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The Gender Dimensions of Drought in Fedis Woreda District, Ethiopia

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Gender Dimensions of Food and Water Security
in Dryland Areas

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Acronyms

BoA	Bureau of Agriculture
CCI	Complementary Community Investment Programme
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ETB	Ethiopian birr
EWS	Early warning system
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FSP	Food Security Programme
GDP	Gross domestic product
GGCA	Global Gender and Climate Alliance
HAB	Household Asset Building Programme
IDI	In-depth interview
IGA	Income-generating activity
IPCC	Intergovernmental panel on climate change
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
KII	Key informant interview
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MoFED	Ethiopian Ministry of Finance and Economic Cooperation
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Program
SIGI	Social Institutions and Gender Index
UNCCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNISDR	United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
USD	United States dollars
WEDO	Women's Environment and Development Organization
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

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Abstract

This paper presents the key findings of a research project that investigated women's and men's vulnerability to drought in Fedis woreda, a district located in Eastern Ethiopia. It focuses on the gendered impacts of drought on rural livelihoods in dryland areas. The research used a comparative assessment of both men's and women's susceptibility and coping capacities. Findings show that, in the event of a drought, women's workload increases, their health is severely compromised due to reduced food intake, girls are more likely to drop out of school, and women have fewer chances than men to engage in income-generating activities. In addition, women do not have decision-making power on many issues that impact livelihood security, such as crop cultivation, agricultural practices and asset management. As a result, women's capacity to reduce the negative consequences of drought, be it preventive or palliative, is inferior to that of men. Furthermore, this paper analyses the government's key interventions to reduce drought risk.

The analyses of these different aspects illustrate that women are more likely than men to experience harm from drought. The paper therefore calls for stronger and gender-sensitive risk reduction measures that take into consideration women's needs and their disadvantaged position.

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Introduction

Dryland areas cover 40 per cent of the earth's land surface (Koohafkan and Stewart 2008) and are home to two billion people (Reynolds et al. 2007). What characterizes them is the scarcity, infrequency or unpredictability of rainfall. Drought, loss of organic material, wind and water erosion, soil crusting, salinization and other processes gradually render soils infertile and severely impact livelihood in dryland areas (Schwilch et al. 2015). Research studies have estimated that 12 million hectares of fertile land are lost to desertification every year—three times the size of Switzerland (UNCCD 2011). Some regions are particularly prone to drought events. Recurrent drought events in Africa have for instance resulted in huge losses of life and property and triggered the migration of people.

In Ethiopia, dryland areas make up 75 per cent of the land mass and host about one-third of the population (FAO 2010). Drought is the most important climate-related natural hazard which periodically affects Ethiopia, greatly menacing the agricultural sectors and livelihoods of the poorest populations (FAO 2010) as well as the economic growth of the country.¹ Climate variability and the frequency of extreme events have increased over recent times and the country was recognized as one of the most affected by climate change (Shepherd et al. 2013). This adds to the challenges already experienced by people living in dryland areas.

There is general consensus that climate change—despite its global nature—will not affect everyone in the same way and with the same intensity. As Neumayer and Plumper explain, “natural disasters do not affect people equally...a vulnerability approach to disasters would suggest that inequalities in exposure and sensitivity to risk as well as inequalities in access to resources, capabilities and opportunities systematically disadvantage certain groups of people, rendering them more vulnerable to the impact of natural disasters” (2007:1).

Poor people are therefore often identified as the most disadvantaged when it comes to the impacts of natural disasters: the reliance of the poor “on local ecological resources, coupled with existing stresses on health and well-being and limited financial, institutional and human resources leave the poor most vulnerable and least able to adapt to the impacts of climate change” (Economic Commission for Africa 2009:1-2).

Multiple studies and organizations² also point to differences between men's and women's vulnerability to natural hazards. For instance, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) claims that climate shocks will disproportionately affect women, as they are mostly “responsible for securing food throughout the whole value chain, and equally responsible for managing the natural resource base (land, water, in particular)” (UNECA 2009:5), which is likely to be severely reduced as a consequence of climate change. Women seem more vulnerable due to factors related to their reproductive role and the associated higher food and medical supervision needs during pregnancy; and to factors resulting from social norms that regulate decision-making power and access to land and other resources. The social dimension is central in determining one's vulnerability to external shocks, as any kind of human impact of

¹ In Ethiopia, agriculture directly supports over 85 per cent of the population in terms of employment and livelihoods, accounting for about 47 per cent of the country's GDP, and generating over 90 per cent of the foreign exchange earnings on average (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html>, accessed in August 2015).

² United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UN Women, Global Gender and Climate Alliance (GGCA), International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO).

natural disasters is contingent on economic, cultural and social relations (Neumayer and Plumper 2007). As Cannon puts it, “there are no generalized opportunities and risks in nature, but instead there are sets of unequal access to opportunities and unequal exposures to risks which are a consequence of the socio-economic system” (1994:14).

Drought can affect a community in many ways. Its direct or indirect impacts can be grouped in three clusters: (i) economic impacts, as failed or infected crops, loss of livestock production, loss of income, capital shortfall and price increase; (ii) environmental impacts, as loss of wildlife and water quality, fires, soil erosion and loss of biodiversity; (iii) and social impacts, including health, public safety, conflicts between water users, reduced quality of life and poverty. Drought vulnerability is a complex concept that includes both biophysical and socioeconomic drivers that determine people’s susceptibility to harm and capacity to cope with drought. Components of drought vulnerability are, for instance, inadequate disaster management, limitations of technology and of the economy, social factors and environmental constraints (Naumann et al. 2014).

Situated within the international debate on the gender dimensions of climate change, this paper will present the key findings of an empirical study that assessed how men and women experience drought in Fedis *woreda*,³ Ethiopia. More specifically, it presents men’s and women’s disaster risk to drought with the aim of contributing to a broader understanding of the phenomenon to policy makers, sector officers and researchers. The data have been collected during fieldwork conducted between October and December 2014 in Bidi Bora, a lowland agro-pastoralist *kebele* inhabited by 8,235 people.⁴ Bidi Bora is one of the 19 kebeles that are comprised in Fedis, a *woreda* located in the East Hararge Zone, Oromia Region, Eastern Ethiopia.

The section below introduces the conceptual approach and methodology used in this research. This is followed by background information on the general level of exposure to drought in the case study area and the gender relations patterns in the research area, as identified during data collection. Then I will present men’s and women’s susceptibility to drought and their coping capacity. This will be followed by a brief look at government initiatives concerning disaster risk reduction. Finally, I will list the different factors contributing to men’s and women’s vulnerability to drought and suggest recommendations for policy makers based on the research findings.

Conceptual Approach and Research Methodology

Disaster risk is defined as the likelihood of experiencing harm from a natural hazard

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