

# Pack 119

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**Backgrounder: Rights of rural women in Ethiopia**

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**Introduction**

Ethiopian women have played the traditional role of mother and homemaker in both rural and urban areas. In addition to their farming work, women also engage in unpaid work in their household such as cooking for the family, grinding grain, fetching water, gathering fuelwood, doing laundry, and cleaning barns. However, their work has never been limited to the household and family.

This backgrounder will cover various aspects of rural women’s lives, including access and control of productive resources, harmful traditional practices such as early forced marriage and female genital mutilation, gender-based violence, and women’s involvement in decision-making.

Ethiopia is characterized by great ethnic and religious diversity, and the multiplicity of patrimonial and customary laws means great variation in the status of women. Semitic traditions and the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia tend to dominate in northern Tigray and Amhara, where, according to customary norms, women cannot plow the land and are forced to rent their land to others to work it.

In Southern and South-Central Ethiopia Cushitic traditions, Islam, and Protestant Christianity are practiced. In these regions, women have no right to own land and can only access land through their husbands. The household was traditionally considered as a unit for land distribution and only heads of households were registered as members of peasant associations.

In Eastern Ethiopia, where the majority of residents are Sunni Muslims and recently converted Protestants, women’s right to own land is not officially recognized and they depend entirely on their husbands for access to land. Thus, the security of marriage is the major foundation for the security of tenure. In practice, land and cattle are men’s property, although women can own household items and some small animals such as chickens and sheep. (2)

#### **1. Key statistics**

#### Women account for about 43% of the agricultural labor force globally, and about 47% in Ethiopia. (23)

#### More than 85% of Ethiopia’s population depends on rain-fed agriculture.

#### 20-40% of agricultural labour is done by rural women in Ethiopia.

#### Approximately 79% of rural women in Ethiopia work an estimated 13-17 hours per day, almost twice the amount of time that men work. (17)

#### Women own only 19.5% of land titles in Ethiopia.

#### 15% of women compared to 21% of men landholders have access to credit. (4)

#### **2. Key information**

**Access and control of agricultural resources**

Women in Ethiopia constitute half of the country’s population and about 40% of women live in rural areas. (21) But most lack independent access to productive resources, particularly land. As elsewhere in Africa, women’s contribution to agricultural production and household food security is very significant. (20)

Rural women in Ethiopia play a significant role in crop and livestock production in addition to their roles in childbearing, child care, domestic, and community roles. But their access to and control over resources is limited. Unfortunately, women’s agricultural work has often been considered marginal, and they have been viewed more as consumers than producers. (4)

In Ethiopia, women’s rights, including their legal rights, to use and manage land are not respected and are commonly violated by their close relatives or their spouse’s close relatives. This places female farmers at a disadvantage for crop production in small-scale farming systems as their success is frequently hindered by their:

* Reduced capacity to purchase farm inputs such as fertilizer and improved seeds due to poor access to funds.
* Lack of collateral such as title deeds for accessing the credit required to purchase inputs.
* Lack of access to funds from selling farm produce as these funds are often managed by male members of the household.
* Poorer access to extension information due to generally lower levels of literacy.
* Limited time to fully commit to farming activities because of household activities such as cooking and caring for children and other family members.
* Weaker access to markets.
* Poorer access to agricultural technologies and machinery. (8)

**Ethiopian women’s land rights**

The traditional system of land tenure in Ethiopia was based on a tenant-landlord relationship and totally denied women independent land rights. Even though the present federal government has created gender-sensitive policies and proclamations, the process of implementing and publicizing policies that enable women to access land has been slow. (20)

Recently, the Ethiopian government has enacted a variety of laws and established institutions to protect women’s rights to land. Despite these commitments, customary practices and stereotypes remain prevalent in the country, limiting women's ability to exercise their rights. (24)

**Gender roles in agriculture**

In most Ethiopian societies, men’s agricultural roles are clear and recognized. But women’s roles in agriculture are unclear. Although there is increasing recognition that women have involved in world agriculture until recently it has been difficult to gain a clear picture of where, and under what circumstances women participate in farm work.

Here are factors that affect women’s participation in agricultural production activities:

* Demographic factors: age of women, number of children in the family.
* Economic factors: the size of farmland, access to key factors of production.
* Socio-cultural factors: attitudes toward women’s work and culturally prescribed roles of women. (17)

Some of the key agricultural sectors in Ethiopia are teff, cereals, coffee and tea, livestock, and the fishing sector. Women are typically involved in activities such as weeding, harvesting, preparing storage containers, managing all aspects of home gardens and poultry raising, transporting farm inputs to the field, and procuring water for household use and some on-farm uses. (16)

**Women farmers and climate change**

* Changes in the amount, intensity, and timing of rainfall, as well as temperature changes, often cause serious production losses and worsen food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa, including Ethiopia. (13)
* Ethiopian farmers rely on rainfall to make a living and are adversely affected by extreme weather events such as floods and drought as well as by changing weather patterns. Women farmers’ poor access to education, credit, and technology increases their vulnerability to the negative impacts of climate extremes.
* Small changes to traditional farming practices can reduce the impact of climate shocks on farmers’ yields, allowing them to adapt to a changing climate and reduce agriculture’s environmental impact. (7) For instance, rehabilitating degraded land by applying fertilizers and implementing agroforestry systems to increase the diversity of crops and trees allow farmland to be productive all year long (18). allowing women to boost their critical role in bringing food and economic security to the household.

**Useful and harmful traditional practices and rural women in Ethiopia**

Traditions are long-established patterns of actions or behaviours that may be handed down within communities over many generations and are based on the beliefs and values held by community members. Ethiopia has both useful and harmful traditional practices.

*Useful traditional practices:*

* 59% of mothers in Ethiopia exclusively breastfeed their newborns until they are six months old, while 72% start breastfeeding within one hour of childbirth.
* Relieving women from work after childbirth, (Also, the current labor law in Ethiopia allows maternity leave of up to six months and women’s jobs are secure after they complete their leave.)
* Special care and a nutritious diet for new mothers.

*Harmful traditional practices:*

* In 2005, 74% of women and girls aged 15-49 have undergone some form of female genital mutilation (FGM), while 62% of girls aged 15-19 had experienced some form of FGM. (19)
* Early marriage
* Marriage by abduction
* Polygamy (1)

Some of the reasons why FGM is practiced include:

* To maintain the moral behavior of women in society (to gain social acceptance). Community members perceive a girl who is uncut as unclean and may therefore stigmatize the girl and her family from taking part in social and religious functions.
* To preserve virginity in unmarried women.
* For hygienic and aesthetic reasons: There is a view that the external female genitalia is unsightly and should be removed to promote good hygiene, prevent illness, and enhance the esthetic appeal.
* To “calm” a girl and make her “decent” by suppressing her sexual desires.
* To avoid difficulties at delivery. There are myths that FGM enhances fertility and promotes child survival because of the removal of the hymen.
* To increase matrimonial and marriage opportunities (men can be more assured that their brides are virgins.)

**Gender-based violence (GBV)**

Gender-based violence is violence that is experienced by individuals because of their gender, gender expression, gender identity, or perceived gender, and encompasses physical, sexualized, psychological, and economic violence.

The prevalence of gender-based violence is high in sub-Saharan Africa, and Ethiopia has one of the highest prevalence, with 67.7% of 10-24-year-old women having experienced GBV at some point.

Survivors of gender-based violence suffer psychological problems in addition to the physical effects.

Psychological effects of GBV:

* Stress
* Anxiety
* Depression

Physical effects of GBV:

* Unwanted pregnancy
* Being pressured to have unsafe abortions
* Sexually transmitted infections (15)

**Early (child) marriage**

* A 2016 survey found that the average age at marriage was 17.1 for women and that about 58% of women marry before their 18th birthday, compared to only 9% for men.
* More than 41% of women 20-24 years old reported getting married by the age of 18, while 16% of women in the same age group were married by age 15.

One of the major issues that have historically prevented the effectiveness of early (child) marriage laws has been the lack of knowledge of laws and policies that discourage early marriage in poor, rural, uneducated people. But the general awareness that early marriage is illegal under national law is increasing. (5)

**Women and decision-making**

*Health*

Women’s ability to make decisions about their reproductive health is central to achieving reproductive well-being. Exercising reproductive health rights has been recognized as one of the prerequisites for sustainable development in many developing countries, including Ethiopia.

* In Ethiopia, 72% of urban births were assisted by a skilled provider, compared with 43% of births in rural areas. Similarly, 70% of urban births were delivered in a health facility, compared with 40% in rural areas. (8)
* Because women are considered as subordinate to their husbands, their ability to fully exercise their reproductive health and rights is restricted. For example, in a spousal relationship, even if the wife supports family planning and is willing to use contraceptives, the husband may be against using contraceptives, in which case he can dominate decision-making about family planning.
* Women in rural areas may have insufficient knowledge about reproductive health, in part because of male dominance in decision-making. Due to this information gap, women are exposed to sexually transmitted infections and other sexual and reproductive health problems. (11)

*Family planning*

The use of effective contraceptive methods is facilitated when couples have a positive attitude toward family planning.

* A 2000 study found that, in almost half of couples (49%), both spouses approved of family planning, while both disapproved in 12% of couples. When one spouse disapproved, it was just as likely to be the wife as the husband (13% versus 11%). (14) Other studies show that 64% of women in Ethiopia have had their need for family planning satisfied with modern methods in the last 5 years.

*Agriculture/pastoralism*

* In pastoralist communities. women are responsible for herding, tending to sick animals, watering, cleaning barns, milking, and processing milk. Women have access to livestock by virtue of their relationships to the men (husbands, fathers, and sons) who own the livestock. Women participate in some decisions about livestock, but only in a consultative manner. Men have the final decision.

Men and women do not have equal decision-making power over household assets, in particular income. Other areas where women have less decision-making power than men include:

* Whether individual crops will be grown for household consumption or as cash crops.
* Selling and transferring large and small livestock.
* Sale or purchase of agricultural inputs.
* Non-farm business activities.
* Buying, selling, or use of agricultural land.
* Buying or selling household property.
* Use of income, including income earned by married women.
* Savings.
* Children’s education.
* Family planning and birth spacing.

**Participation in the formal economy**

* Women are underrepresented in formal employment sectors and highly concentrated in routine, low-paying jobs such as clerical or manual labour.
* The number of women who participate in and benefit from industry and commerce is insignificant due to lack of access to education, productive resources (e.g., land, credit, advisory services, training, and information), and opportunities. However, for women who gain access to formal employment, there is a policy of equal pay for equal work in Ethiopia that is respected in the formal sector.

**Participation in politics**

Women who do enter politics face barriers, including:

* Lack of experience: For example, currently, women hold 38.8% of the seats in the federal parliament.
* Limited support networks, for example, the lack of support from immediate family members or the community.
* Exclusion from the informal decision-making process in male-dominated associations and meetings
* Limited information about female political candidates because media disproportionally cover male candidates.

Despite these difficulties, the number of women parliamentarians is increasing. (9)

**Girls’ education**

* In Ethiopia, there has been significant progress in increasing access to education. In 2015/16, the country’s enrolment rate was 81% for girls and 87% for boys in primary school.
* The Ministry of Education has introduced affirmative action policies aimed mainly at higher education, including establishing lower admission standards for women. The national Gender Strategy for Education and Training aims to ensure gender equity across all levels of education and training by 2030.
* As girls mature, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to continue at school, largely due to social expectations that favour marriage over education. Marriage is a key factor in school dropouts among adolescent girls. A survey in 2020 found that 40% of rural girls had left school because of marriage.
* In many communities, gender norms mean that girls who remain unmarried in their late teens are insulted and ridiculed by their peers and the wider community. Once married, it is challenging for adolescent girls to stay in school because they are expected to focus on their husbands, household chores, and having and raising children. (12)

**Where can I find more resources on this topic*?***

*Documents*

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