

Factors Limiting Rural Women's Involvement in the Economy in Eastern Oromia, Ethiopia

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Abstract: Rural women in Oromia engage in different economic activities that contribute tremendously to the livelihood of their families. Nevertheless, rural women's contribution to the rural economy is far behind expectation due to many challenges. This paper, therefore, intends to investigate the factors that hamper rural women's involvement in the economy with particular emphasis on the rural women in eastern Oromia. In this study, both quantitative and qualitative research methods were employed. The major barriers to women's involvement in the economy were identified using interview schedule, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participatory observations. The finding indicates that factors emanating from the socio-cultural traditions of the community such as men's view towards women, women's view of themselves, the burden on women in childbearing and rearing, women's lack of access to valuable resources and education have daunting effects on women's involvement in the economy. Moreover, the finding also shows that the religion of the community which also upholds patriarchal values has a detrimental effect on women's involvement in the economy. Hence, the study recommends that improving the involvement of rural women in the economy requires the transformation of the cultural traditions and religious outlooks of the community, women's practical access to resources particularly land. Above all, the study recommends that there should be a sound policy framework that can ensure the education of both men and women to bring about the actual emancipation of women in the economic sphere.

Keywords: Economy; Rural; Women

1. Introduction

Ethiopia is one of the countries located in the Horn of Africa. It is the second most populous country in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to World Bank (2014), the population of Ethiopia is estimated to be 97 million of which half are women. Around 83% of the Ethiopian population live in rural areas where agriculture accounts for 85% of employment (Oxfam Canada, 2012), 46.6% of gross domestic product (GDP) and 90% of exports (Feed the Future, 2014). Social services such as education and health are poor and rural women's social and economic situations are embarrassing (World Bank, 2014).

Though there is lack of gender-segregated data in the country, it seems that women in rural areas are overloaded by different economic and non-economic activities and responsibilities and work 13-17 hours a day (Desta, 1999; Bekele, 2007). To one's dismay, however, rural women are the most disadvantaged group in the country (Adal, 2005; ESPS, 2008). Though there are development policies, programs and projects to address the situation of rural women, these policies, programs and projects have never been implemented effectively.

Socio-cultural traditions and expectations of a given society are responsible for boys and girls to behave differently and develop different characteristics. These traditions and expectations repress the individuality of the children and force them to act or behave according to the society's gender views (Shukla and Chauhan, 1987). Men and women engage in different types of jobs in many parts of the world due to gender-based division of labor (Ross, 1983).

As Mincer and Polachek (1974) rightly stated, actual as well as perceived separate family expectations for boys and girls limit women's choice of jobs, as these expectations influence their access to education, their workload and their chances of advancement. Furthermore, as Doeringer and Piore (1971) indicated, the gender configuration of a society determines the kind of jobs in which men and women work which has consequences for both sexes but more seriously for women.

In the words of Hoffman (1972), the root cause of women's underachievement is their socialization experience starting from early childhood. As he further states, women are treated so differently and discriminately by their parents and others around right from birth which make them weaker, educational drop-outs, depressed, dependents, so on and so forth.

Similarly, as Shukla and Swarnlata (2007) indicate, the basis of unrewarding self-concepts are usually laid by parents as self-concepts are mirror images of what children believe the significant others in their lives, particularly their parents, think of them. The self-concepts that people have for themselves are always the most determinant factors in conditioning their behavior. Sex role stereotypes create in both men and women the belief that males are superior to females and also that masculine characteristics and abilities are more desirable and valuable than feminine characteristics. This belief shapes the self-concepts of both men and women and the way they portray themselves and each other.

The standards set for the roles of men and women based on sex differences force individuals of opposite sexes to behave differently in prescribed ways. This may pose

challenges to the development of capabilities of both men and women to full potential. However, the more easily recognized victims of this sex typing are often women as it conditions them to operate extremely below their full potential in all settings and assign them characteristics that are inferior to those assigned to men (Shukla and Swarnlata, 2007).

Sex typed individuals excel either in masculine or feminine traits while androgynous individuals excel in both. Being sex typed or androgynous has important implications for self-worth, well-being, and adaptation to circumstances. Sex-typed individuals lack the resources to act in situations where cross-sex-typed behavior is required. Sex-typed males develop chauvinistic feelings which condition them to be independent, playful, and expressive in their behaviors while sex-typed females are conditioned to feel inferiority complex which makes them unable to behave independently and be expressive in their behaviors (Bem and Lenney, 1976). Androgynous individuals, however, have combination of masculine and feminine characteristics and capabilities which enable them to be versatile and have better coping and adaptation skills across situations (Heilbrun, 1986). Androgynous women may be more effective, competent, and assertive in decision-making situations as compared to sex-typed women (Shukla and Kapoor, 1990). Thus, androgyny has important implications for decision-making and distribution of power in the family as it gives chance for both men and women to have equal statuses and opportunities in all situations.

This study was made in line with the preceding arguments regarding the gender configuration of society as the realities in Ethiopia in general and in the study area in particular are not different from those captured in the arguments.

In the Ethiopian economy, as in many other African countries, rural women play a decisive role in the food production system. Nonetheless, similar to the above arguments regarding the gender-based structural division of society, rural women in Ethiopia in general and in the study area in particular spend considerable time on activities that are considered to be women's fields. These include such activities as fetching water, collecting firewood, preparing foods, looking after children and small herds, and marketing agricultural products to purchase manufactured or non-agricultural products for their families' consumption. These miscellaneous and recurrent activities consume the time and energy of women to engage fully in productive economic activities, i.e. crop cultivation and animal husbandry. Consequently, rural women fail to be fully productive and contribute to their personal economic gains though they indirectly contribute to agricultural production and productivity.

As SOFA Team and Cheryl Doss (2011: 1) rightly argued:

Overall the labour burden of rural women exceeds that of men, and includes a higher proportion of unpaid household responsibilities related to preparing food and collecting fuel and water. The contribution of women to agricultural and food production is significant but it is impossible to verify empirically the share produced by women.... women make essential contributions to agriculture and rural enterprises across the developing world. But there is much diversity in women's roles and over-generalization undermines policy relevance and

planning. The context is important and policies must be based on sound data and gender analysis.

Here, it goes without saying that overgeneralization about the role of women in the rural economy should not be taken for granted as it hampers the development of critical knowledge in the area which in turn challenges the effort to fully involve rural women in the economy. The existing common view among many scholars in the area is that women involve in the rural economy equally with men if not more. However, as already indicated, this overgeneralization serves no purpose except wrongly informing policy makers and planners as well as the academia. This overgeneralization also downplays the specific realities of women in different geographical, socio-cultural, and economic environments.

Hence, in this paper the argument is that the rural women of the study area do not involve in the rural economy equally with men and ensuring the full involvement of rural women in the economy demands empirical examination of the factors that affect their involvement. This study, therefore, examines the critical impediments to rural women's involvement in the economy considering the case of the rural women of the study area.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Description of the Study Area

The study area, East Hararge, is located in the eastern part of Oromia National Regional State, eastern Ethiopia. It is bordered on the southwest by the Shebelle River which separates it from Bale, on the west by West Hararge, on the north by Dire Dawa city and on the north and east by the Somali Region.



Figure 1. Oromia National Regional State Administrative Zones Map

Source: Pantuliano and Wekesa, 2008

East Hararge is characterized by plateaus, rugged mountains, deep gorges and flat plains. Its altitude ranges from 500 to 3,400 meters above sea level. It contains three

agro-ecological zones, *badda* (highlands—elevation above 2,300m), *baddadare* (midlands- elevation between 1,500 and 2,300), and *gammojji* (lowlands -below 1,500m). There is a direct relationship between rainfall amount and altitude and an inverse relationship between altitude and temperature (Tolossa and Tafesse, 2008).

East Hararge has 18 districts (*Anas*) with a total population of 2,723,850, of which 1,383,198 are men and 1,340,652 women. With an area of 17,935.40 square kilometers, it has a population density of 151.87 people per square kilometer. While the huge majority (about 91%) of the population depends on agriculture, 8.27% are urban inhabitants, and a further 1.11% are pastoralists. The zone has a total of 580,735 households and an average of 4.69 persons to a household (CSA, 2007). The great majority of the inhabitants in the area are followers of Islam.

2.2. Research Design

The logical structure of inquiry used in this research was descriptive and explanatory case study. Within this research design the factors that limit the involvement of rural women in the economy was investigated by using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

2.3. Data Sources

The data presented in the study were obtained from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected directly from respondents using interview schedule, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participatory observations. Secondary data were collected through the review of related literature.

2.4. Sampling Techniques

This study was conducted in Gurawa, Goro Gutu, and Babile districts of East Hararge. These three districts were selected purposively from among 18 districts as they represent the different ecological and geographical parts of the region. The three districts together exhibit the general socio-economic and environmental attributes of all the 18 districts of the region and thus represent the region as far as the aim of this study was concerned.

2.5. Sample Size

Three hundred respondents were selected, one hundred from each district (fifty men and fifty women), to respond to the interview schedule of this study. These were selected through opportunity sampling, i.e. any married woman or man had the opportunity to be selected by the researchers by chance during the fieldworks of the study until the total fixed number of respondents was met. Opportunity sampling was used as it served the purpose of the study without compromising validity and credibility. It was the belief of the researchers of this study that any sample population from the study population could give the desired data on the topic under study as the subject of study was believed to be unchanging regardless of the size of sample population and geographical coverage. Thus, 300 respondents were considered to be very sufficient to give adequate data on the subject under study. It is

also important to indicate here that these 300 respondents were picked up from almost all the villages of the districts of the study area.

Interviews and focus group discussions were undertaken until saturation points were reached where no longer hearing of anything new. However, qualitative sample must be big enough to assure one to hear most or all of the perceptions that might be important. Hence, interviews with 60 informants, 20 from each district (10 men and 10 women), were selected through opportunity sampling where the researchers came to interview any informant by chance while traveling through villages in each district depending on his/her will. However, effort was made to cover the geographical space of each district during interviews. Nine focus group discussions (each of which had 6 to 10 members), three in each district (2 for women and 1 for men), were conducted. Focus group discussion participants were also selected purposively at three different places in each district with the support of volunteer women/men.

2.6. Data Analysis

The data obtained through interview-schedule were analyzed by organizing respondents' responses in terms of frequencies and %ages. The process of qualitative data analysis usually involves the identification of themes. Looking for themes involves coding. In this study data recorded on tapes and taken as notes were reviewed to identify themes that were coded. Coding was made manually.

Seidel (1998) developed a useful model to explain the basic process of qualitative data analysis. The model consists of 3 parts: Noticing, Collecting, and Thinking about interesting things. These parts are interlinked and cyclical. For example while thinking about things you notice further things and collect them. Noticing interesting things in the data and assigning 'codes' to them, based on topic or theme, potentially breaks the data into fragments. Codes which have been applied to the data then act as sorting and collection devices. Qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observations were put into different categorical variables. Major themes were identified and analyzed in line with the research objectives and were summarized for use in descriptive and explanatory analyses.

3. Results and Discussions

The extent of rural women's involvement in the economy varies from region to region in Ethiopia. Equally important, a variety of factors that are either regional specific or common to all rural settings of the country hamper the full involvement of rural women in productive agricultural activities. The critical impediments or bottlenecks to the involvement of eastern Oromia's rural women in the economy are partly similar to that of other rural women in Oromia though there are certain obstacles that are peculiar to the study area. These factors emanate from the community's socio-cultural traditions, which manipulate men's view towards women and the views women have for themselves.

It is a concrete fact that all societies have their respective customs, traditions and belief systems/religions which make up their cultures. In most cases, these cultural

elements divide every society into two unequal gender categories. In this gender categorization, which considers women differently from men, men have better opportunities and privileges at the expense of women and women are subjected to different discriminations and violations of rights. Men have the authority to control almost all the resources and make decisions on almost all social, economic, and administrative issues of their families which make women powerless and weak to emerge successful in all social and economic endeavors. Similarly, the rural women elsewhere in Oromia/Ethiopia and in this study area in particular suffer from gender-based cultural constitution which is pro-men.

In the subsequent parts of this paper, presentation, analysis, and discussion of the factors that affect the involvement of rural women in the economy in the area under study are made considering in detail the factors resulting from the prevailing socio-cultural traditions of the community.

3.1. Women's Lack of Access to Education

The strongest impact of early marriage and the subsequent early motherhood on women is that they affect their chance of education and through it their achievements in life. Advocates for Youth (1997) noted that early marriage and childbearing are two among many factors that are highly related to women's status because they are closely tied to educational attainment. In the same vein, lack of education - due to early marriage and child bearing as well as traditional outlooks - is found to have serious repercussion on the fate of women in the study area.

Both focus group discussions and interview results indicate that one of the major factors in women's subordination and powerlessness in the study area is lack of education for both men and women. As the results indicate, the community expects women to be submissive and subordinate to men as both male and female members of the community lack education to appreciate that men and women are equal and can achieve equally in all areas of life if appropriate and encouraging environment is in place.

Having a child at a young age severely limits woman's education and her employment prospects (WAGGGS, 2014). Similarly, as almost all the interviewees vividly indicated, marriage and the inevitable event of childbearing mark the end of schooling in the study area which in turn plays a detrimental role in women's future social and economic prospects.

In addition to the forgoing facts, the community's perception that does not have much space for girls' education seems to have limited women's access to education. All of our interviewees unanimously indicated that the education of girls has never been given due attention by the community as the community does not appreciate the significance of girls' education and as it wants girls for their domestic services until marriage separates them from their parents. As focus group discussants pointed out, girls are supposed to create connection with other families through marriage which may result in resource sharing between parents of the spouses particularly during times of economic crisis or calamities due to extended droughts and pest invasions.

This very fact, as the interviewees underscored, encourages families to support early marriage at the expense of girls' education.

Rural women's lack of access to education consequently works against their involvement in the economy and expose them to deplorable social and economic statuses in the community. Given the fact that women have less access to education and lack the expertise needed to engage in gainful economic activities, they are always limited to domestic activities which are not productive to result in their socio-economic progress. Women, therefore, always remain in destitution, and depend on male members of the family for their survival and rarely engage in any gainful economic enterprise on their own.

3.2. Men's Prejudicial View towards Women

A culture that glorifies patriarchy throughout the world places women in a subordinate position. It dictates women to be submissive and too dependent on men. Consequently, women are willing to submit to the norms and values of the society to which they belong and these norms and values compel them to be dominated by men who make decisions on behalf of them (Kambarami, 2006).

In the socio-cultural context of the study area, males consider themselves as superior to females. Patriarchal system of gender relations where males enjoy social, economic, political, normative and ideological privileges over females is observed.

It was possible to realize from the focus group discussions that the rural community in East Hararge is organized on gender basis where men dominate almost all spheres of life. The wives are expected to assume subordinate position to their husbands and husbands have full control over all the resources of their families and the families as well.

The division of labor between husband and wife is very important to understand the economic relationship between them. As clearly shown by 95% of interview schedule respondents, the husband has full right of administering the family economy and is the sole head of the family. He is responsible to cultivate crops and rear animals to supply his family with almost all the necessities. The wife and children have a secondary role to play in the economic life of the family though the other male members of the family play a relatively better role in the economy than female members. The general perception of men is that women are subordinate to them and play secondary role in the rural economy.

As it was observed during the field visit, in the rural economic system of the study area men rarely recognize that their womenfolk really work. Women's work is rarely recognized and rarely rewarded. Though women engage in a wide array of activities which are both economic and non-economic and very decisive for their families' social and economic survival, men rarely value women's role in the social and economic lives of their families. Men consider women's activities as trivial and invisible compared to theirs. Men work in the field and these field activities are always overvalued against women's domestic activities. Women are seen as feeble and flimsy to engage in hard work which demands muscular strength.

Almost all interviewees clearly expressed that it is women's fate to do what they do regardless of its impacts on them. Furthermore, they indicated that women's activities are typically considered as what women should engage in and for men these activities are mainly seen as inferior to the activities reserved for men. Hence, all the responsibilities and activities of women are considered secondary to those of men.

3.3. Women's Distorted View of themselves and their Roles in the Community

It is known that rural women work longer hours and their work is usually more arduous than men's. As Blackden and Bahanu (1999) rightly indicate, African Women work for longer hours than African men. An average of their work per day is 50% longer than men. This is what is also observed in the community of this study. However, as reported by significant majority of the in-depth interview respondents, women's contribution to agriculture, measured in terms of the number of tasks performed and time spent, is less than that of men. This is because the works of women are in most cases in the nonproductive areas such as fetching water, collecting fire woods, preparing food, cleaning home, bearing and rearing children, taking agricultural products to market to sale and buy non-agricultural items, and participate in community social and cultural affairs. This wide array of non-economic activities consumes the time and energy of women and limits them from fully engaging in the cultivation of crops and animal husbandry.

Be that as it may, according to the results of focus group discussion, women's misconception of themselves is also one important contributory factor to their limited involvement in the agricultural economy. Women focus group discussants vividly indicated that women perceive of themselves as ordained to specialize in domestic activities while men are for field ones. Women, therefore, refrain from engaging in activities they believe are the domains of men. As one of the women focus group discussants wisely put it: "We feel that domestic activities are our field of specialization as men have their own. This feeling is deep-rooted to the extent that it is not easy to get rid of it."

From this, it goes without saying that rural women's involvement in productive economic activities is severely limited as they are overloaded or overburdened by domestic works not only because of the views of men towards them that they deserve these activities but also because of women's strong perception that these activities naturally belong to them. Women focus group discussants clearly argued that women do not have appreciation for men who partake in activities that are conventionally seen as women's fields of engagement. This indicates that women in the area under study are still suffering from an entrenched tradition which forces them to unknowingly manifest an irrational view towards themselves with regard to the activities in which they involve. This inept view, by and large, limits women to domestic chores and denies them the chance to expand their domain of engagement in gainful economic activities outside home.

3.4. The Burden of Childbearing and Childrearing on Women

In the study area, there is a strong social value attached to high fertility as families perceive that children are their source of prestige and social and economic security. The religious view of the people also strongly supports high fertility. As clearly stated by the respondents to in-depth interview, women are expected to bear children throughout their reproductive years as frequently as possible regardless of the social, economic, and health consequences on them and their children. Women also have deep belief in the norm of having many children and they do not know or bother about the healthy and economic consequences of having many children.

Though it is not possible to get the contemporary average fertility rate of the study area, it is not difficult to observe the presence of many poverty stricken children in almost every family in the study area. With possible room for error, it is possible to estimate the average fertility rate of the study area to be not less than 5 children per family. Such a high rate of fertility could be related to some basic causal factors such as early marriage, poverty, low status of women, and low level of education and above all the traditional/religious view of the community which appreciates having many children.

Childbearing and rearing practices are highly conditioned by the beliefs, values and aspirations of parents which are influenced by their education level and socio-economic status. As the educational level and socio-economic status of the community in the study area are low, parents believe in having many children for prestige as well as social and economic security but critically lack awareness about the impacts of frequent childbearing and rearing on themselves and on the current and future lives of their children.

As early marriage is prevalent in the community, the very young mothers, whose educational chances are shadowed by early marriage and pregnancy, face severe disadvantages in life as they remain uneducated and weak which makes them unable to work towards better social and economic positions in their community. According to focus group discussion and interview results as well as field observation, births to young women under age 20 are very common in the study area. This indicates the existence of adolescent childbearing because of early marriage.

Frequent childbearing and rearing can affect women in a number of ways among which limited involvement of women in the economy is worth mentioning. Frequent child-bearing and rearing brings about the problem of high fertility rate and hence rapid growth of family size which has implication on women's status and wellbeing. Frequent child-bearing and rearing activities consume much time and energy of the rural women and contribute negatively to their social and economic wellbeing as they limit their productivity.

In economic terms, childbearing and rearing without birth spacing not only consumes the time and energy of women but also contributes to their health problems which limit their participation in the economy. It also increases women's level of poverty as having many children becomes an economic burden on them. This has an adverse effect on the family economy from which women are the most to suffer. This in turn reduces women's chance of engaging in productive work as they remain poor

due to large number of children. Frequent childbearing and rearing affects negatively not only women's social and economic statuses but also creates the perception that women are created for reproduction not for production. This perception in turn contributes to the view that women's economic role is less significant in relation to that of men as women spend most of their time on childbearing and rearing.

3.5. Religious Views towards Women

Religion plays a significant role in shaping the way men and women participate in the economic life of their community. By the same token, religion is one of the major contributory factors to women's subordinate economic positions and roles in the community of the study area. The focus group discussants and interviewees underlined that religious norms and values being practiced by the community largely limits women to domestic chores. The focus group discussants also indicated that women are expected to make their husbands happy being at home always while the husbands are expected to work in the field and provide their families who depend on them with all the necessities. All of our in-depth interview respondents explicitly indicated that the religious view of the community limits women's involvement to domestic activities and restricts their publicity. Similarly, in response to the question whether the religious view of the community encourages the involvement of women in domestic activities or not, 91% of the respondents to interview schedule replied 'yes' while only 9% replied they 'do not know.' This remarks that religious view of the community plays a considerable role in limiting women to nonproductive domestic activities.

As Fine-Davis (1979) states, more religious groups which have religious orientation are more likely to have a traditional sex based division of labor and to resist social change that may result in gender equality and less likely to recognize the consequences of limiting women to domestic activities. This is strongly true to the community of this study area as it venerates one of the religions of the patriarchal societies.

3.6. Women's Lack of Access to Valuable Resources and Services

Women's full access to resources is vital in the endeavor to ensure gender equality and the meaningful participation of women in the social, political and economic spheres of the community. Nonetheless, the established culture of the community concerning the roles and values of women create women's economic dependency from their early age as it inhibits them from accessing valuable resources that would make them productive members of their community. As a result, rural women lack property right and significant input in the economy and consequently remain economically insecure.

It is evident that land is one of the most valuable resources in the rural area under study. However, women do not have direct access to this resource even though it is a critical element to ensure the full involvement of women in the economy. As shown in the table below, women can only access land through their husbands though this entitlement is more apparent than real as women cannot claim ownership over the

land during their husbands' life time. However, even widows may not easily access the lands of their deceased husbands as they may face competitors from male members of the family and other close relatives.

In the study area, access to their husbands' land offers rural women secondary or nominal right and this seriously constrains women's right to land as this nominal right itself is secured only as long as the marriage lasts. This fact is supported by the works of Rahmeto (1994) and Tadesse (2000) who considered the issue at national level. According to them, rural women do not have equitable access to land and agricultural resources. Thus, as Kebede (1990) rightly states, the violation of the rights of women with regard to key assets and economic resources such as land, livestock, agricultural products and other economic activities is considerable.

Out of our interview schedule respondents, 81% reported that women access land through marriage while 12%, 6%, and 1% reported that women access land through inheritance, allocation, and lease respectively. Thus, in the study area, most women have indirect access to land through their husbands while some others access land through inheritance from their parents.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of women's means of accessing land

Means of women's access to land	Response	Frequency	%
Marriage	No	57	19
	Yes	243	81
	Total	300	100
Inheritance	No	264	88
	Yes	36	12
	Total	300	100.0
Allocation	Yes	282	94
	No	18	6
	Total	300	100
Lease	Yes	297	99
	No	3	1
	Total	300	100

The data collected through focus group discussion and in-depth interviews also underscore that rural women in the study area access land mainly through their husbands. This goes with the trend in other Sub-Saharan African countries where marriage for women has been a primary means of getting nominal access to land under customary system of tenure (Davison, 1988; Nizioki, 2002).

In the study community, land title and tenure tend to be vested in men, either by legal condition or by socio-cultural norms. The land reforms of the successive governments of the country seem to have reserved this bias against women. Compared to men, women are less likely to hold title, secure tenure, or have the same rights to use, improve, or dispose of land. As the respondents to interview questions

and participants of focus group discussions pointed out vividly, women's access to land is constrained by socio-cultural norms which inhibit women from having direct access to land on equal ground with men.

Regarding access to other resources, women of the study area have also difficulties. As both men and women focus group discussants unanimously underscored, though they contribute to their families' livestock production, women have access only to livestock products such as milk and butter for home consumption or for sale while live animals are mostly owned by husbands who decide what to do with them. As they indicated, cattle, camel, donkeys, sheep, goats, etc are reared in the study area and in most cases these live animals are considered as belonging to the whole family though the husband is the chief owner who dictates how to appropriate these resources. As they further pointed out, when these animals are sold to get money, the money in most cases is kept by the husbands who may not require the consent of the wives to spend it and in case the husbands mismanage the money, the destitution of women and their incapacity to engage in any meaningful economic enterprise is likely to happen.

It is clear that micro-finance institutions play a remarkable role in creating informal employment and improving the socio-economic situation of people living in the rural areas particularly women. As Mayoux (2005) states, having access to credit support and micro-finance facilities can help women to increase their income and escape from poverty as they are better managers of money. Nonetheless, as reported by the participants of focus group discussions, there are no micro-credit institutions to enable women start and run their own micro-enterprises in the area under study and this condition discourages them from engaging in self-employment which in turn makes them economically weak to aspire for better economic achievement. Hence, as the rural community of the study area is in a serious dearth of financial resources, except those areas where khat (mild stimulant plant) is produced, the absence of micro-finance services has great implication for the rural people particularly women's self-employment activities. Nonetheless, even in the khat growing areas, women have less access to finance as men are in charge of cultivating and selling it and determine how the money is to be utilized. Some women who have access to money also lack the expertise to run small businesses as there are no institutions which support them to develop entrepreneurship skills. This condition creates a situation where these women cannot even wisely utilize the little financial resource at their disposal and perpetuates their poor involvement in the economy.

4. Conclusion

Women of the study area have low involvement in the economic activities and have low decision-making power. Their participation in and contribution to agricultural activities are invisible and they are more occupied by non-agricultural and nonproductive domestic activities. As the findings of this study indicate, rural women's involvement in the economy is constrained by a number of interlocked factors.

Lack of access to education, men's prejudicial views, women's distorted view of themselves and their roles in the community, the burden of childbearing and childrearing, religious views towards women, and lack of access to valuable resources and services are found to be the major factors inhibiting women from fully involving in the economy.

High illiteracy rate and low level of education characterize the community in the area understudy. Though illiteracy and low level of education have their own negative social and economic effects on all groups of the community irrespective of their of gender category, women as a group are the most to suffer as lack of education could not allow them even to know their natural rights and appropriate places in the community.

The cultural and religious views of the community do not create an environment for women to access education easily. As the community considers women and their roles as secondary, it does not appreciate their education. Being loaded by domestic activities and required to engage in early marriage, women do not have the chance to successfully pursue their education to the level that they can get the required knowledge and skills that qualify them for active and holistic involvement in the important affairs of the community particularly the economy.

Men do not recognize the role of women in the economy not only because of the prejudice they have for women but also because of women's limited involvement in the economy due to their engagement in several domestic activities which distract them from full involvement in the economy. Men's perception that women need to be submissive and subordinate to men and that they need to play secondary roles in all affairs, incapacitates women from fully utilizing their potential as they themselves also share this perception. As the prevailing cultural views of the community do not encourage women to challenge the supremacy of men, women submit themselves to the stereotypes that they are weaker and inferior and do have a limited area of engagement with regard to the social, cultural and economic affairs of the community. In other words, women reflect the distorted views that they are ordained mainly for domestic chores and have a marginal participation in the economy.

Childbearing and childrearing take away a considerable time of women and reduce women's participation in the economy. As the community culturally and religiously appreciates high fertility and as women do not have the right not to bear children, women give birth as frequently as possible. This contributes to women's lack of sufficient time to involve in the economy. It also contributes to increased family size which exposes families in general and women in particular to abject poverty. The presumption that women are created more for reproduction than production downplays not only women's role in the economy but also their potential to change their fate through active engagement in productive activities.

The religious views of the community in the study area establish the role of women as home keepers or domestic workers. Women's role is seen in terms of serving the interests of men being mostly at home while men are to excel in activities outside home. The religious views of the community portray women as the subjects of men who do not have the right to make independent decisions. These views, therefore,

live women in a situation of helplessness to contemplate for better economic life and hence debilitate their potential to change their social and economic fates on their own.

Women's access to resources such as land, livestock, and micro-finance service is very minimal. As agricultural activities are highly dominated by men, land and livestock are almost owned by men and women access these resources mostly through their husbands. For women, land acquisition through inheritance and other means is not significant. Since women are secondary owners of these valuable resources, their decision making power is insignificant and they always remain economically weak to aspire for self-reliant economic activities.

The women of the study area have little or no access to micro-finance services. This condition denies women not only the financial resource but also the entrepreneurship skills needed to initiate and run micro-businesses. Lack of finance and entrepreneurship skills in turn restrains women from engaging in gainful economic activities.

5. Recommendations

Improving the economic status of women enhances their decision-making capacity at all levels and in all aspects of life, especially in the area of sexuality and reproduction. Improving the economic status of women requires the concerted efforts and interventions of all concerned bodies mainly in the areas of girls' education and access to and utilization of resources and services.

Education is the most important weapon to emancipate the community from the age-old cultural and customary gender views and practices which are not women friendly. Taking children, both girls and boys, to school and expanding the domain of education is a good overall strategy to have an educated community in the long run. This helps to create a community that appreciates gender equality being free from awkward gender outlooks and stereotypes. However, in the current condition of the study area, the presence of a huge number of illiterate as well as less educated adult people calls for immediate non-regular or non-formal education programs and tailor-made trainings. These non-regular education programs and tailor-made trainings should be geared towards relieving the community from culturally established norms and values which mistreat women. These education programs and trainings should be the ones which help women to be aware of their rights and their appropriate place in the community. They should also contribute towards liberating women from the burden of frequent childbearing which disengages them from engaging fully in economic activities. The attempt to reduce the frequency of child bearing requires appropriate family planning which contributes to women's wellbeing and their active engagement in income generating activities outside domestic works.

Improving the economic status of women also demands women's unconditional access to resources. Women need to have access to land, livestock and cash resources on equal grounds with men. Land title and tenure should be vested legally in both women and men and the ownership of family lands should be open to both wives and

husbands equally. Women should also be given legally the prerogative to decide on family resources on equal basis with men.

Provision of micro-finance facilities for rural women is also one of the most important strategies for empowering rural women economically. Micro-finance support not only empowers rural women but also contributes to poverty reduction and enhanced living condition for rural families. Credit support through micro-finance institutions as well as entrepreneurship skills trainings should be given to women in the area under study in such a way that women become self-employed and economically secure.

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