

Challenging gender inequality in rural Ethiopia: what does it take?



Introduction

Despite the vital roles women play in food systems, their access to land, inputs, services, finance, and technology continues to lag behind men's. Discriminatory social norms and rules affecting women and girls are at the heart of gender inequalityⁱ. Evaluations of food system programs recommend a transformative lens for gender equality to tackle its root causesⁱⁱ.

Much of the agricultural research and practice so far has been confined to using a women-in-development (WID) or gender-accommodative approach which promotes women's participation within existing contexts. With the evolving food system approach, there has been a drive worldwide to change the way our food system is currently structured in order to achieve the desired food system outcomes. This transformation cannot be achieved without centring the focus towards addressing the underlying, deep rooted structural barriers.

A scoping study on gender-focused initiatives in Ethiopiaⁱⁱⁱ highlights the need to address structural causes of gender inequality, beyond symptoms such as lack of women's access to credit and services. A number of initiatives with Gender Transformative Approaches (GTA) in Ethiopia demonstrated how this could be done. Yet, none of the initiatives identified shows clearly how a GTA could be integrated into research for food systems transformation settings.

KEY messages

- A wealth of experience with gender transformative approaches is available in Ethiopia. How to integrate these into often crop or technology centred research for food systems transformation activities remains to be explored.
- Across the food systems, unwritten rules and social norms dictate resource access, control decisions and livelihoods leaving certain groups at a disadvantage. Transforming food systems in equitable ways requires moving beyond the accommodative approach.
- Gender transformative change is an iterative and non-linear process happening at different levels. This transformation journey takes diverse pathways in diverse contexts requiring commitment at individual, household, community, and organizational levels.
- Changes in gender relations cannot be imposed. Community ownership over the transformation process is therefore a prerequisite.

A learning route to GTA cases

To realize the project's progress towards gender equality, RAISE-FS¹ has committed to adopt innovative, gender transformative approaches that actively explore, challenge, and change underlying causes of gender inequality in research for food systems transformation context. As part of this commitment, the project mapped gender transformative practices that are featured in the FAO, IFAD and WFP compendium of good practices^{iv} and

¹ The RAISE-FS project is hosted by Stichting Wageningen Research (SWR) Ethiopia

organized a learning route to selected cases. This learning visit has gathered 12 project implementing teams from SWR Ethiopia, Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation (WCIDI), South Agricultural research institute (SARI), Areka and Worabe research centres, Hawassa University and RAISE-FS staff from Oromia and Amhara liaison offices along with the respective developmental and public office stakeholders. The Ministry of Agriculture, CARE Ethiopia, Ripple Effects and PASIDIP have partnered in organizing the learning route that took place in Boditi, Dara and Meskan ² *woreda's* in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) and Sidama regions.

The team explored how GTA could be integrated into research for food system transformation. The UNSDG's five factors of Leaving No One Behind (i. discrimination on the basis of socially ascribed identity, ii. geography/location, iii. vulnerability to shocks, iv. governance and v. socio-economic status) were used for interactions on outreach and targeting. The Gender@Work framework was used for interactions on changes triggered by the GTA from the individual to systemic levels, in the informal and formal spheres. This structured the interviews, observations and discussions with community participants and staff involved in the cases. A checklist was used with questions on i) the changes at different levels; ii) targeting and outreach; iii) depth of engagement; and iv) sustainability.

After the interactions and reflections, observations were analysed, and lessons were articulated.

Transformative Household Methodology (THM)

THM is a tool that aims at creating awareness of intra-household relations by improving relations between women and men, girls and boys.

THM supports household members to identify their different roles and responsibilities as well as their access to and control over resources and related benefits, using the Harvard Gender Analytical Tools.

First-hand impression of the changes at local level

In the three *woreda's*, three different GTAs have been applied: **Social Analysis and Action (SAA)**, **Transformative Household Methodology (THM)**, and **Gender Model Family (GMF)**. In terms of entry level, the visited cases fall into two broad categories; i) family and intra-household level, and ii) group/communities' level. For GTAs that use the

Gender Model Family (GMF) (GMF)

The GMF is a gender transformative approach that enables married men and women (couples, partners) to address unequal power relations and decision making about household resources.

The approach works by establishing role model families and engaging both the wives and husbands as 'change agents in their community.

intra-household level as main entry point, the focus mainly lies in transforming existing gender dynamics at household level. This comprises changes in gender roles, decisions and gender relations. GTAs that use the group/community levels as main entry point focus more on transforming restrictive social and gender norms at a wider level.

Despite the differences in focus between these approaches, all three cases had demonstrated changes at multiple levels. SAA used village economic and social associations and savings and lending associations as entry points. THM was built around producer groups, while GMF used the farmer field school structure by targeting model farmers. At the **individual level** for example, women attested that they had taken up leadership roles in the groups (such as saving groups and economic self-help groups) for the first time in their lives as a result of the GTA. This had been shown both in a formal way (women having leadership positions), and in informal ways through self-confidence to speak in public, manage income and make decisions. Some testified that this was because they now own assets and control their own income and are supported by male members of the household. Women's mobility had also changed positively in the sense that women started participating in public meetings, community work, training and social events. While decisions around marriage in the past were commonly decided by men,

² Hosted by [Ripple Effect Ethiopia](#), [CARE Ethiopia](#), and the IFAD-supported [Participatory Small-scale Irrigation Development Programme II](#) respectively.

there were some strong testimonies of women having an equal say in such decisions.

This pointed to the **changes at the household level**. A more equal sharing of the workload was the most common change reported across the three cases. The burden on women was previously disproportionately high, and tasks were rigidly divided. As a result of GTA interventions, men increasingly took up household chores and care tasks to reduce the burden. This also led to a higher involvement of women in economic activities. Assets and resources are increasingly co-owned and co-managed by women and men, based on trust-building processes they went through. Participants also reported reduced incidence of gender-based violence and bickering in the household as a result of their GTA participation. These changes in social relations underpinned changes in nutrition and livelihoods such as having increased savings, diversification of crops and diets, higher production of crops and/or livestock and better income earnings.

The changes at individual and household levels turned out to be supported by changes at **wider and structural levels**. Especially in group and community focused gender transformative approaches, positive shifts were observed, in cultural and social norms of the community. Participants reported that it is now considered normal that women own business, speak in public and make decisions about assets and men engaging in what used to be 'women's domains' like going home shopping and doing household chores while this was hardly the case before. Role models were said to have shown the way. It was observed that, indeed some of the women were very vocal, especially in SAA

Social Analysis and Action (SAA)

SAA is a community led change process through which individuals and communities explore and challenge the social norms, beliefs and practices that shape their lives and are at the root of the development problems that they seek to address.

The change process of SAA lies in a series of discussions; through which implementing staff, community members and other pertinent stakeholder engage in a critical self-reflection about restrictive social norms, beliefs and practices that affect their lives.

participants in Dara *woreda*³. Yet, in general, men were still the first to speak.

In terms of **targeting**, the cases in the three *woredas* were very different. For the SAA approach PSNP⁴ households were deliberately targeted first, followed by self-selection through their informal networks, while in the case of THM approach, local leaders first mobilised 'household heads' who – based on participatory wealth ranking – selected people living in poverty. The GMF approach targeted model farmers following the Farmer Field School structure. In two cases self-help groups⁵ were deliberately created as part of the GTA. Group members were trained and taken along in the GTA process, to be sharing the approach with their peers. Among the THM participants, this was referred to as "passing on the gift". Common was that women and men from the same village or neighbourhood were targeted. In some cases, participants seemed to involve their religious groups as well. On the other hand, it was observed that younger families are less in number especially in the GMF approach. Out of the UNSDG factors of leaving no one behind, "discrimination based on gender identity" and "socio-economic status" were articulated as the main criteria for targeting.

The differences in **outreach** were very large also because of the differences in implementation period. In the SAA case in Dara for example the project had closed 1.5 years ago, and 16,200 families had been reached in the *woreda*. In THM in Boditi – where the project is ongoing – 2500 households have been reached so far through nine clusters.

The **depth of engagement** was hard to assess. In all cases, multiple approaches had been applied and adapted to the context. The team noted that the tools used were very straightforward and well-understood by community participants. Training modules on gender contained pre-defined topics such as labour division between women and men and were combined with livelihood interventions. In the SAA case there was a deliberate focus on group and capacity development, including saving and credit to be managed by the participants. Links with microfinance institutions were made for emerging larger business ideas. In the THM case minimal material support was provided such as seeds, artificial insemination, and feed grass. In the GMF

³ The scope of the visit was not to assess to what degree changes could be attributed to the GTA. In this case for example religion and the congregation around the religious houses seem to have played a role in relation to their public speaking and assertiveness.

⁴ The Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) is a social protection program by the Government of Ethiopia targeting food-insecure households.

⁵ In Dara these were referred to as "Village Economic and Social Associations" (VESA).

case the role model families (being the same as the model farmers) were supported with a wide range of inputs like seeds, solar panel, pumps for irrigation and materials for vermicomposting.

Can it be sustained?

In the case of Social Analysis and Action, the project had closed 1.5 years ago. It was observed that the groups were still active, tracking their progress and updating their plans for the future, perhaps helped by the willingness of the community facilitator to continue some voluntaries follow up. In the case of SAA and THM it was explained that setting up self-help groups and strengthening capacities aimed at sustainability from the start. In the GMF approach, the focus on role models in the community was indicated as the main sustainability mechanism (recorded evidence of replication through role models was not available). Combining the GTA alongside existing government structures, such as the model farmer approach, may facilitate institutionalisation and sustainability thereof. In all cases staff aspired to hand over these interventions to the government structures, yet practical examples of this were not recorded. Questions remained on the sustainability where material support was given to participants. It was noted that working with longer periods of time also contributes to the sustainability of interventions.

Lessons learned

After each field visit, the team shared and reflected on observations and responses. At the end of the week these reflections and observations were synthesised into key lessons as indicated below.

The changes in the **social and the economic sphere were completely intertwined** and interdependent. Changes in gender relations and social norms helped participants to progress economically, and the enhanced economic opportunities helped to underpin the changes in gender relations in a mutually reinforcing way.

Role models and peer sharing help to **shift the status quo**. Social norms do not necessarily change through training. Two strategies stood out: role models who show that different behaviour is possible and beneficial; and peer sharing through informal social groups. A higher level of material support to role model families does not necessarily make others in the community change their gender relations. A focus on capacity development, group mobilisation and skills seem to lead to more credible role models and examples that others are more likely to follow.

The cases showed that not necessarily one single gender transformative approach needs to be selected. It can rather be a **mix of approaches** depending on the

context and capacities, as long as it is well-designed with effective entry points and adapted based on experience.

It involves working with or developing **groups that function as platforms to support individuals** to act on commitments to change gender relations. Groups with a self-help function or a self-generated initiative are suitable because participants feel ownership. The VESA⁷ group for example meets every week because of the savings and these meetings were used to address gender and other social issues as well.

Changes require a collaborative effort. The observations, discussions and interviews confirmed for the team that **community ownership** is a precondition for sustainable changes at the individual, relations, and structural levels. Without changing social norms, the changes at individual and relation levels may be reversed because of peer pressure. To have changes at different levels, a collaboration between stakeholders is needed, for example:

- Community participants' role includes passing on the training and messages to their peers.
- Facilitators are needed who live in the community and always interact, reach out to participants and function as linking pins for supporters.
- Supporting facilitators with an outsider view are also needed to challenge issues that are hard for local facilitators to raise. Especially at the start they need to be present and deeply engaged.
- Local governmental partners need to be engaged for the sustainability of the initiative.
- Financial service providers are needed (beyond saving) to support emerging business initiatives.

The stakeholder roles differ depending on the context, so these roles need to be designed, reflected upon and adapted where needed.

While a change process can be quite complex, the tool demonstrated in the THM case to change the division of labour within households showed us the **power of simplicity**: a participatory tool that participants themselves can easily facilitate and that helps them to get engaged and act.

In the cases observed, gender issues were pre-defined, especially women's workload. The disadvantage may be that other urgent social issues are overlooked. GTAs also exist in which the participants first identify the locally relevant social issues and prioritise which issues to address first.

Implications and way forward

From the reflections the question arises why, with the wealth of available experience with GTA in Ethiopia, there is so little uptake within research for food systems transformation interventions?

The team realised that their typical interventions start from crops, livestock and technologies rather than people in their complex livelihood systems and are designed with farmers from different locations for testing and demonstrations. A village or group perspective – as vehicle for the GTA - is often missing. This may be different for the work on home gardening and business models such as poultry production. In addition, staff of universities and research centres are often located far from farmer's testing sites, while social change processes require the presence of local facilitators.

The team concluded the following way forward:

- To integrate a gender transformative approach, a clear targeting framework and engagement strategy in the community is needed in the initial stage for an effective intervention. This means effective **entry points** first need to be identified. For example, in the case of the research centres in Oromia the home gardening interventions can be used as an entry point because these apply a village and group approach. For crop-based interventions, the selection of farmers for technology testing and demonstration need be revisited to represent diversity for example in gender, age and location, and a strategy is needed to involve the wider community.
- The focus on crops and technical issues needs to be **widened to include social issues** at the individual, household, group and wider levels.
- Not necessarily one specific GTA is suited for research for food systems transformation activities. **Tools and parts of different GTA** need to be combined to design a tailor-made process.

- **Dedicated process facilitation** is needed to challenge gender and power relations in order to reach the types of changes described above. Agricultural research centres and universities may not have all the necessary capacities in-house. Collaboration with other organisations and individuals is needed to ensure the presence of facilitators in the communities of implementation. Peer to peer education using the principle of "passing on the gift" is important for reaching a critical mass of people so that gender norms can be challenged. This needs to be considered as part of the design of the process and planning.
- **Capacity strengthening** at the organisational level needs to go hand in hand with the piloting of gender transformative approaches. Field based experiences in the working area of research centres and universities are more inspiring compared to theory and help to make the issues practical and concrete.
- The **level of investment** required depends on many parameters and needs to be worked out along with the process design and planning. It is expected that the initial stages are the most cost intensive. Once the peer learning mechanisms are functioning, the follow up becomes less intensive.
- **Youth empowerment** appears a different ballgame. The topic of gender transformative approaches is large and although intersectionality is discussed as part of it, the youth agenda easily slips through the cracks. This requires deliberate attention and strategy development.



Figure 1 SWR Ethiopia staff while visiting the GTA sites.



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