

Gender and farming in Ethiopia: an exploration of discourses and implications for policy and research.

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April 2014

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Abstract

There is growing realisation that gender matters in African agriculture. However, a comprehensive and properly contextualised analysis of the nature of gender and gender relations as well as the way it comes into play in agriculture is lacking in much of the scholarly and policy debate surrounding the issue. The positioning of men and women in relation to farming, the spaces they are and are not allowed to occupy, the embodied nature of agricultural activities, and their implications to the future of African agriculture and rural youth are among the issues which have attracted little attention thus far. In this paper, we explore the utility of these issues in understanding gender issues within the context of small scale family farming in Ethiopia. Based on two qualitative studies of three rural farming villages and the existing literature, we explore the cultural and highly symbolic construction of 'the farmer' as an essentially masculine subject in Ethiopia, and reflect on the reasons behind the continued persistence of this construction and its implications for policy and further research. We argue that, due to its likely origin and long history of use in the region, the plough occupies a pivotal and privileged place in the history of farming in Ethiopia. Its practical and symbolic importance and its placement in the exclusive domain of men have resulted in the construction of a particularly male centric notion of what it means to be a farmer and who can be considered one. Although it has been argued that men have certain physical advantages that explain this male centric dominance, we suggest that notions of embodiment have better explanatory power since there appear to be important differences in the way men's and women's bodies are perceived in relation to farming implements and activities, on the basis of which narratives of what they can and cannot do are constructed. We discuss the implications of this highly gendered construction for the entry routes of young men and women into farming and their relative positioning afterwards. Finally, we reflect on the implications of our findings for current policy and suggest directions for further policy debate and research.

Introduction

The issue of gender and agriculture has garnered a lot of attention in recent years among scholars and policymakers alike. In March 2011 the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) released its annual flagship report on the state of food and agriculture, which for that year was entitled *Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development*. The report points to the existence of a 'gender gap' in the agricultural sectors of many developing countries as many women face gender-specific constraints that reduce their productivity and limit their contributions to agricultural production, economic growth and the well-being of their families and communities. It argues that women's access to productive resources; their access to and adoption of modern agricultural inputs and technologies; and their access to credit and extension services are severely constrained in much of the developing world. The report calls for action aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women in agriculture in order to 'win, sustainably, the fight against hunger and extreme poverty' (FAO 2011: vi).

In May of the same year, a highly provocative paper entitled *On the Origins of Gender Roles: Women and the Plough* (Alesina et al. 2011) was published by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER). The paper grabbed headlines owing to its claim of finding a strong causal link between historical use of the plough and women's subordination.³ And in September, the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hosted the UN event 'Women and Agriculture: A Conversation on Improving Global Food Security', where she announced a \$5M new gender program within the Feed the Future food security initiative of the US government to fund further research into and promotion of gender equality in agriculture. The Secretary stated,

We know that women farmers represent a major untapped resource, but we don't know nearly enough about which approaches will change that. So we need concentrated research about the obstacles facing women farmers worldwide so we know how to remove them, so women can contribute even more. (Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, September 19, 2011)⁴

It is perhaps too early to say conclusively whether these events and the spotlight they have put on the issue of gender and agriculture in the developing world have borne any fruit. In comparison with the copious body of literature that deals with gender in farming systems in the Global North, where the relative positions of women and men in farming systems and the discourses surrounding women's involvement and positioning have been discussed for decades, the gender gap in agriculture in the Global South is further exacerbated by an even bigger knowledge gap.

African agricultural systems have historically been described as female centred due to the predominance of shifting cultivation (Boserup 1970). More recent studies which have dealt with gender and farming are primarily concerned with the importance of recognising the vital but often invisible role of women in African agriculture. Facilitating women's access to agricultural inputs, resources and services so as to increase agricultural productivity and ensure food security is a frequently raised theme in the literature. A consensus seems to have emerged over the fact that women comprise a substantial, and sometimes even dominant, proportion of the population involved in agriculture in Africa; their contributions are under-recognised; and their potential is unrealised due to gendered inequalities in access to and control of key resources and services. In this respect, several studies have tried to look into gender in relation to food security (Kebede 2009; Ibnouf 2009; Gawayia 2008; Scanlan 2004), the adoption of agricultural technology (Doss 2001; Doss and Morris 2001), gendered patterns of cropping (Carr 2008; Doss 2002), agricultural productivity (Croppenstedt et al. 2013; Tiruneh et al. 2001) and land rights (Gebru 2011; Holden et al. 2011; Kevane and Gray 2010; 1999; Yngstrom 2002).

As such, there is indeed a growing realisation that gender matters in African agriculture. However, there is still room for improvement in the way gender is framed in much of the scholarly and policy debate. Decades after the shift from Women in Development to Gender and Development and the theoretical innovations of the late 1980s and 1990s that have transformed the way we understand gender, much of the literature on gender and agriculture in Africa is one that equates gender to women and throws out the instrumental role women can play in bringing about improvements in food security and agricultural production as a justification for why gender matters.

The way gender enters in to every aspect of life, underlies and to some extent determines experiences, opportunities, hopes, aspirations and conceptions of self is all too often lost. The positioning of men and women in relation to farming, the spaces they are and are not allowed to occupy, the embodied nature of agricultural activities and their implications for the future of agriculture as well as farming are all legitimate subjects of enquiry which have thus far attracted little attention. In this paper, we explore some of these concepts and the narratives that surround them in Ethiopia in light of our own empirical evidence as well as the literature and reflect on directions for further research. We particularly explore, based on studies of three rural farming villages in the Amhara Region and the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR), the highly gendered cultural and symbolic construction of 'the farmer' as an essentially masculine subject, and reflect on the reasons behind the continued persistence of this construction and its implications for current agricultural policy, further research and, above all, the current and future lives of young men and women in farming communities in Ethiopia.

Table 1: Summary of participants

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

The study context

This article is based on two qualitative studies of rural youth in three farming communities in Ethiopia conducted in 2011 and 2012. The first study was aimed at exploring the views of rural youth towards a possible future in farming (Tadele and Gella 2012). It explored characteristics and features of agricultural life which make it desirable or undesirable to young men and young women, as well as the possible forces that shape young men's and women's perceptions of agricultural life in general. This study was funded by the Future Agricultures Consortium and covered two rural kebeles⁵, Chertekel in the north and Geshgolla in the south of the country, selected to represent two different agro-ecological zones and farming traditions. The second study was done as part of an MPhil thesis by the first author and explored the aspirations and imagined futures of rural youth in relation to education and farming in Guai kebele, in the East Gojjam Zone of the Amhara Region (Gella 2013).

Methods

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

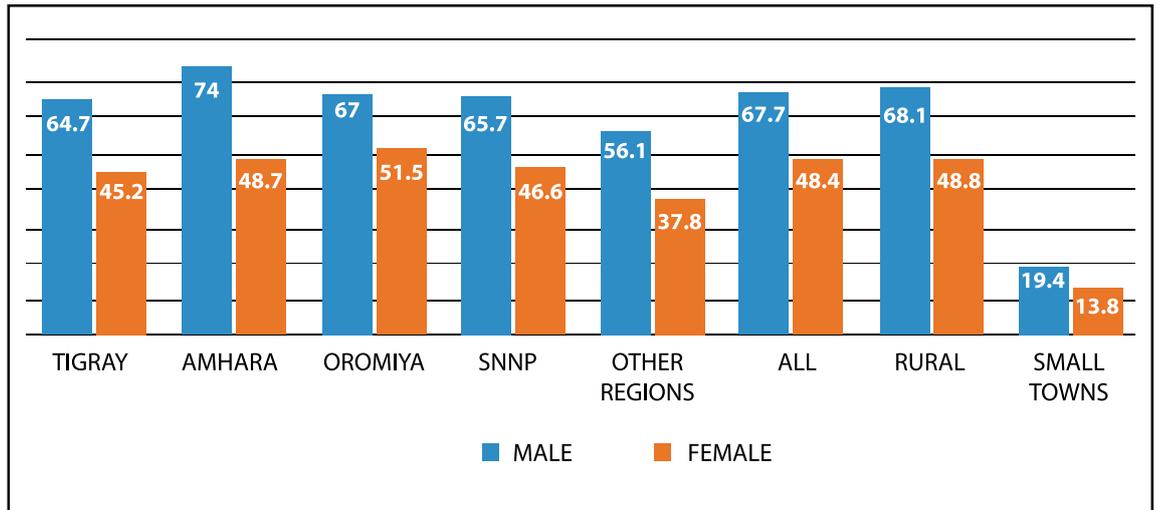
Findings

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

...in terms of semantics, throughout Ethiopia, both within government bureaus and communities, the term 'farmer' is used synonymously with the word for 'man'. It is clear that whether rural women contribute to the process of agricultural production to a greater or lesser extent, they are generally perceived as marginal players. (Frank 1999:3)

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

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



Source: CSA 2013, p. 51

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

Many labour intensive agricultural activities such as land preparation, weeding, harvesting and transporting harvests require the active involvement of women alongside men. Women are also primarily, and most often exclusively, responsible for tending to backyard gardens, cleaning animal barns, milking, milk processing and looking after poultry. But their active participation in the vast majority of agricultural activities does not result in their recognition as farmers on equal footing with men. Our own observations echo previous studies which have found that women are rarely recognised as proper farmers. Frank (1999: 3) for example observes, 'many agricultural extension agents refuse to acknowledge the importance of women's role in agricultural production'. Becher (2006: 26) also writes that 'when asked about the difference between men's and women's work, people generally say that men work on the land and women assist them,' and 'the notion of "assisting men in farm work" is a frequently expressed description of women[s] role'. She concludes that 'agricultural knowledge and work are considered part of a male-dominated social sphere' that women find best to leave to their husbands.

This lack of recognition is not limited to men and agricultural extension workers. Given the hegemonic nature of gender structures, women themselves can undervalue their involvement in and contributions to farming. This is apparent in the following data from a rural socioeconomic survey carried out in 2011–2012 where women's self reported involvement in agricultural activities is significantly lower than that of men. The fact that the self reported levels of involvement for women

are significantly lower than that of men across all regions despite significant differences in the cultural and technical organisation of farming is further testament to the dominance of a male centric understating of farming.

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

Of men and the plough: physical and cultural explanations of male hegemony in farming

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

Consistent with Boserup's hypothesis, we find a strong and robust positive relationship between historical plough use and unequal gender roles today. Traditional plough use is positively correlated with attitudes reflecting gender inequality and negatively correlated with female labor force participation, female firm ownership, and female participation in politics. (Alesina et al. 2013: 471)⁶

Although he does not explicitly attribute it to physical differences, McCann (1995) also notes that women in Ethiopian agriculture are 'structurally distant from the primary act of cultivation' and attributes this mainly to the dominance of ox plough agriculture in the country. He observes that 'gender relations and the imprint of ox-plough technology have added further divisions in socioeconomic relations in the economics of highland agriculture by producing household labour patterns dominated by male cultivation, [and] female food processing' (McCann 1995: 77).

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

The development and dominance of the ox plough technology as the principal form of agricultural production in much of Ethiopia and its placement in the exclusive domain of men are indeed important factors with significant implications for the historic as well as current gender order in farming. Unlike much of sub-Saharan Africa where the plough was introduced by European settlers and missionaries in the early 1920s, the ox plough technology most likely has its origins, or at the very least a very long history, in Ethiopia (Gebregziabher et al. 2006; McCann 1995; Ehret 1979)⁷. Perhaps owing to this long history of use, both the plough and the ox occupy a central place in popular understandings of what it means to be a farmer. Furthermore, their exclusive association with the masculine is an important issue with profound implications for the existing gender order in farming. But we find it quite problematic to reduce the origins and current state of gender relations in farming to the physical requirements of the plough.

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

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

3D modelling and analysis of the forces needed to operate the plough seem to indicate that the role of the operator is minimal. A pair of oxen provide the draught needed to pull the plough, the plough itself simply breaks but does not turn the soil. The major operative procedures involved are adjusting the tillage depth (either by modifying the length of the ploughshare or putting greater downward pressure on the handle); applying lateral pressures to the handle to facilitate the breaking and loosening of the soil or when the ploughshare is wedged; guiding the plough to maintain a straight line; and lifting up the ploughshare while turning at both ends of the plot (Nyssen et al. 2011; Mouazen et al. 2007; Gebregziabher et al. 2006). It is often also the case that a single plot requires multiple rounds of tillage, with each successive round requiring less strength.

Given all of this, it is questionable to assert that such a simple tool, heavily dependent on the power of the draught animal but with minimal requirements of the operator, would place women at a disadvantage – nor lead to the belief that they are unable to plough. In fact, Ehret (1979: 173) casts a serious doubt on this 'widely held idea that men took over cultivation tasks because of the invention of the plough', citing that 'even where the plough never was introduced, among South Cushites in particular, still men are the cultivators'. In addition, local explanations as to why women don't plough are often symbolic or cultural rather than physical, although the fact that women are physically weaker than men can often form part of the explanation. Bauer (1977: 72) in his study of households in Tigray explains that the prohibition against women threshing and ploughing is a long-standing one that is based on an indigenous theory that their participation in these activities would decrease the amount of crops produced. Gebru (2011: 50) in her investigation of gender and land rights in the same region attributes the prohibition against women ploughing to cultural taboos as well as perceived physical differences between men and women. She reports that 93 percent of women in female headed households and 71 percent in male headed households said they wouldn't plough even if given oxen and training on how to plough; 'toughness of the task' was the primary reason offered for this, with cultural taboos coming second. But Gebru goes on to explain that 'toughness of the task' is often a reference to the near impossibility for women of ploughing while at the same time carrying out their other productive and reproductive duties, rather than physical inability. Overall, she observes, the cultural taboos against women ploughing with oxen seem to be losing potency, but women find it impossible to engage in ploughing while they are responsible for the care of the entire household at the same time. She notes that the few women who did plough were largely able to do so since they had other women within the household (such as sisters) who took over their responsibilities as caretakers.

Figure 2: Three-dimensional sketch of the Ethiopian ard plough

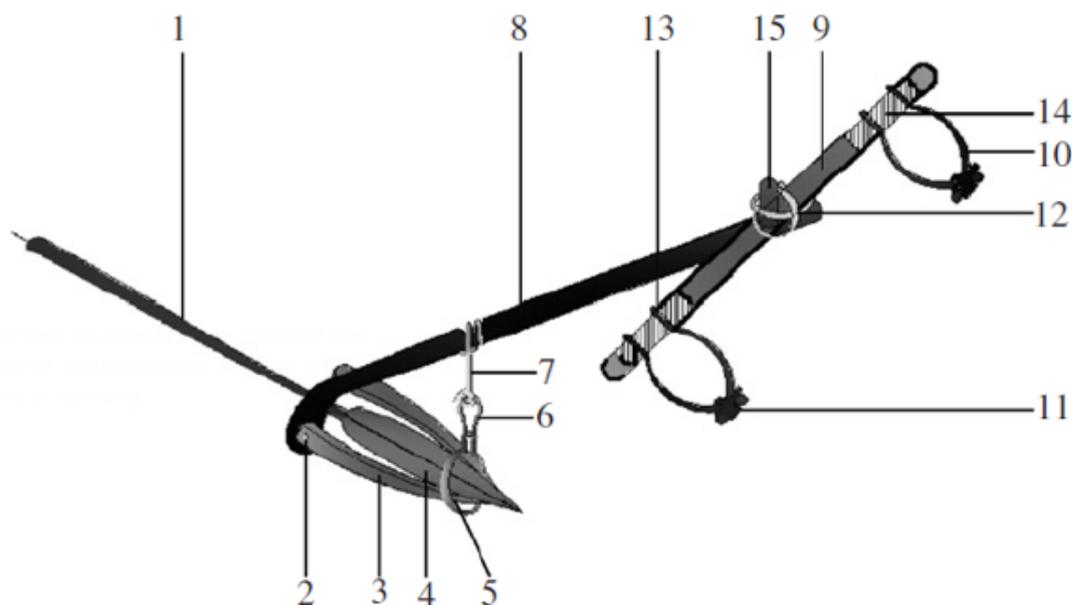


Fig. 2-Three-dimensional sketch of Ethiopian *ard* plough 'Maresha'(1) handle; (2) wooden pin; (3) side-wing; (4) ploughshare; (5) lower metal loop; (6) upper metal loop; (7) leather stripe (8) beam; (9) yoke; (10) neck holder sticks; (11, 12) leather strap or rope; (13) rubber as washer; (14) leather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

Source: Gebregziabher et al. 2007, p. 30

Aboma (2000: 67) in his investigation of gender and agricultural production among the Maqi Oromo indicates that women's involvement in agricultural activities largely depends on the wealth and labour needs of the household. He however notes that ploughing and sowing are considered to be exclusively male activities due to the cultural parallels drawn between women and the earth, insofar as both are seen as bearing the man's fruit. A woman ploughing the land, he observes, is akin to 'a woman tilling a woman' (Ibid: 71).

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

The notion of embodied selves, the links between the body, society and gender relations, and the ways discourses construct certain types of bodies with different powers and abilities represent important advances made in the last three decades to the way we understand gender relations (Gatens 1996, cited in Saugeres 2002; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). Such concepts have usefully been employed to study agricultural work and gender relations in western contexts. For example, Saugeres (2002), in her discussion of gendered discourse and embodiment in a French farming community, argues that the discursive representation of women's and men's

bodies in a farming context maintains and legitimates farm women's subordinate positions. She finds that women's bodies are represented as frail, delicate, deficient and lacking; and as a result, 'farm women are never seen as having bodies which enable them to farm in the same terms as men'.

Our studies are limited and we did not directly explore notions of social embodiment. Nevertheless, we believe there are important differences in the way men's and women's bodies are perceived in relation to farming activities in Ethiopia, on the basis of which narratives of what they can and cannot do as well as the spaces they can and cannot occupy are constituted. Although it is true that gender identity depends on the performance of gendered tasks rather than having a male or female body, narratives about the male and female body and their differences are an important source for the construction and reproduction of gender identities.⁸ As Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987: 25) put it, 'societies regularly reproduce and socialise the kind of bodies that they need'.

Crossing boundaries and challenging the gender order

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



A young woman ploughing with oxen in Tigray.

Source: Gebru 2011

There is this tradition that has been brought on from the past. For example, you will never see a man baking *injera* or cooking or a woman ploughing land or sowing seeds in the farm. It is just tradition but it still keeps men and women doing different things. (Female high school student, Chertekel)

Even if a woman had her own land but had no husband, she can't farm it herself. Maybe she can rent it out to a man who can but she can't go out with a plough and a pair of oxen to actually farm it herself. (Female high school student, Chertekel)

Instances where the line between what men's and women's bodies can and cannot do and the spaces they can and cannot occupy are crossed do exist both in the literature as well as our own studies. In our own study, we have only been able to get accounts of one widowed woman near Guai who ploughed her own land and one young woman in Geshgolla who claimed to be able to plough. Aboma (2000) and Gebru (2011), in their respective studies of farming in Oromiya and Tigray regions of Ethiopia, also find a few women who broke with tradition and ploughed with oxen. But there appears to be one underlying commonality to such instances where women encroach on the domains of men: it only occurs where there is an absence of men in the household. Nowhere in the literature or our own observations did we find married women who ploughed alongside their husbands.⁹ As a result, although such women are a cause for conversation as bodies out of place, they are tolerated, looked upon sympathetically, or in some instances

admired. Although their actions do deviate from the dominant form of femininity in farming, their femininity is not questioned.

Instances where men invade the space of women and perform activities that are considered feminine are rare and this issue does not seem to have been considered a legitimate topic of study thus far.

There were instances where the distinction between the activities of men and women were questioned by our participants. Young farmers as well as students often questioned the 'naturalness' of the gendered division of tasks and attributed its continued existence to 'bad culture' rather than nature. In interviews held with young farmers in Guai, participants brought up two examples of how this traditional division of labour was being challenged by some women. The actions of one local woman, who ploughed her own land and sowed it and did everything else a farmer should do, were given as an example of how things ought to be.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The key informant from the woreda children, youth and women's affairs office outlined a number of steps that have been taken by the office to change such traditional views and ensure that women take part and benefit from farming on equal basis with men. For example, male farmers (as household heads) have been organised into kebele-level development teams whereby model farmers take three to five other farmers and help them to be as good a farmer as they have become; however, there have been no equivalent teams for

women. Nor did women take part in the activities of the male only development teams. In an attempt to rectify this, the office has started establishing women's development teams. As much as this may seem, on the surface, an attempt to challenge gendered divisions, in reality it may end up further reinforcing them. While the men meet and develop plans about what they will sow on a particular plot and what inputs they will need and expenses they will make and returns they expect, the women are only expected to plan about which children they will send to school and which ones to the local clinic and what they will grow in the backyard or whether or not they will keep a few hens. Such interventions which draw boundaries between women's spheres are strong indications of the continuing existence of hegemonic gender beliefs and will likely end up further reinforcing these rather than challenging or changing them.

Other interventions have attempted to get women involved in natural resource conservation activities such as the erection of barriers and the planting of trees on areas considered prone to soil erosion. These activities, often planned and executed by local kebele administrations, were also exclusively done by men in the past. Yet, it is not clear how adding more burdens to women's already crowded schedule will help in bringing about gender equality. The potential negative effect of such interventions aimed at promoting gender equality, which add to the work loads of women without any substantial attempts at a redefinition of the existing relations between the sexes, is one that has been recognised for quite a while (see Molyneux 1985: 229). The fact that there are no parallel initiatives being undertaken to get men involved in activities that have traditionally been seen as women's domain is also quite telling in itself.

Limited as they may be, the above efforts by the government as well as the views expressed by participants in the interviews reflect an increasing desire to challenge and change traditionally held views regarding the role of men and women in farming. But in the end, when asked if a young woman by herself can make a living as a farmer (in the same way an unmarried young man could make a living from farming even when he does not own land and property), the response of participants was always 'no'; she either needs to be married or hire an *abelegna* – a male helping hand. Although one or two women may have stepped outside the accepted norm, a woman is still considered incapable of doing the two activities at the centre of farming: ploughing and sowing. As a result, the supportive role of women in agriculture remains powerful and the recognition of women as farmers in their own right remains an ideal.

The gendered path to farming and implications for rural youth

The gendered nature of agricultural and rural life is also visible in the different ways rural boys and girls grow up, in the differences in the time use of boys and girls, and in the different spaces which are open to them.

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

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

The availability of wide open spaces (fields) for both play and work (farming) as well as the belief that as farmers (or more specifically, as sons of farmers who took part in farming) they lived from their labour and the land without any dependence on anyone else was emphasised as constituting the better side of living in a rural area by most boys. Girls, on the other hand, appeared to have less time and space for play. Their play times were often limited to weekends (mainly Sunday) and religious holidays. Even during days they considered to be relatively free of work, the girls said that they have to do a variety of household chores such as washing their clothes and those of their families.

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

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

and why they were particularly apprehensive about a future life of farming (see Tadele and Gella 2012).

It has been documented that women's route of entry to farming has significant implications for their later relationship to farming and their relative positioning within the farming family (Shortall 2001: 165). In our studies, we find the pathways leading to a life of farming to be significantly different for young men and women. Young girls who have never gone to school tend to be married at an early age, usually to older males who are established farmers and therefore end up becoming farmers themselves. Young girls who complete high school and fail to go beyond also face the same option of entry into farming through marriage once they go back to their families. Young men, whether they have come back after finishing high school or been there their entire childhood, on the other hand get the option to work on their own, either on their parents' plot or for other people as hired helping hands, and accumulate a few assets (see Tadele and Gella 2014). Once they accumulate a few assets, they can then decide between getting married and settling for a life of farming, or venturing into other ways of earning a livelihood such as trade. For young women, such choices are rarely available since there are few to no ways they can accumulate assets by working independently as unmarried young women in the village. The choice is often between getting into a life of farming through marriage, and migrating to the nearest town and trying their luck there.¹⁰ When they do enter into farming, the route they took, that of becoming a farmer by marriage rather than becoming a farmer by their own choice and right, further reinforces their subordinate position.

Implications for current policy

Although some have cast a very critical eye on the current government's real commitment to gender equality (see Biseswar 2008), a lot has happened on the policy front in the last two decades to address gender inequality in Ethiopia. The country's first ever women's policy was legislated in 1993 (Buchy and Basaznew 2005). The family law and penal code were revised in 2001 and 2005 respectively to incorporate clauses guaranteeing women's equality and better protecting their rights. The equal land use rights of rural women were recognised with the start of the rural land certification program which began after the 1997 Federal Rural Land Administration Proclamation. Before that, women only owned land through their husbands and there were no legal assurances to continued co-ownership or equal division in the event of a divorce. The rural land administration and use proclamations of 1997 and 2005 and the rural land certification program which implemented these proclamations is perhaps the most important change that has occurred in the history of traditional smallholder farming in Ethiopia when it comes to addressing gender inequality. Although the specific details of the certification program differ from one region to the other, spouses are often given a joint certificate featuring their names and photographs side by side as

a testament to their equal land use rights. Although women themselves as well as their husbands can be well aware of their rights in the event of a divorce, key informant interviews as well as informal discussions with women seem to indicate that men are often unwilling to abide by the law. It often takes years of litigation, which many divorced women may find costly, to actually secure their equal land use rights, despite the joint certification.

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

The agricultural extension programme has also thus far mainly focused on men. Two to four agricultural extension workers, referred to as Development Agents (DAs), with expertise in crop cultivation, livestock and dairy and natural resources management are based in each kebele to provide guidance and training to local farmers. In the vast majority of cases, these DAs are men and provide their training and guidance to 'model farmers' who also happen to be men. Although the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has developed an alternative package for women in recent years with emphasis on expanding support for women's agricultural activities, it only deals with activities that traditionally fall under women's domain such as poultry and backyard vegetable gardens (key informant interviews; Mogues et al. 2009: 25)

Thus, the agricultural extension programme and the various initiatives that are underway to empower women seem to be ineffective. The fact that the extension programme is mostly run by men and targets male farmers as household heads is a manifestation of the current gender order in farming. But it also further reinforces the belief that men are the real farmers. The introduction of parallel extension programmes targeting women and women's activities pushes women to the margins instead of bringing them to the centre stage. Furthermore, activities intended to empower women by promoting their greater involvement in activities such as soil conservation that have little to do with challenging the masculinity of farming carry the risk of placing further burdens on women so long as there are no parallel initiatives intended at promoting men's greater participation in areas that are traditionally seen as the domain of women. There is a need for critical evaluation of the extension programme and its various gender empowerment components. Interventions which attempt to bring gender equality into farming which are themselves tailored along gender boundaries could even

have the opposite effect and end up reinforcing existing stereotypes and gendered forms of discrimination. The fact that little thought has been given to promoting the involvement of men in what are traditionally seen as women's activities shows not only the lack of a proper understanding of gender and the nature of gender relations but also the lacklustre nature of these interventions.

Conclusion

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

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

The nature of male dominance in farming and its implications for the lives of rural men and women does not seem to have been fully understood by policy actors. Perhaps as a result, current interventions aimed at challenging and changing gendered forms of inequality in farming run the risk of doing the exact opposite since they are themselves tailored across and further reinforce the belief that women and men have different spheres and activities. Interventions aimed at gender equality ought to be more transformative and need to take into

account gender relations, their full implications to the lives of men and women as farmers, and how they should and can be challenged. There needs to be a realisation among policy actors that the all too often sought after goal of transforming the agricultural sector should also involve bringing about transformative changes in gender and gender relations.

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

End Notes

- ¹ Asrat Ayalew Gella is an independent researcher and consultant specialising in gender and development.
- ² Getnet Tadele is an Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia
- ³ 'Gender inequality? Blame it on the plough', Live Mint and the Wall Street Journal (<http://www.livemint.com/Money/9du3j1RQL5vYLjTEtPjLL/Gender-inequality-Blame-it-on-the-plough.html>); 'The plough and the now: Deep-seated attitudes to women have roots in ancient agriculture', The Economist (<http://www.economist.com/node/18986073>); 'The root of inequality? It's down to whether you ploughed or hoed...', The Guardian (<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2011jul/31equality-hoes-ploughs-women-agriculture>)
- ⁴ <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2011/09/20110920121811su0.2064434.html>
- ⁵ A kebele is the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia, comprising a set of neighbouring hamlets in rural areas. The woreda is the next unit and is made up of a set of adjacent kebeles.
- ⁶ The authors stress that while their findings do support Boserup's hypothesis, they can also be interpreted differently. 'For example,' they state, 'we would observe the same relationships if societies with attitudes favouring gender inequality were more likely to adopt the plough historically, and these attitudes persist today.' It is, however, unfortunate that they follow this quite legitimate concession with an assertion that they have adequately controlled for an exhaustive set of observable characteristics to ensure that traditional plough use is the most important causal factor on subsequent cultural norms.
- ⁷ Although it has long been accepted that Semitic tribes from southern Arabia brought the ard plough with them and introduced it to the Cushitic inhabitants of the Ethiopian highlands, strong arguments have been made to refute this. Both Ehret and McCann argue that plow agriculture preceded South Arabian influence.
- ⁸ The relevance and applicability of notions of embodiment and the body to the study of African gender relations has been questioned by some. Oyewumi (1997) for example argues that the emphasis on the body in understanding personhood and the self are primarily a reflection of western thought, questions its relevance for the study of African societies, and criticizes western feminism for its preoccupation with the body as a defining principle of difference. We feel that while Oyewumi's critique is valid, it should not rule out the need to explore the applicability of the concept in all African societies. We believe Bakare-Yusuf (2003: 138) is right in asserting that 'we must reject outright any attempt to assign a particular conceptual category as belonging only to the "West" and therefore inapplicable to the African situation'.
- ⁹ A notable exception here is the Awramba community, which has been described as a place where pregnancy, giving birth and breast feeding remain the only tasks that are unshared between men and women. See article in the Ethiopian Herald (<http://www.ethpress.gov.et/herald/index.php/herald/art-culture/4354-the-awramba-community>) and a review of the available literature (http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/91/65/51/PDF/Awra_Amba_RJ_300612_EN_bd.pdf) on this utopian community.
- ¹⁰ Some young (and a lot of older) women do engage in the preparation and selling of traditional alcoholic drinks, mainly areqe (a local alcoholic drink). But this too requires startup capital. The unique advantage of being an abelgna is that it requires no startup costs. As long as young men and boys are willing to work for others, even their immediate needs for clothing, shelter and food are covered by the host family. In a way young women lack such choices of beginning from nothing to gradually build up their assets.

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