depth data about gender relations in access to and control over resources in Awra Amba community.

<sup>10</sup> Eight committee members (two from each committee) who were purposively selected from the four committees (Development Committee, Compliant Hearing Committee, Security Committee, and Reception Committee) of the study community were interviewed to generate in-depth data on the issue at hand and to cross-check the data gathered from the *Woreda* officials.

interviews were recorded by intensive note taking. Some of the interviews were also tape recorded with the consent of the informants<sup>11</sup>.

The study also employed focus group discussions with selected community members to cross-check and validate the data gathered through in-depth interviews and to come up with common understanding on the values of the study community. To this effect, focus group discussions were held with three different groups consisting of seven to eight members, which were organized based on sex (one female group and one male group) and community membership (one group consisting of eight members of various committees). The discussions were conducted in the Amharic language through discussion guides and the discussions were recorded by intensive note taking.

Throughout the fieldwork (18<sup>th</sup> Nov.-8<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2011) in Awra Amba community, the primary data were also gathered through non-participant systematic observation of livelihood activities, the social environment, communal leadership activities and communal meetings as well as availability and quality of social services and facilities in general and gender roles and relations in particular. The systematic fieldwork observation was used to cross-check the information obtained through interviews and focus group discussions with that of the day-to-day activities of the members of the study community.

The data gathered through secondary and primary sources were organized and analyzed as follows involving four stages. First, the qualitative data gathered through interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and translated from Amharic into English. Second, the primary data collected through interviews, focus group discussions and observations were thematically organized based on the objectives of the study. Third, the primary data were analyzed qualitatively and the data extracted from secondary sources were qualitatively interpreted and analyzed. Finally, the perspectives and insights from the interpretation of secondary sources were integrated with the qualitative analysis of primary sources of information to increase the validity and reliability of the findings.

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<sup>11</sup> Here, it should be noted that most of the informants in the study community considered the interview as time consuming and they seemed bored due to the various interviews they have given for visitors, researchers, *Woreda* Bureau agents and other organizations. As a result, some of the interviews with community members were conducted under difficult and noisy conditions since the study participants were involved in cooperative works such as weaving and spinning during their working days.

## Findings and Discussion

### The Socio-Economic System of Awra Amba Community

Awra Amba community practices a cooperative economic system in which resources are collectively owned and work is collectively organized. According to informants,<sup>12</sup> this is particularly due to the community's fragmented landholding size, which is about a total of 17.5 hectares. A quarter of its total land mass (>4 hectares) is allocated for educational facilities and school buildings.<sup>13</sup> This leaves a total of only 13 hectares of land including the areas where the community members' houses, pensions, warehouses, guest houses, etc, are built on. Hence, if we divide the remaining 13 hectares of land to the total population (431) of the community, each one of them will receive an average of 0.03 hectare of land, which is highly insignificant for private farm activities. Accordingly, the study community introduced a cooperative economic system as a way out of the problems created by shortage of farmland.

The livelihoods of Awra Amba community depend on diversified income-generation schemes such as farming, weaving, dairy farm, retail shops, and cafeteria services (IIRR, RNE and IGS 2009). Weaving is the main income source of the community's cooperative cottage industry which produces shirts, dresses, skirts, table cloths, scarves, hats, towels, blankets and many other forms of garment (Mamo 2006, in Joumard 2010b) and the products are sold on site or in markets. The cooperative owns three grocery shops: one in the village and two others in the neighboring towns of Woreta and Aember (Joumard 2010a). Milling is also the source of income for the community.

According to the key informants<sup>14</sup>, the off-farm income-generating activities are the most important economic means for supporting the livelihood of all household members in the study community. The better market access the study community has been getting over the past few years and the introduction of modern weaving and spinning machines increased the income that members of the community generate from their cottage industry. Moreover, the increasing flow of tourists over the past decade enormously contributed to improving the members' living standards and per capita income in three ways.<sup>15</sup> First, the growth in the flow of tourists increased the income that members of the community earn from

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<sup>12</sup> Semi-Structured Interview with the Community Committee Members in Awra Amba (SICCA):SICCA 6; SICCA2 & SICCA1, Awra Amba, 18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>13</sup> SICCA6 & SICCA8, Awra Amba, 18<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Semi-Structured Interview with *Woreda* Officials in Woreta (SIWOW): SIWOW3,Woreta, 5<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2011

<sup>15</sup> SIWOW1,Woreta, 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec. 2011

entrance fees and hotel services.<sup>16</sup> The data obtained from Fogera *Woreda* Culture and Tourism Office indicates that the Awra Amba community generated over 330,000 *Birr*<sup>17</sup> from this sector in 2010/11 alone. Second, according to the same source, the flow of tourists in the study area also contributed to members' economic gain by increasing the sales of products produced by the community's cottage industry. Hence, apart from its direct contribution as a source of income, this sector has also indirect contributions by bringing consumers of products and services directly to Awra Amba community. Thirdly, apart from being a source of income, the increasing flow of tourists also plays a role in the social development of the community through the provisions of books and other educational materials, mostly contributed as gifts by tourists. Therefore, as to the informant from Fogera *Woreda* Culture and Tourism Office, it seems unlikely to treat the current economic achievements and the development of the study community in isolation from the service sector.

In the study community, resources/incomes are collectively owned and administered by the community's development committee. According to an informant from this committee,<sup>18</sup> the incomes generated by the members' collective efforts are distributed at the end of each fiscal year on the principle of "from each according to his/her ability, and to each according to the net profit available." Similarly, another informant from the community's information center<sup>19</sup> noted that, "at the end of each fiscal year, a balance sheet is prepared to determine the net profit of the community. Once the assets and liabilities are calculated and the net profit is determined, the profit is distributed to all household heads, who are members of the cooperative, on equal basis."<sup>20</sup>

In general, as the information gathered through fieldwork observation, interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis indicate, at the end of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ethiopian unit currency

<sup>18</sup> SICCA7, Awra Amba, 20<sup>th</sup> Nov 2011

<sup>19</sup> SICCA1, Awra Amba, 18<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>20</sup> According to our fieldwork observation, the balance sheet for each fiscal year is posted publicly in the community's information center. We also observed that members of this community use an astonishing audit system during the sale of products. Apart from sales persons, there are also auditors at the gate of each shop. While we bought a scarf produced by members of the study community, what we observed was quite amazing. Every product has a fixed price attached to it and, to our surprise, product buyers are not allowed to detach the price tag before they leave the shop. Such task is reserved for the auditors waiting at the gate of the shops. By collecting price tags, immediately from sold products, the audit system makes the process of auditing quicker and balance sheet preparation easier. In short, apart from serving as a means to ensure accuracy and transparency, the application of 'modern' accounting system in the study community makes the income distribution easier and simple.

each fiscal year, in the study community, income is distributed as follows: (1) The income distribution is calculated based on households<sup>21</sup> registered as members of the cooperative; (2) The net profit accumulated at the end of each fiscal year is distributed equally to all members<sup>22</sup> of the Awra Amba Agriculture and Handicraft Multi-Purpose Cooperative; and (3) Households with many family members, elderly persons and people with physical disability, and the like are not eligible for any additional money from the cooperative's income distribution. However, members of the community collectively work on every Tuesday and the revenue obtained from it is deposited in the study community's social security fund and the elderly people, people with physical disability, households with large family size, women during maternity, etc. are entitled to earn a special aid from such funds based on the rules and regulations of the community.<sup>23</sup> In short, the Awra Amba community's socio-economic system promotes equitable gender relations in access to and control over locally available economic resources/incomes.

### **Administrative Structure, Leadership and Membership in Awra Amba Community**

The administrative structure of Awra Amba community comprises thirteen different committees that have authorities related to broad areas of concern and they are entrusted with a host of activities in the community (see Figure 1 below). Having a clearly defined power and authority, the communal leadership in the area is undertaken by these committees. According to a female informant,<sup>24</sup> these committees are allowed to make decisions concerning members of the community as a whole and they are also responsible to lead community discussions and to act as spokespersons in dealing with neighboring communities and visitors. Hierarchically, the committees are composed of one main committee, i.e., the

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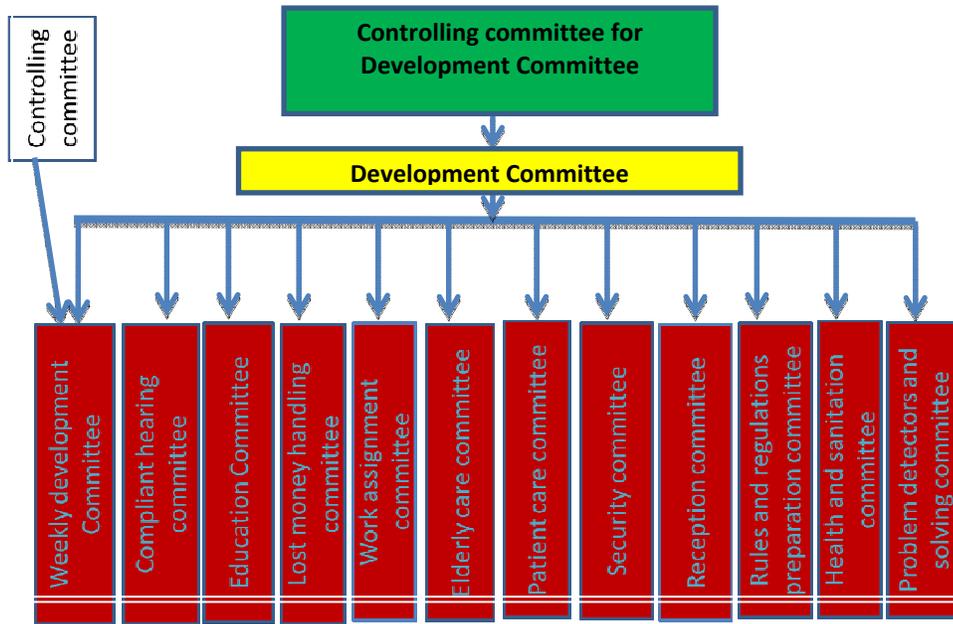
<sup>21</sup> Only husbands and wives, but not other members of the household are considered in the income distribution.

<sup>22</sup> Members of households consisting of married couples (husbands and wives) get both spouses' share; whereas an unmarried adult member of the cooperative gets his/her share alone.

<sup>23</sup> Here, it should be noted that, "the logic behind the full-fledged support, respect and treatment of the elderly people lies in the fact that these people have done their own share during their productive ages and, hence, they have to be acknowledged during their old ages" (SICCA2, Awra Amba, 19<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011) Moreover, women have the right to a paid maternity leave (for three months) and they are also entitled to get additional supports from the community's social security fund during maternity leave (ACRRPC 2009:8).

<sup>24</sup> Semi-structured interviews with community members in Awra Amba (SICA)- SICA3, Awra Amba, 20<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

development committee and twelve other sub-committees. All of the sub-committees are accountable to the development committee and they have a vertical relationship with it, and are responsible to report to it on a regular basis.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the twelve sub-committees have horizontal relationships with each other, and are autonomous in their own jurisdictions. There are also two intermediate committees with a mandate to control and supervise the activities of the main committee and the weekly development committee.<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 1: Organizational Structure of the Different Committees in Awra Amba Community**

**Source:** Awra Amba Community Rules and Regulations Preparation Committee (ACRRPC 2009:3)

<sup>25</sup> ACRRPC 2009:5

<sup>26</sup> GCMA, Awra Amba, 28<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011; ACRRPC 2009

The above figure shows Awra Amba community's administrative structure with a clear separation of power between and among the different committees though all committees are ultimately accountable to the general assembly. In this regard, a male informant<sup>27</sup> stated that, "the ultimate power resides in the hands of the general assembly, although the different committees are assigned with power and authorities to undertake different activities." As confirmed by the leader of the community<sup>28</sup> and focus group discussants,<sup>29</sup> the general assembly officially meets once in a year, but it can hold extraordinary meetings when the need arises. It has also the power to recall all the committees and to dissolve them if necessary.

With regard to the distribution of power, each committee comprises of different members who assume power and authority through election which takes place every three years.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the term of office for all committees is three years and in principle every member of the community has a chance to assume power and responsibility. But in practice, according to a male informant<sup>31</sup> and focus group discussants<sup>32</sup>, committee members are elected on the basis of merits such as education (at least being able to read and write), management and interpersonal communication skills, exposure to the region's capital (Bahir Dar) and other towns, previous experience as a committee member, and so on. Moreover, there is no a re-election limit and any candidate who secures the required amount of votes (simple majority or fifty plus one) can assume power and authority repeatedly.<sup>33</sup> However, there are not any special benefits and privileges extended for the various committee members, including the chairperson of the development committee, who is also considered as the leader of the community, shouldering the tremendous responsibilities and burdens of leadership without a salary or any additional benefits.<sup>34</sup> As a result, the various committee members get only their own share from the fruits of the community's collective efforts on equal basis with any other member of the community at the end of each fiscal year.<sup>35</sup>

As to membership in Awra Amba community, there are two types of membership: (1) Membership to the Awra Amba Community Agriculture and Handicraft Multi-Purpose Cooperative; and (2) Membership to the Awra Amba

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> SICCA2, Awra Amba, 19<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>29</sup> GCMA, Awra Amba, 28<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>30</sup> SICCA3 & SICCA5, Awra Amba, 19<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>31</sup> SICA2, Awra Amba, 21<sup>st</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>32</sup> GMA (Group Discussion with Male Participants in Awra Amba), Awra Amba, 23<sup>rd</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>33</sup> GCMA, GMA, and Group Discussion with Female Participants in Awra Amba (GFA), Awra Amba, 23<sup>rd</sup> -28<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> SICCA1, Awra Amba, 18<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

Community New Chapter Cultural Building and Development Multi-Purpose Association. The first type is purely an economic membership that determines the economic lives of members of the community through collective resource ownership, collective work and equal distributions of income at the end of each fiscal year. According to a female informant<sup>36</sup>, “the Awra Amba cooperative is composed of only household heads and it consists of a small number of population compared to members of the Awra Amba community.” ACRRPC (2009:14) also noted that, “only household heads registered as members of Awra Amba community that reside in its geographic boundary are eligible for this type of membership.” Hence, members of Awra Amba community who live in some other area as well as children and teenagers below the age of 18 are not eligible for this type of membership. Moreover, the cooperative has its own detailed rules and regulations approved by the Amhara National Regional State Justice Office in 2007. These rules and regulations are applicable only for its members but not for members of the second category, which is open to all human beings who live on the planet earth. In this regard, the community leader argued that “unlike membership to the Awra Amba Cooperative, the only precondition for being a member of the community is peacefulness.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, another informant from the community’s reception committee also stated that, “any non-violent human being of whatever sex, race, ethnicity, nationality, etc, can become a member of the Awra Amba community so long as he/she is ready to live according to the community’s values and principles”<sup>38</sup>, which are discussed below.

### **Cultural Values and Principles of Awra Amba Community**

The Awra Amba community has its own cultural values and principles, which are the results of the cultural transformation of the conventional “Amhara way of life.”<sup>39</sup> The founder of the community, Zumra Nuru, came up with a new philosophy, which is the base for most of its cultural values and principles. Members of the community believe in the supremacy of humankind and entertain

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<sup>36</sup> SICCA5, Awra Amba, 19<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>37</sup> SICCA2, Awra Amba, 19<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>38</sup> SICCA6, Awra Amba, 18<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>39</sup> According to Astawesegn *et al* (2009:1), because of different historical, political and other reasons, the Amhara region is characterized by keeping its local cultural norms and values as routines. Seid (2008:69) also noted that in most communities of the Amhara region, social relationships are rigidly defined and cultural traditions, in which the individual’s freedoms are subordinate to the interest of the family or the community and the various festivities rooted in such relationships and cultural traditions made the people in the region highly extravagant.

a ‘humanist philosophy’ like its African counterpart, i.e., *Ubuntu*. According to the leader of the community,<sup>40</sup> difference is the essence of being human, and being human is the greatest good, the unifying force that should transcend all differences to harmonize people in their day-to-day interactions. But, as to the leader of the community, people should always recall that they all are members of the same species and, thus, whatever differences in terms of ideas, views or opinions, they should be ready to discuss cogently, rather than furiously, in order to agree and convince one another.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, according to the rules and regulations of the community, regardless of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, etc, all human beings should be respected and treated alike since we all are brothers and sisters by the mere fact of being human.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the vision of the community is “to do away with all conflicts, hatred and other evil deeds, to bring an end to war among the human race, instill brotherhood and sisterhood, and ultimately create heaven on earth” (IIRR, RNE and IGS 2009:2).

Joumard (2010b:1)<sup>43</sup> also noted that, “the Ethiopian village of Awra Amba is a well-established community with a truly extraordinary lifestyle, especially in terms of equality between men and women, community spirit, absence of religion, honesty, hard-work, democracy and even ecology.” Members of Awra Amba community believe in work as a sacred act of human beings to fight all odds against humanity and for them there is no day called a “holiday”; they work all the time except for the Ethiopian new year (IIRR, RNE and IGS 2009:1&2). Furthermore, members of this community believe that it is the concerted efforts of human beings that make everything possible in this world and governments do have only supportive roles. In this regard, a female informant<sup>44</sup> said, “nobody should be blamed for our failure and we do not accept any proverbs used as justification such as ‘it is the will of God’ or ‘God allows it to happen’, for whenever opportunities we missed.” Furthermore, according to the flyer published by ANRS Justice Office (2007) and other documentary sources, members of Awra Amba community have faith in love and hard-work is their religion. As a result, members of the study community agreed that all days are similar and have equal importance if people would work on them.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> SICA2, Awra Amba, 21<sup>st</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Awra Amba Community Rules and Regulations Preparation Committee (ACRRPC 2009:8).

<sup>43</sup> Joumard (2010b)’s article on “Awra Amba, an Ethiopian utopia, according to the web” is based on ‘a synthesis of varied and even contradictory information available on the web and short field visits in Awra Amba community.

<sup>44</sup> SICA2, Awra Amba, 21<sup>st</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>45</sup> In this connection, the leader of the community further argued that the production process and productivity depends upon our efforts and other factors of production such as labor, land and

Most of the cultural values and principles of Awra Amba community are based on the founder's grand philosophy, which can be considered as the pillar in which all other shared cultural values and principles are built around. Some of the basic cultural values and principles of Awra Amba community include: (1) elimination of all forms of gender-based discrimination and the condemnation of early and forced marriages and female genital mutilation, and all other forms of harmful traditional practices; (2) protection of children's rights, the elderly people and people with physical disability; (3) disapprobation of begging, cheating, lying, unplanned wastage of time, crime and other offensive behaviors; and (4) protection of the rights of women for a paid maternity leave and their entitlement to get support from the community's social security fund during maternity leave.<sup>46</sup> Some of these values and principles related to gender relations in Awra Amba community are briefly highlighted below.

First, the rules and regulations of the community clearly stipulate that marriage in the study community will be contracted only when the girl is above 19 years old and the boy is above the age of 20, given that the two partners are willing to contract such a relationship.<sup>47</sup> As a result, marriage in this community is contracted based on the free will of the two partners without any cost of whatever sorts<sup>48</sup>. In short, girls and women in Awra Amba community have both the right to choose their marriage partners and to use family planning methods unlike most rural communities in the Amhara Region, where girls and women have no say about their marriage as well as in making decisions about controlling their reproductive lives (see Guday 2005 and Eshetu 2010).

Second, children in Awra Amba community are considered as huge potent forces that will determine the fate of the community's future. So, children are motivated to be independent thinkers and to come up with new ideas and concepts.<sup>49</sup> During the fieldwork, the education committee was motivating students in the community to develop a positive sense of competition by officially posting the names of students of distinction. The community members have also the highest value for education.<sup>50</sup> In this regard, the founder of the community<sup>51</sup>

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capital, but not on the will of God, who traditionally and unreasonably presumed as ordering people not to work on some specific days... God is always willing for everyone to work hard and reap his/her fruits as per the efforts he/she exerted (SICCA2, Awra Amba, 19<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011).

<sup>46</sup> ACRRPC 2009:8-13; Seid 2008; Solomon 2005; Merhatsadik 2009; ANRS Justice Office 2007

<sup>47</sup> Ibid: 8-10

<sup>48</sup> In this regard, members of the community believe that costs related to marriage and funeral ceremonies are manifestations of extravagance and sources of poverty.

<sup>49</sup> SICA 6 & SICA 13, Awra Amba, 22<sup>nd</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, the community allocated more than 4 hectares of land (from its small landholding size of about 17.5 hectares) for educational institutions and facilities.

<sup>51</sup> SICCA2, Awra Amba, 19<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

said, “I don’t want to see children doing activities as I used to in my childhood. Rather, I want to see them at school, where they can learn to be creative, innovative and capable of building a better world through their individual and group efforts.” A female informant<sup>52</sup> also noted that, “I always remind my children that Zumra has founded this community [Awra Amba] without having any formal education and, thus, you are expected to contribute something new and valuable to your community.” Similarly, a boy informant<sup>53</sup> affirmed that, “[i]n our community, we are sent to school not simply to learn how to read and write, but to contribute something new and valuable to our community. Thus, we always work harder to the fullest extent of our potentials to meet the expectations of our parents and our community.” As a result, children in Awra Amba community have relatively better targets and visions as they shoulder big responsibilities like inventing or creating something that could benefit their community in particular and their country in general.

Third, begging, cheating, lying, unplanned wastage of time, prostitution, crime, and offensive behaviors are highly denounced in the culture of Awra Amba community.<sup>54</sup> Particularly, with regard to cheating, crimes, disputes and offensive behaviors, the community uses informal preventive mechanisms and formal institutional dispute/conflict prevention and resolution techniques. According to informants<sup>55</sup>, focus group discussants<sup>56</sup>, and documentary sources<sup>57</sup>, the informal preventive mechanisms involve discussions between the disputing parties or individuals (negotiation) and the involvement of any neutral third party as a facilitator (mediator). The formal mechanisms, on the other hand, involve the institutions entrusted with such jurisdiction, namely the “Compliant Hearing Committee” and “Security Committee.” According to ACRRPC (2009), these two committees were initially established with a mandate to deal with disputes or disagreements which cannot be resolved through the preventive mechanisms. Nonetheless, according to members of the ‘Compliant Hearing Committee,’ so far none of the disputes or disagreements in Awra Amba community transcended the preventive mechanisms. Moreover, the absence of any security threats emanating from within this community redefined the mandate of the security committee to fix its eyes on security threats that emanate from outside the community. Concerning this, the chairperson of the ‘Security Committee’ explained that:

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<sup>52</sup> SICA8, Awra Amba, 22<sup>nd</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>53</sup> SICA7, Awra Amba, 22<sup>nd</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>54</sup> ACRRPC 2009:11-13

<sup>55</sup> SICA2, SICA3, SICA9, SICCA1, SICCA2, SICCA6, and SICCA7, Awra Amba, 18<sup>th</sup> -24<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>56</sup> GMA, GFA, and GCMA, Awra Amba, 23<sup>th</sup>- 28<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>57</sup> Merhatsadik 2009; Seid 2008

“although the security committee was established to deal with both internal and external security threats that could affect the community members’ well-being, our task has now shifted to maintaining the security of the community from any possible threats caused by external forces due to the absence of any potential or actual security threats from within.”<sup>58</sup>

Last, but not least, women have the right for a paid maternity leave (for three months)<sup>59</sup> and they are also entitled to get additional support from the community’s social security fund during their maternity leave. The cultural principles of the community also guarantee women the right to use family planning methods of whatever sorts, even when necessary, without the knowledge of their husbands.<sup>60</sup> As to the leader of the community<sup>61</sup>, this is so due to the direct and immediate effects of too many pregnancies upon women. This right, besides fostering women’s rights to have control over their reproductive lives, challenged the cultural resistances against family planning methods in Awra Amba community.

In general, almost all of the shared cultural values and principles of Awra Amba community emphasize individual autonomy, the socialization of members to voluntarily commit themselves to cooperate with others, highly denounce hierarchy and inequalities of whatsoever; and promote cooperation, self-expression, social and political participation, tolerance and nurturance. In short, the above discussed cultural values and principles of Awra Amba community promote equitable gender relations, which are discussed below.

### **Equitable Gender Relations in Awra Amba Community**

In Awra Amba community, men and women are considered as members of the same species who are naturally equal.<sup>62</sup> The information obtained from informants,<sup>63</sup> focus group discussants,<sup>64</sup> and secondary sources<sup>65</sup> revealed that men and women in Awra Amba are considered as naturally inseparable and both men

<sup>58</sup> SICCA3, Awra Amba, Nov. 2011

<sup>59</sup> ACRRPC 2009: 8

<sup>60</sup> SICA9, GFA, SICA18, Awra Amba, 24<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011.

<sup>61</sup> SICCA2, Awra Amba, 19<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>62</sup> This view is stated by the community’s leader as follows: “[B]oth men and women are equally human beings. Neither of them is more human than the other... the number of women and men in this world is also proportional. Furthermore, naturally, there can be no man without a woman and vice versa. So, men and women are inseparable and they are naturally equal by the mere fact that they both are human beings” (SICCA2, Awra Amba, 19<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011).

<sup>63</sup> SICCA8 & SICA18, Awra Amba, 20<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>64</sup> GMA, GFA, and GCMA Awra Amba, 23<sup>th</sup>- 28<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>65</sup> Seid 2008; Solomon 2005; Merhatsadik 2009

and women have the rights to be treated and respected equally. As a practical manifestation of the community's grand "humanist philosophy", the objective of equality between men and women is to eliminate discrimination on the basis of 'irrational' distinctions. This principle encourages women to participate in all spheres of activities by eliminating the patriarchal social organization both at the domestic and public spheres. As a means to ensure gender equity, the principle called off gender stereotypes, which are used for the discursive constructions and reconstructions of gender relations, gender roles and identities in other communities of Amhara Region in particular and in other parts of Ethiopia in general (see Yalew 2000, Zelalem 2012, Jeylan 2009). In general, equitable gender relations in Awra Amba community promote equal entitlement of rights, benefits, and opportunities between the two sexes in general and gender equity in division of labor, educational opportunities, in access to and control over economic resources and leadership and decision-making, which are highlighted and explained below.

### **Gender Equity in Division of Labor**

In Awra Amba, there are no rigid and mutually exclusive categories of male-female tasks since men and women share activities both at home and outside of the home environment based on abilities and preferences to satisfy their basic needs. Accordingly, the rules and regulations of the community stressed that, "both men and women should share works both in the domestic and public spheres on a strict basis of ability and efficiency guided by discussions and mutual understandings."<sup>66</sup> The rules and regulations of the community<sup>67</sup> further stated that apart from biological differences (biological reproduction, child-bearing and breast-feeding), every other tasks are common in which women have equal rights to participate.<sup>68</sup> However, according to a male informant<sup>69</sup>, women in Awra Amba community are not engaged in the activity of 'community policing,' which is also

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid

<sup>67</sup> ACRRPC 2009:8

<sup>68</sup> In this connection, a woman from Awra Amba said, "At home, we share authority with our husbands, and we are happy and proud of that", which entails that women's rights are respected and another woman of Awra Amba who is happy with this situation also said, "being a member of Awra Amba means I am respected within the family and treated as an equal. I am able to discuss my rights and if I am no longer happy in my marriage, I know that if I divorce, I will get 50% of our belonging (France 2009; in Joumard 2010b).

<sup>69</sup> SICA12, Awra Amba, 26<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

supported by other local informants and focus group discussants<sup>70</sup>. Furthermore, an informant from Fogera *Woreda* Administration and Security Affairs Office<sup>71</sup> explained that, “the absence of women in ‘community policing’ in Awra Amba community is not something related with gender-based division of labor, rather it is the formal authoritative body that nominates and assigns individuals in such task at the *Kebele* level.” In short, apart from ‘community policing’, both men and women in Awra Amba share activities both at home and outside of the home environment. Concerning women’s involvement and participation in the public domain, the leader of the community noted that,

...the involvement of women in farming and other out-door economic and administrative activities are only one manifestation of gender equality. But, true equality between men and women also requires equality of participation and responsibilities between the two sexes in the domestic activities... unless men and women have equal responsibilities and authorities in the management, expenditure, decisions, etc., activities at the household level, there will never be gender equality.<sup>72</sup>

In Awra Amba community, as much as women work in the field, on activities like clearing and sowing or on weaving and spinning machines, men are also engaged in activities that are traditionally labeled as ‘female-domains’ such as cooking *wot*,<sup>73</sup> fetching water, baking *Injera*,<sup>74</sup> etc., in most other areas of Amhara Region. Of course, work is assigned to all male and female members of Awra Amba according to their ability and efficiency. As to the extent of gender equality in division of labor in Awra Amba, Joumard (2010b:3) argued as follows:

Both female and male members of the community fetch water from spring though a limited count shows that, for the traditionally female tasks, out of 51 people carrying water from the spring (and therefore carrying about fifteen kilograms), 35 are still women and out of ten spinners in the cooperative, eight are women. For the traditionally male trades, out of eleven weavers, eight are men, and the five ploughmen we saw were all men. Gender equality in the various tasks seems therefore not fully reached, but we also have to consider that

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<sup>70</sup> GFA; GCMA & GMA, Awra Amba, 23<sup>rd</sup> -28<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>71</sup> SIWOW2, Awra Amba, 5<sup>th</sup> Dec.2011

<sup>72</sup> SICCA2, Awra Amba, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2011

<sup>73</sup> Hot and spicy stew.

<sup>74</sup> Traditional Ethiopian bread made from a batter and is cooked like a pancake, the daily basic food for the household.

the tasks are also attributed according to capacity: Spinning is an easy task, ploughing is physically very difficult. At least half of the objectives are reached, which is considerable.

The above statements reveal variations in the extent of equity in division of labor between male and female members of the community. Of course, the division of labor in Awra Amba community is based on ability and efficiency. This entails the absence of gender-based division of labor both in the domestic and public spheres, which is the central feature of the existing gender relations in this community, where women are not restricted in the domestic sphere alone, but they are also engaged in activities of whatever kind outside of the home environment. In this regard, an informant from Fogera *Woreda* Women’s Affairs Office<sup>75</sup> said, “there is no gender-based division of labor in Awra Amba. Work is assigned to individuals strictly on the basis of their ability and efficiency.” The information gathered from focus group discussions and secondary sources (see Merhatsadik 2009, Seid 2008 and Solomon 2005) also support the presence of gender equity in division of labor among Awra Amba community members.

### Gender Equity in Access to Education

The existing gender relations in Awra Amba community also promote equal access to educational opportunities for girls/women and boys/men. The following table shows the total number of male and female students as well as college/university graduates in the study community.

**Table 2: Number of Students by Educational Level and Sex in Awra Amba Community**

Educational Level	Sex		
	Male	Female	Total
Pre-School	8	8	16
Primary Education (grade 1-8)	65	55	120
Secondary Education (grade 9-12)	24	11	35
Tertiary Education (Diploma and Degree)	8	2	10
Graduates from Colleges and Universities	5	8	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>194</b>

**Source:** The Awra Amba Community Information Center, Nov. 2011

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<sup>75</sup> SIWOW2, Woreta, 5<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2011

In Awra Amba community, children starting from the age of three spend their time in educational institutions<sup>76</sup>. The information gathered through secondary sources<sup>77</sup> indicates that all adult members of the community can read and write, which is “a considerable achievement in a country where half of the population is illiterate” (UNICEF 2010; in Joumard 2010b:4). In general, according to the information collected through field observation, interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, education is considered as a “source of income” and one factor in Awra Amba community’s development endeavors. Being cognizant of this, the community has established an ‘Education Committee’ composed of five members responsible for various issues related to education. As a result, all members of the community acknowledge the considerable value and the importance of education for rational thinking, technological and economic advancements of their community. Furthermore, the leader of the community said that “to be educated means respecting and helping each other in order to establish brotherhood.” Hence, in addition to basic education, much time is devoted for learning about “the nature of human beings, women’s rights and respect for others” (Calvino 2009, in Joumard 2010b:4).

### **Gender Equity in Access to and Control over Economic Resources**

In Awra Amba, men and women have the right to engage in any economic activities to earn their own income. As such, women in this community are independent workers on their own right, whose contribution to the households’ expenditure and the community’s economic gains are as equally important as their men counterparts. A female informant<sup>78</sup> affirmed this by saying that, “I have an equal opportunity to participate in the community’s economic activities and I also get a share as equal as my husband from the community’s income distributions. So, I and my husband support and manage our family on equal basis, without being dependent upon one another.” A widowed informant also supported the economic independence of women in Awra Amba community by saying that, “I

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<sup>76</sup> During the fieldwork (18<sup>th</sup> Nov.-8<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2011), there were one pre-school (where children between the ages of three and seven learn alphabets, about human nature, moral and cultural values and principles of their community), one primary school (grade 1-8) built by the Fogera *Woreda* education bureau, one computer center, one secondary school (9-10) entirely built and financed by members of the community, and one small and one big libraries that provide educational services to students of the study community and other students from the surrounding areas.

<sup>77</sup> Halpern, 2007; Merhatsadik, 2009; and Seid, 2008

<sup>78</sup> SICA10, Awra Amba, 26<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

had no fear of losing my sources of income when my husband passed away, because I was not at all economically dependent upon him.”<sup>79</sup> While explaining the household expenditure pattern, a female informant<sup>80</sup> said, “I buy grains, butter, oil and other food items. If I ask my husband to buy these or some other items and products for our household consumption, there is no problem. The income we earn is ours, a common property for our common consumption.” Furthermore, a male informant<sup>81</sup> pointed out that, “our women have equal access to income. They also have equal share of household resources and are equally responsible for household expenditures.” In the same vein, while comparing the status of women in the study community with other women’s situations, the leader of the community<sup>82</sup> stated that, “women in the surrounding areas, if not oppressed by their husbands, are oppressed by their own limited knowledge and poverty. But, women in Awra Amba are free from such oppressions, partly for they have equal access to educational opportunities and partly for they are not economically dependent upon their husbands.”

It is important to remember, therefore, that the existing gender relations in Awra Amba enhanced women’s economic opportunities by putting an end to their inferior economic positions and, consequently, by liberating them from economic dependence on their husbands. According to Seid (2008:106), the average annual female-headed households’ income in this community was 2,439 *Birr* and the total estimated average income of households in the community was 3,748 *Birr* in 2006/07. This income includes the equal share that marriage partners earned from the community’s annual income distribution and the income generated from homestead economic activities, which was an average of 1004.83 *Birr* per annum (Ibid). It is also important to note that the living standards and per capita incomes in Awra Amba community are relatively higher than the regional standard, which was more than 1000 *Birr* against the regional standard of 840 *Birr* in 2005/06 (Ibid: 67). In short, Awra Amba community has narrowed the gender differences in access to and control over economic/financial resources.

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<sup>79</sup> SICA14, Awra Amba, 26<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>80</sup> SICA18, Awra Amba, 26<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>81</sup> SICA15, Awra Amba, 27<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

<sup>82</sup> SICCA2, Awra Amba, 19<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2011

## Gender Equity in Access to and Control over Leadership and Decision-Making

The Awra Amba community is organized under diverse administrative and governance structures (see Figure 2 above) and discussions that take place in the community are inclusive of women's views,- it is merit that is given weight, i.e., women are taking part in decision-making at all times and levels (IIRR, RNE & IGS 2009:2-3). Hence, in all the committees women are significantly represented and even in some committees, their number exceeds that of men members (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Sex Composition of Members of the Different Committees in Awra Amba Community**

Committees	Members		
	Male	Female	Total
1. Controlling committee for the development committee	1	2	3
2. Development committee	6	3	9
3. Controlling committee for the weekly development committee	1	2	3
4. Weekly development committee	2	3	5
5. Compliant hearing committee	2	1	3
6. Education committee	3	2	5
7. Lost money handling committee	2	1	3
8. Work assignment committee	1	2	3
9. Elderly care committee	2	3	5
10.Patient care committee	1	2	3
11.Security committee	3	--	3
12.Reception committee	1	2	3
13.Health and sanitation committee	2	1	3
14.Rules and regulations preparation committee	11	4	15
15.Problem detectors and solving committee	1	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>69</b>

**Source:** The Awra Amba Community Information Center, Nov. 2011

The Table 3 depicts that, women are fairly represented in each committee. In fact, about half of these committees are chaired by women and about half of the members within the committees are women. Hence, women in Awra Amba play crucial roles in community leadership and decision-making processes of the

various committees<sup>83</sup> in which they are members as well as chairpersons. In this regard, a female informant<sup>84</sup> noted that, “we elect our committee leaders among our members, who can read and write, have good management and interpersonal communication skills and exposure to Bahir Dar and other towns for our public relations as members and chairpersons of the various committees, regardless of their sexes.”

In general, Awra Amba women have access to and control over leadership and decision-making power both at household and community levels as a result of the existing gender relations, which have brought a change in societal common perceptions regarding females’ involvement in the communal administrative and decision-making processes by diminishing cultural prejudices about women and womanhood. Furthermore, the local administrative structure, which allows the participation of all adult members in election, decision-making, and leadership activities, protection of human rights and freedom of expression of ideas, rule of law, strict check and balance, power rotation, members’ freedom of choice (like freedom to choose marriage partners, membership, work/activities to participate in, etc.) and transparency and accountability of the various committee members, etc, all served the purpose of peace and development in Awra Amba community apart from enhancing women’s opportunities for leadership and decision-making.

## **Conclusion**

The existing gender relations in Awra Amba community, through the elimination of stereotypes about man/woman and manhood/womanhood, abated cultural justifications for super/subordinate gender relationships in general and called off women’s dependence and inferior status in particular by giving them equal access to and control over locally available resources. Of course, the existing equitable gender relations in Awra Amba community enhanced women’s educational, economic and leadership opportunities in particular and the communal development endeavors in general through the creation and continuous maintenance of economic and administrative structures that guarantee equal opportunities to all members of the community. Concerning women’s economic opportunities, women are economically independent and they generate their own income from their community’s share and even from other private income-generating activities. Furthermore, the existing gender relations enhanced

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<sup>83</sup> There are fifteen committees in the Awra Amba community responsible for various day to day activities in the community. These committees are made up of the main ‘Development Committee’, twelve sub-committees and two other controlling committees.

<sup>84</sup> SICA22, Awra Amba, 6<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2011

women's participation and involvement in the formulation and implementation of development plans at the community level. As a result, women in Awra Amba are represented in the main Development Committee that supervises and controls the implementations of development and other related plans in their community.

As the discussions based on the experiences of the Awra Amba community unveiled, besides an advocacy of gender equality and equity in its own right, the advantages of gender equity in access to and control over resources are manifold both at the household and community levels. At the household level, equality of participation and responsibilities between men and women reduces the disproportionate work burdens that women shoulder and increase their bargaining position (Tzannatos 1999) and at the communal level, gender equity in access to and control over resources and equality of participation, opportunities and responsibilities in the economic and social life is not only advantageous to the female population, but also to the society as a whole (Elston 1999, in Bussmann 2007). This implies that local level economic and administrative structures as well as cultural values need to promote equitable gender relations in division of labor, access to educational opportunities, economic resources, leadership and decision-making power of women both at the household and community levels.

In the final analysis, it should be noted that the Awra Amba community's equitable gender relations in access to and control over economic resources and power both at the household and community levels are contrary to the prevailing gender ideologies in most rural communities of Amhara Region, where the study community is found. This finding calls for the need for further investigation about the extent to which the existing economic and administrative structures as well as cultural values and principles of Awra Amba community promote equitable gender relations in access to and control over resources in other communities of Amhara Region in particular and Ethiopia in general.

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