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The Gender Perspective of Household Food Security in Meskan District of the Gurage Zone, Southern Ethiopia

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Abstract:
Despite the considerable number of rural women in Ethiopia and their contribution in food production, processing , preparation and provision, they are often neglected and deprived of services and amenities which leads to their vulnerability to poverty, food insecurity, gender bias and effects of environmental change. Accordingly, the principal objective of this study is to assess the food security situation and the type of coping strategies pursued by female and male- headed households in two kebeles of Meskan District of the Gurage Zone, Ethiopia. The findings of the study indicated that female-headed households compared to male-headed households are found at a low level of food security and are non- self sufficient in terms of the food requirement of their households and the amount they produce within a year. A number of factors cause the difference in food security status between female and male-headed households as discussed in detail in this paper. The paper winds up by concluding that granting a piece of land by itself could not end the food insecurity problem of female-headed households as these households are constrained by lack of access to important factors of production such as labor, plough oxen and credit and other agricultural inputs. Moreover, cultural and social constraints in a form of gender biased customs, stereotypes and misconceptions about women are the major challenges for female-headed households in the study area.

Introduction

Ethiopia is the third most populous country in Africa. The incidence of poverty is 44 percent at national level. Agriculture plays an important role in the development of the national economy and contributes about 50 percent of the GDP and employs 85 percent of the population. A combination of natural and man-made factors has resulted in a serious and growing food insecurity problem in many parts of the country. About five to six million people are chronically food insecure every year. There are people who do not have the capacity to produce or buy enough food to meet their annual food needs even under normal weather and market conditions (FAO, 2006).

According to the 2005 DPPC half year report on SNNPR food security situation, the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional State (SNNPRS) where the study area is located is one of the food insecure regions in Ethiopia. Currently, 1.5 million people in 64 districts of the Region are vulnerable to chronic and transitory food insecurity. Many households are only able to produce sufficient food to meet their food requirements for less than six months of the year.

At the household level, female- headed households are more food insecure than male-headed households. There are many challenges to women in general and to female- headed households in particular in playing a more active role in food security than male- headed households. These, according to Senait (2000), include inadequate access to and control over productive resources (such as land, labor, and capital), lack of access to appropriate and efficient technologies and/or inputs to raise productivity, institutional barriers, cultural and social constraints in a form of gender-biased customs and conventions, stereotypes, and misconceptions about women.

The general objective of this study is to assess the gender aspect of household food security in *Meskan District* of the Gurage zone. Specifically, the study sets out:

1. To assess the status of food security/ insecurity situation in female and male –headed households.
2. To investigate the underlying causes of the prevalence of food insecurity in female and male-headed households.

Statement of the Problem

In Ethiopia, rural women who comprise the bulk of the country's agricultural workforce and who engage in food production, processing and preparation are often neglected and deprived of services and amenities. As a result, they are vulnerable to poverty, food insecurity, gender bias and effects of environmental changes and disequilibria. Research in rural parts of Ethiopia reveals that little is done about the all-round potential of women in general. Moreover, although rural women are engaged fully in agricultural activities, the division of labor in rural Ethiopia is quite traditional that certain jobs are reserved for men and others for women. Men are still considered to be the head of the household, the bread winner. Based on the stated facts above, this paper attempted to assess the food security situation in female and male-headed households in *Meskan District* of the Gurage zone.

Methodology

Sampling Procedure

The survey district is purposively selected because of its highly traditional and subsistence rain fed type of economy, recurrence of natural adversities, low level of development and mainly due to the researcher's prior experience in the area. Two *kebeles*, namely *Beresa* and *Dobo Tuto*, were chosen out of the 47 *kebeles* in the district because of the high vulnerability of the areas to seasonal food insecurity. The data on the total number of households in the two *kebeles* was obtained from the respective Rural Kebele Administration Offices. Accordingly, out of 695 households in *Beresa Kebele*, there were 190 female-headed and 505 male-headed households. On the other hand, out of a total of 420 households in *Dobo Tuto Kebele* there were 30 female-headed and 390 male- headed households which amounted to14 percent of the total households in the two *kebeles*. Then, since the research is gender based, sample sizes were determined basing female and male-headed households in the study area. In this case, 90 samples of male- headed households (10 percent of the total male headed households) were taken. With respect to female-headed households, owing to their smaller number compared to their counter parts, all female- headed households in *Dobo Tuto Kebele* and 30 female-headed households from the *Beresa Kebele* making a total of 60 sample female- headed households were taken to ensure better representativeness of the sample. Hence, the survey was carried out on a total of 150 households out of which 60 are female-headed households and the rest 90 are male-headed households.

With regard to key informants, focus group discussions and household case-story the study used purposive or judgment sampling since informants will be selected on the basis of their social position, roles in the community, knowledge of the community and critical information rather than on representative consideration. Accordingly, key informants were selected from peasants (both female and male heads of households, respective *kebele* chairpersons, District Agriculture and Rural Development Office experts and Development agents).

Method of Data Collection

Data for this study was obtained from primary and secondary sources through the household survey, focus group discussions, observation, household case stories and key-informants; that were approached from each *kebele.* It involved village elders, male and female heads of house-holds, District Agriculture and Rural Development Office Food Security Desk Experts, District Extension Team Leaders, Development Agents, Peasant Association Leaders and Kebele chairpersons in the study sites. The information gathered from these key informants has been used in the study to strengthen the findings obtained through household survey.

Findings and Discussion

Food Security Status of Households

Food Self –Sufficiency

According to Degefa (2005),self –sufficiency in the context of peasants who are leading subsistence way of life entails whether the crops and livestock they produce at home cover their annual food consumption requirements or not. Participants of the FGD described a non-self sufficient farm household in the locality as one who goes out to market to purchase grain to meet his/her household food requirements.

Based on the above contextual definition, households were asked about their perception of their households' self-sufficiency in terms of food. As shown in table 1, out of the total 18.2 percent of the respondents who reported self sufficient, 6.8 percent were female-headed households whereas the rest 11.4 percent were male-headed households.

On the other hand, 93.2 percent of female-headed households reported that their production at home did not cover their family's annual food consumption requirements. Though, the figure for male-headed households is

also quite large, they are found relatively at a better situation compared to their female counter parts.

Household Food Security

The concept of food-security differs from self-sufficiency in that it encompass a number of issues such as 'access', 'utilization', 'security' and 'availability' while self-sufficiency is limited to only food availability (Degefa, 2005).

The survey result showed high proportion of food insecure households both in female and male-headed households. With slight difference between the two types of households, the figure depicted 91.5 percent and 89.7 percent of female and male-headed households lived either through seasonal or chronic situations of food shortages in the study area. On the other hand, even though the number of households who responded food secure are generally low both in female and male-headed households, smaller number of female-headed households compared to male-headed households reported food secure which is 8.5 percent against 10.3 percent of their male counterparts. Several factors would come in to play to explain the disparity between female and male-headed households in this regard as explained in the subsequent section.

Frequency of Meals

The number of meals per day and the composition of each meal vary for rural households according to the season, the size of the previous harvest and the sustainability of income from non-farm activities. This survey was carried out during food shortage periods of the year in the study sites. Therefore, households responded to this kind of food shortage seasons in various ways among these is changes in the type and frequency of consumption in their household. The table below shows the average frequency of meals of households during one weak prior to the period of data collection.

The study result on the average frequency of food intake during the seven days prior to data collection showed some differences between female and male-headed households. It can be understood that regardless of the type of foods they consume, the majority of female-headed households, which account for nearly 85 percent of the total respondents are undernourished and are food insecure. Smaller number is registered for male-headed households in which around 48 percent of them were able to feed themselves less than three times a day. Only 15.3 percent of female-headed households were able

to consume 3 times a day against 51.1 percent of their male counterparts. Female household heads who participated during the FGD explained, it is common to reduce the number of meals even to one meal a day in times of critical food shortages. As one key informant female head explained in her own words:

> *"I usually pass the day with a piece of 'Yebuna kurs'(a piece of bread served with coffee ceremony in the morning.)Sometimes I don't even remember whether I have eaten with in a day or not as I usually leave the house early in the morning and return back home late in the evening to bring some income to my family. "*

Change and Continuity in the Type of Meal

The type of meal that is consumed in any rural household largely depends on the economic status and cultural preferences of the people. The change and continuity in the type of meals that people consume at home therefore, to some extent, tell the food security status of households. What people consume under normal situation may differ from times of livelihood economic crises.

An in-depth interview with peasant key- informants in the study area indicated that *kita* (traditional bread made from maize) served with cabbage, is what many households consume at normal seasons. Besides, in few well to do families, *injera* made from *teff* with different kinds of *wot*(kind of sauce*)* is served. During seasons of food shortages poor households usually shift to cheaper and easily prepared food items such as *nifro* and *Kolo* made mainly from maize mixed with other cereals.

Major Causes of Food Insecurity

A) Crop Production Related Constraints:

Access to land

Land holding in rural context plays an important determinant factor of the type and size of crops produced and the availability of pasture land that in turn determines number of livestock reared (Degefa, 2002). Therefore, the size of farmland has vital role in households' food security.

The existing pattern of land distribution in Meskan district in general and the study sites in particular is largely a result of land distribution during the Derg regime. Accordingly, the majority of the study population, including female-

headed households, had some form of arable land except few landless households. Among the landless are those who didn't inherit land, or migrants from other areas. The survey finding in this case indicated 98.3 percent of female-headed households owned farm land compared to 92 percent of male-headed households. The large number of female-headed households who had possessed land in this case could probably be attributed to the effects of the land redistribution in the current regime that has granted land right to rural female heads of households.

However, there are various research findings in different parts of Ethiopia that showed how rural women are disfavored in terms of possession of important assets such as land due to unfair and traditional marriage and divorce patterns. Similarly in the study area, women are also trapped by various cultural and traditional practices that are related to marriage.

The experience of one woman in the study area is presented as follows:

> *She is a 48 years old, mother of 4 daughters. She was married to a man at her young age. As she got older and older, her husband left home and started living with a young mistress. Then, he gave his mistress portion of land that legally belonged to his first wife and him. She reported to the kebele saying that her husband inappropriately abused her right over her share of land. Then fearing the consequences, he started to show up at home after seven years while his relation with the mistress was still continuing. This time, he restricted her in-laws not to plough over the land claiming he is the owner of the land. During the land measurement in 2005, he made his mistress register for ownership of portion of land that legally belonged to his first wife and him. However, his first wife was made to share the rest of the land with him (which is only a small portion of land). She once again, reported the case to be seen by law. But he started to threaten her that he would kill her if she ever try to go to the law. He even restricted her not to share 'eshet'(the produce) from their farm that year. This time, she went to the law, but, he severely attacked her and she finally run away to her family. She still has the case in court but did not get solution.*

Land Size

In the study area, female-headed households who own less than 1 hectare of land account to 93.1 percent while 86 percent of the sample male-headed households have less than 1 hectare of land. Male-headed households who had land more than one hectare were estimated 14 percent while only 6.9 percent of female-headed households had land greater than 1 hectare. (See table 4)

The average land size in the two *kebeles,* according to the information obtained from the District Agriculture and Rural Development Office is 0.5 hectare.

Soil Fertility

As noted by Degefa (2005), not only the size of land holdings but also the quality of land affects the type and amount of crop that a peasant harvests. This in turn affects household's level of food security.

From the researcher's observation of the study sites, the survey results and key informant interviews, it is possible to tell that both study *kebeles* have rugged topography with poor soil fertility. It was also observed that most households, due to shortage of land, plough on hillsides which further aggravate soil erosion at times of heavy rain. On top of that, adverse climatic conditions such as erratic rain and flood in the area have worsened the condition for the past few years.

Access to Labor

Ethiopian agricultural activity is labor intensive. Even though, the grand labor availability is not as such a serious problem, some households' livelihood situation is threatened by lack of labor, especially male labor.

Similarly, the household survey on the size of family showed that 55.9 percent of the total sample female-headed households had family size that ranges between 4 and 6 followed by family size of 1 to 3 which is 23.7 percent. However, taking male-headed households, 39.7 percent of them have family size that ranges between 7 and 9 followed by 34.4 percent that have family size of 4 to 6. Thus, the data made clear that female –headed households compared to their male counterparts has relatively smaller family size.

The study also showed that 81 percent of female-headed households have faced critical shortage of labor during their last production season while

relatively lower number of male-headed households which accounted to 60.7 percent said had problem of man power during their last harvest season.(refer to table 5)

Similar to many parts of Ethiopia where ploughing is culturally mens' task, the study area also experiences the same tradition. Therefore, this, coupled with shortage of male-man power to carry out the traditionally assigned mens' task such as plouging has constrained female-headed households from undertaking important agricultural activities such as ploughing. Consequently many female-headed households who have no male labor at home give their land to sharecropping.

Availability of Plough Oxen

In areas of Ethiopia where plough agriculture is dominant, a pair of oxen is essential for effective farming.

As the survey result depicts women-headed households have relatively fewer access to plough oxen in spite of its importance in the intensive-plough cultivation of the area. Nearly 55 percent of the total respondents had no oxen at all and 78.3 percent comprises female-headed households while 38.9 percent goes for male-headed households. Besides, only 20 percent of female-headed households have one ox as against 45.6 percent of their male counterparts.

This situation confirms the argument by Yigremew (2001: 8), which states "as women do not plough land and as keeping oxen requires additional labor and resources (such as fodder), women would more likely have no oxen or at best own fewer oxen than male-headed households."

Agricultural Input Use

Nearly 37 percent of respondents in the study areas did not use agricultural inputs out of which 45 percent were female-headed households against 31.5 percent of male-headed households. The most important agricultural inputs used were fertilizers, high yielding inputs, herbicides and pesticides. From the focus group discussion with peasant household heads, it was revealed that the number of people who are applying fertilizers in the study sites is decreasing from time to time. Again, those who are unable to use these inputs especially fertilizer are mostly poor female-headed households. (Refer to table 7)

Environmental Constraints

Climate triggered factors that affect household food availability in the study *district* are erratic rainfall distribution and shortage of rain. As the key informant interview with the District Food Security Desk Experts indicated, the major aggravating factors of food insecurity in the study *kebeles* are recurrent drought and erratic nature of rainfall which leads to heavy soil erosion during rainy seasons. These were also major phenomena which led to asset depletion of many rural households in the study area.

The effect of these environmental adversities on the livelihood of poor peasants especially those of female-headed households who have limited asset possession are quite unbearable compared to the well off rural households. This is because missing one season's harvest or having a considerably low harvest due to such kind of climatic shocks can leave these households with nothing to fall back on.

B) Livestock Production Constraints

Despite the contributions of livestock in farming, supplementing food needs and adding to the income of households through sale in the study area, the number of livestock possession has remained very limited. In this regard, economic factors such as lack of financial capital and other external elements including shortage of grazing land, water and animal diseases have remained major constraining factors for livestock production in the study sites.

Lack of Financial Capital

One of the reasons for limited number of livestock possession such as plough oxen among the surveyed households is lack of purchasing capacity of households. As the interview with the District Agriculture and Rural Development Office Livestock Department expert revealed, livestock possession has largely declined due to de-stocking by many poor households and lack of cash to purchase on the market. Among these poor households are many female-headed households in the study area as it has been elaborated in the previous section.

The other constraining factors which are common to all of the households in the study area are lack of grazing land and adequate pasture, shortage of water, and animal disease and poor veterinary services.

In general, the aforementioned predicaments render unfavorable condition for the possession of livestock in the study area. This condition is even more

challenging for poor female-headed households, thus register poor performance with respect to keeping domestic animals.

B) Non-Farm Income Constraints

Degefa (2005), explained getting access to work in any non-agricultural activity does not guarantee the attainment of food security in many rural households . The same author also explains whether or not the non-agricultural activities lead to food security in rural settings depends, among other things, on the type of activity, the amount of income to be obtained and the sustainability of the activity.

Households who engage in non-farm activities in the study area as identified from the participants of the focus-group discussions are those households who are unable to meet their food requirements and other needs through sell of their own production. Therefore, the income obtained through such ventures help to augment their family' needs.

Even though there was no accurate data obtained from surveyed household regarding the income they earned from various ventures, some of the non-farm activities pursued by the study population are mainly petty trading involving sell of firewood, sell of traditional drinks such as *araki* and *tela*, sell of *kita* and *kolo* and sell of consumer products such as salt and soap. Besides, wage labor through safety net program is also considered as non-farm activity perused by households in the study area. (See table 8)

Lack of Start-up Capital

For female-headed households who are unable to meet their family food needs from their small farm land, non-farm activities such as petty trading may offer an alternative opportunity to augment their income to purchase food. However, as the FGD with the female heads of households showed such kind of income generating opportunities are constrained by their limited financial capability.

Rural credit could be an important source of cash for households, however, according to the FGD and interview with the District Extension Team Leaders, there is no formal financial credit giving institution functioning in both *kebeles* since the past four years. Government financial credit giving institutions such as Omo Micro finance Credit Institution has failed to function in the two study sites as most peasants were unable to pay back their

credit on time. The other credit and micro finance institution which was giving service to the near by town, Netsanet Micro Finance Institution, requires high amount of down payment by the loan taker, thus, poor households are unable to benefit from such kind of services due to lack of required assets. Only few relatively better- off male-headed households are able to involve in such credit giving institutions as they fulfill the necessary collateral (land/ oxen and other assets) to take loan.

Lack of Supporting Rural Infrastructure

Lack of basic rural infrastructures such as suitable road, grinding mills and potable water has rendered a huge impact on the livelihood activities of rural households. The fact that women are overburdened with multiple household chores such as food processing, collecting fire wood and fetching water, coupled with their responsibilities to bring additional income to their home, highly requires them to travel long distances with in a day. However, the presence of poor infrastructures in the study sites has multiplied the burden of many rural women particularly of female-headed households who face serious labor shortage. As women participants during the FGD explained the absence of basic infrastructures such as rural roads in the study sites has a huge impact on their households' food security situation as they are unable to save time to engage in various farm and non-farm activities that add to the improvement of their families' livelihood.

Limited Knowledge and Lack of Skills

The majority of household heads particularly those of female-heads of households in the study area are illiterate. Moreover, as the FGDs with both female and male head of households revealed household heads generally do not have a clear understanding of the viability of various non-farm activities and do not have the necessary skills on how to pursue those activities. Therefore, sensitizing and providing peasants with various non-farm income generating ventures is vital to improve their livelihood.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The findings of the study on the surveyed households revealed that female-headed households are more food insecure and less self- sufficient compared to male- headed households. It was also revealed that female-headed households are concentrated among the poorer strata of society and often have lower incomes than male-headed households.

An important point to underline is that ensuring availability of small piece of agricultural land necessarily cannot guarantee food security in female-headed households as these households are highly constrained by shortage of critical factors of production such as labor. To sum up, the limited access and control over productive assets such as land, labor, oxen and credit in many female-headed households as compared to male- headed households in general have a far reaching implication on their potential to improve their productivity as well as to diversify their income through engaging in various non-farm income generating ventures and thus has increased their vulnerability and fragility at times of critical food shortages. Addressing the issues of rural women, particularly those of female-headed households within the context of this study requires intensive integrated planning and intervention at all levels. These may involve the participation of the Government, NGOs, donor organizations and the local community.

Based on the findings of the study makes the following suggestions:
Gender sensitization activities and empowerment of rural women to reduce the existing gender biased traditional attitudes and customary practices could be introduced. These could be realized through expanding gender education or promoting the establishment of independent women organizations that work at kebele level.

To lessen the dependence of female headed housheols on labor one alternative could be assisting women to perform ploughing by themselves by creating access to easily applicable, labor saving farm technology to replace the high labor demanding oxen-ploughing system.

Enabling environment should be created to involve poor female-headed households in financial credit institutions to enhance their asset base so as to sustain better livelihood for their families.

Improving the existing rural infrastructures and ensuring sustainable supply of energy in the study area would contribute in improving the livelihood of households as such facilities help rural households save time for other productive tasks.

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Table 1 Food self-sufficiency of Households

			Household Type		Total
			FHH	MHH	
Production at home covers annual food consumption requirements	Yes	No.	4	10	14
		%	6.8	11.4	9.5
	No	No.	55	78	133
		%	93.2	88.6	90.5
Total		No.	59	88	147
		%	100	100	100

Source: Field survey, 2008

Table 2 Households' Perception of the Level of their Food Security

Househds' perception of their level of food security		FHH		MHH		Total	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	Food secure	5	8.5	9	10.3	14	9.6
	Seasonally food insecure	46	78	75	86.2	121	82.9
	Chronically food insecure	8	13.5	3	3.5	11	7.5
Total		59	100	87	100	146	100

Source: Field Survey, 2008

Table 3 Average Frequency of Food intake by Households for 7 days before the Start of the Survey

Type of household			Frequency of Meals				
			One time	Two times	Three times	More than three times	Total
	FHH	No.	1	49	9	-	59
		%	1.7	83.1	15.2	-	100
	MHH	No.	1	41	45	1	88
		%	1.1	46.7	51.1	1.1	100
	Total	No.	2	90	54	1	147
		%	1.4	61.2	36.7	0.7	100

Source: Field survey, 2008

Table 4: Land Holding Size of Households

Type of Household			Size of Land Holding			Total
			Less than 1 hectare	1-2 hectare	3-4 hectare	
	FHH	No.	54	4	-	58
		%	93.1	6.9	-	100
	MHH	No.	74	11	1	86
		%	86	12.8	1.2	100
	Total	No.	128	15	1	144
		%	88.9	10.4	0.7	100

Source: Field survey, 2008

Table 5: Labor Availability of Households

Have faced shortage of labor in the last production season			Yes	No	Total
	FHH	No.	47	11	58
		%	81	19	100
	MHH	No.	54	35	89
		%	60.7	39.3	100
Total		No.	101	46	147
		%	68.7	31.3	100

Source: Field survey, 2008

Table 6 Oxen possession of households

Type of Household	Number of Oxen Owned									
	None		1 ox		2 oxen		More than 2 oxen		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
FHH	47	78.3	12	20	1	1.7	-	-	60	100
MHH	35	38.9	41	45.6	12	13.3	2	2.2	90	100
Total	82	54.7	53	35.3	13	8.7	2	1.3	150	100

Source: Field survey, 2008

Table 7 Agricultural Input uses of Households

Type of Household	Use of Agricultural Input Use					
	Yes		No		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
FHH	33	55	27	45	60	100
MHH	61	68.5	28	31.5	89	100
Total	94	63.1	55	36.9	149	100

Source: Field survey, 2008

Table 8 Non-farm Activities Pursued by Households (multiple responses)

Non-farm Activities	FHH		MHH		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Sell of firewood	10	16.7	5	5.7	15	10
Sell of *araki* and *tella*	5	8.5	1	1.1	6	4
Sell of *kita* and *kollo*	5	8.5	1	1.1	6	4
Sell of salt and soap	45	77.6	33	37.5	78	52
Work as daily laborer	19	32.8	37	42	56	38.1
Total	84	-	77	-	161	-

Source: Field survey, 2008