



Women's collective action in the honey sector in Ethiopia

February 2013

# Involving marginalized women in collective action

Making a difference through NGO interventions

  
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WOMEN'S ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP IN AGRICULTURAL MARKETS

## Summary

At first glance, the honey sector in Ethiopia seems an unlikely place in which to find women forming collective action (CA) groups, taking leadership positions, and benefiting from increased income generation. Beekeeping and honey production are largely male occupations, partly because harvesting honey from traditional hives requires climbing trees, which is not socially acceptable for women. Women's ability to engage in producing and marketing honey and bee products has also been hindered, however, by a lack of necessary assets, such as land and equipment, and limited access to market services and functions, including finance, marketing and technical training.

Over the last decade, however, women have begun to participate in CA in the honey sector in Amhara region of Ethiopia, and to benefit from their involvement in these groups. This change has been enabled by a number of factors, driven by the growing global demand for honey and bee products. The sector has become an attractive investment opportunity, opening up a space for women and

other marginalized smallholder producers to engage with market and state actors. Modern hive technology has also overcome a barrier to women's engagement in the sector, as the hives are relatively cheap and can be kept at ground level, close to homesteads. Crucially, external actors taking advantage of this enabling environment for women's collective action (WCA) have specifically prioritized the participation of marginalized women in CA, supporting them to join and benefit from groups.

As a result of these factors, younger and unmarried women in Amhara have been able to access and benefit from CA. This is in contrast to Oxfam's findings from Mali and Tanzania, which showed that, in those contexts, it was usually older, married women who were more able to participate in CA activities. The WCA findings from Ethiopia are particularly exciting, as they suggest that focused interventions by government and development actors really can make a difference when it comes to reaching more marginalized groups of women.

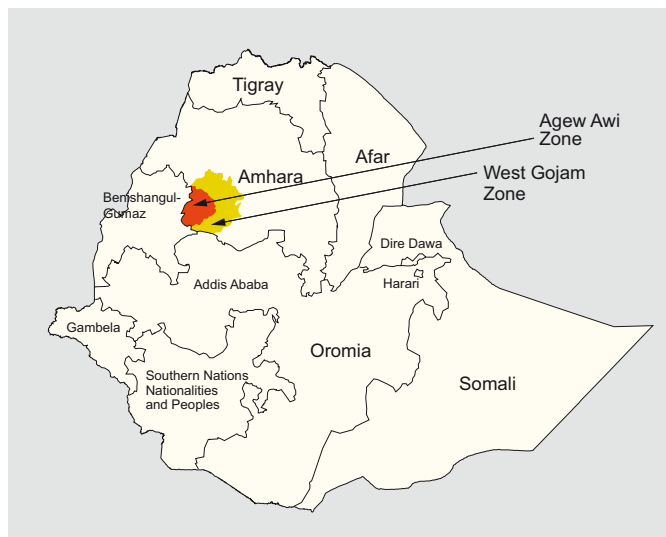


Figure 1: Map of West Gojjam and Agew Awi zones, Amhara region, Ethiopia.

## Background

Over the past decade, Ethiopia has become one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, and it is the agricultural sector which is leading this economic growth. Beekeeping (apiculture) is an important economic activity, employing up to two million people, and the honey sector is now benefiting from government investment and interventions. However, while Ethiopia is the largest producer of honey in Africa, current production is limited to only 43,000 tonnes of honey and 3,000 tonnes of beeswax, approximately 10 per cent of potential output.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, globally, there is large and growing demand for honey, as well as for beeswax and other bee products with nutritional or medicinal qualities.

In Ethiopia, women play an active role in family-based agriculture, and female-headed households make up 21 per cent of all households.<sup>2</sup> However, until recently they have had limited public recognition as farmers within the national agricultural development framework. Structural barriers, such

as the heavy burden of domestic drudgery, reinforced by local cultural perceptions, have limited women's participation in official agricultural extension activities to a large extent. In addition, women's lack of access to land, finance, technology and decision-making power have critically impeded their ability to take part in profitable market activities.

The WCA research was carried out in Dangila and Mecha *woredas*<sup>3</sup> in Amhara, a region in the north-west highlands of Ethiopia, which accounts for nearly 25 per cent of the country's total honey production (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Traditional beehives remain the dominant technology (96 per cent), despite producing lower yields and lower quality honey than newer hives.<sup>5</sup> Due to limited market access, producers tend to sell their honey locally for a low price.

The main form of recognized CA in Amhara is the 'multipurpose farmers' primary cooperative' (MPPC). MPPCs provide access to inputs and services, as well as marketing support for various commodities. Cooperative members can also be members of informal groups or self-help groups (SHGs). The latter have been established especially for increasing women's participation in cooperatives.<sup>6</sup> There are 42 honey cooperatives in Amhara, with an average of 10 per cent women members.<sup>7</sup> Seven of these cooperatives are members of the Zembaba Union, an umbrella group which supports them to market honey. Meanwhile, in the two cooperatives studied in-depth, Agunta cooperative in Dangila *woreda*, and Meserethiwot cooperative in Mecha *woreda*, women members constitute almost half (49 and 45 per cent respectively). In addition, a total of 14 smaller, women-only SHGs have been established in the two *woredas*, whose members sell most of their honey to their respective honey-marketing cooperatives (see Table 1 for more information). The key development actors supporting interventions in the area are international NGOs Oxfam and SOS Sahel, Ambrosia PLC (a local private sector company trading in honey products) and district and zonal government agencies, including extension services and offices for cooperative development and women's affairs.

Table 1: WCA groups studied

Country	Ethiopia
Region	Amhara
District	Dangila and Mecha <i>woredas</i> (West Gojjam and Agew Awi zones)
Sector	Honey
Existing types of WCA	Umbrella unions; MPPCs; formal marketing cooperatives; savings groups; SHGs; traditional informal groups.

Enideg group	
Year begun	2010
Type	Women's SHG
Location	Girargie Warkit <i>kebele</i> , <sup>8</sup> Dangila <i>woreda</i> . 4 km from Dangila town, rural setting
Membership	20 women
Production	Individual
Marketing	Individual, mostly to Agunta cooperative
Honey products	Raw honey

Andinet group	
Year begun	2010
Type	Women's SHG
Location	Bacha Barayita <i>kebele</i> , Dangila <i>woreda</i> . Close to Dangila town, peri-urban area
Membership	20 women
Production	Individual
Marketing	Individual, mostly to Agunta cooperative
Honey products	Raw honey

Agunta cooperative	
Year begun	2004
Type	Formal mixed cooperative
Location	On the main road from Bahir Dar in Dangila <i>woreda</i> to the capital, Addis Ababa
Membership	343 women, 424 men
Production	Individual production of raw honey by members. Collective production of processed honey, wax and <i>tej</i> (honey wine)
Marketing	Collective to various organizations
Honey products	Raw honey, processed honey, wax, <i>tej</i>

Alem Meta group	
Year begun	2010
Type	Women's SHG
Location	Kuyu community, Rim <i>kebele</i> , Mecha <i>woreda</i> . Rural setting
Membership	20 women
Production	Individual
Marketing	Individual, mostly to Meserethiwot cooperative
Honey products	Raw honey

Serto Madeg group	
Year begun	2010
Type	Women's SHG
Location	Debir Mender community, Rim <i>kebele</i> , Mecha <i>woreda</i> . Rural setting
Membership	20 women
Production	Individual production of raw honey by members
Marketing	Individual, mostly to Meserethiwot cooperative
Honey products	Raw honey

Meserethiwot cooperative	
Year begun	2009
Type	Formal mixed cooperative
Location	Rim <i>kebele</i> , Mecha <i>woreda</i>
Membership	527 women, 533 men
Production	Individual
Marketing	Collective to Ambrosia PLC
Honey products	Raw honey



## Engaging marginalized women in CA

Women derive significant benefits from joining CA groups in the Amhara honey sector. Women group members surveyed in Dangila and Mecha *woredas* earn 81 per cent more than corresponding women outside groups. This translates to an increase in profit of at least \$35 per year for women members compared to non-members. For members of the 14 SHGs surveyed, there is an increase compared to women not in groups both in the quantity of honey produced and in market revenues, when that member also belongs to a formal marketing cooperative. Cooperatives offer 20 per cent higher prices for raw honey than other market buyers and group members have better access to these sales outlets, with 78 per cent of women members mostly selling to groups, compared to only 1 per cent of non-members.

Group membership also confers increased decision-making power in some key domains such as access to and use of credit and control over income for household expenditures. Perceptions of women's roles are also changing: a local leader in Rim *kebele* in Mecha *woreda* reports that *"Compared to non-members, [WCA] members are assertive, can explain their feelings, give ideas, and are punctual and disciplined. Actually, there are many men who are less assertive and participate less than women in the cooperative. There is big gap between WCA members and non-members."* These results are even more impressive given the male-dominated context of the sector, and the social norms which restrict women's participation in economic activities in the region as a whole.

Elsewhere, experience has shown that it is often women from more privileged backgrounds who are able to access the benefits of group participation. Having sufficient time to attend meetings and carry out group activities, as well as support to cover childcare or household duties, are all crucial to enabling women's participation. This pattern is confirmed by the WCA research findings from Mali's shea sector and Tanzania's vegetable sector, where women involved in CA groups tend to be older and married, with a correspondingly higher social status than comparable women outside groups. For example, unmarried women in Tanzania find it difficult to join CA groups, even women-only groups, because they are socially marginalized and lack the assets or household-management support required to participate in group activities. In polygamous communities in Mali, older wives tend to have fewer household responsibilities and greater assets, which allows them to take part in group activities more easily.

In order to address these barriers, NGOs in Amhara have tailored policies and interventions to prioritize female-headed households and marginalized women. As a result, there are significantly more unmarried women in the CA groups studied than comparable women not involved in group honey production and marketing.

## Seizing the opportunity

A combination of factors has allowed marginalized women to participate in CA within the honey and beekeeping sector in Amhara. Market opportunity is the main driver behind all of these factors, and the reason why government agencies, private businesses and development actors have been keen

to work within the sector. This commercial opening has been used to leverage change in women's roles in markets. Globally, there is a large and growing demand for honey and other bee products. Ethiopia is already the largest producer of honey in Africa, but the quality and yield of honey from traditional hives is often low; with support the sector could grow substantially and become more efficient and profitable. Strong market demand means that the inherent risks involved in investing in the market sector are reduced – and if there is local, as well as global demand, this risk is further reduced.

Alongside this market opportunity, new hive technology has been instrumental in enabling women to become involved in the honey sector. Modern hives are relatively cheap, can be kept on very little land, do not necessitate climbing trees, and so are far more accessible to women. Modern beekeeping methods also greatly improve the quality and yield of honey and other bee products. For women producers, it is especially important to identify opportunities in non-perishable, high-value products, which are less risky and more profitable, moving women beyond 'female' crops that often have low profit margins and saturated markets. Moreover, honey can be stored and sold throughout the year to supplement household income.



Traditional hives in an acacia tree (above) and modern hives (below) in Amhara. Photo: Oxfam

The economic potential of the honey sector has made it an attractive investment opportunity, in terms of both economic and social development. This has increased space for dialogue between women, other marginalized smallholder producers, and development actors, powerful private businesses and government agencies. For instance, with the





Women dressed in protective clothing demonstrate modern beekeeping techniques to other women from the village of Mecha, Amhara. Photo: Tom Pietrasik

support of Oxfam, CA groups in the honey sector successfully lobbied district offices of the Ethiopian government's Cooperative Promotion Agency to allow dual membership of husbands and wives in groups. This allows married women to become members in their own right, which has increased the membership, voice and representation of women in mixed groups. In addition, Ambrosia PLC was persuaded by Oxfam and CA honey groups to provide them with honey-extracting equipment free of charge and to build a training centre and demonstration sites accessible to local communities. Significantly, Ambrosia provided special support to women, honouring the agreement it entered into with Oxfam.

### Key intervention strategies

Small producer groups and NGOs have taken advantage of this favourable environment to involve women in CA groups in the Amhara honey sector, prioritizing those from marginalized households. A number of interventions have supported these women to access and participate in CA in beekeeping and honey production.

**Prioritizing female-headed households:** Development actors worked with women smallholders and communities to identify which households were most in need of support, typically female-headed households. Interventions were tailored to fit their needs, including asset provision, training and rotating savings groups.

**Asset provision and training:** To overcome the barriers faced by women lacking assets and skills, development actors Oxfam and SOS Sahel subsidized the provision of hives

and beekeeping training to the prioritized women. Training in production methods, processing, quality control and leadership skills resulted in improved honey yield and quality, and a greater number of women involved in group activities.

**Women-only spaces:** Formal, mixed CA groups often help women to access more profitable markets, but also tend to limit their participation and leadership. Oxfam helped to organize small, informal SHGs for women honey producers to develop their confidence and the skills required to participate meaningfully within larger, mixed cooperatives.

**Rotational leadership in groups:** The informal, women-only SHGs practise a system in which the key positions (chair, secretary and treasurer) change every six months, while chairing of regular meetings rotates each week. This allows women to exercise their leadership skills in a familiar environment, before hopefully moving into similar positions in formal, mixed CA groups.

**Involving men:** SOS Sahel conducted a consultation process with the husbands of women who had been selected to receive support, with the aim of negotiating household barriers affecting women's participation in groups, especially that of marginalized women. This improved the acceptance and legitimacy of the new roles for women in household honey production and CA group activities. Women who are emerging as leaders within the studied honey cooperatives invariably mention that support from their family, especially their husband, is a critical factor in their own success.



**Formal membership targets:** The Cooperative Promotion Agency has implemented a quota policy for women's membership of formal CA groups: at least 10 per cent of cooperative members should be women, with at least one woman in a leadership position. In addition, the dual membership policy has increased the number of women members in some cooperatives dramatically. For instance, in Agunta cooperative, the number of women members grew from just one in 2006 to 197 in 2007, largely due to this change in legislation. Currently, there are almost equal numbers of men and women members.

## Lessons learned and recommendations for development practitioners

### 1. Leverage market opportunities in growing sectors to drive positive change in women's economic position.

Development actors identified the growing demand for honey and bee products as an opportunity to influence cooperatives and communities, market actors and investors, and government agencies, to support an increased role for women in the sector. By promoting women's engagement through the introduction of modern beehives, Oxfam and SOS Sahel were able to show the potential financial benefits of supporting women's participation in the sector for households, cooperatives and also other market actors. In a demand-driven market, interventions which improve productivity and quality are likely to be supported by market actors.

*Development actors can use 'win-win' market opportunities, as a leverage point to encourage individuals, communities and companies to support increased women's participation and visibility in market activities.*

### 2. Utilize new technology with training to facilitate women's participation in new activities.

Modern hives have provided the entry point by which women can access a male-dominated honey sector. Private businesses, such as Ambrosia PLC, are beginning to promote the uptake of modern hives, since the growing export market demands a higher-quality product than allowed by traditional methods. One local man has successfully started producing and selling modern hives himself, and Oxfam is investing in a hive factory in Amhara.<sup>9</sup> As this new technology becomes more readily available (currently only 3 per cent of total honey production comes from modern hives<sup>10</sup>), it is hoped that many more women will be able to start producing high-quality honey and participate in CA.

*Development actors need to work with both private sector actors and CA groups to subsidize or provide accessible financing for the introduction of new technologies, as their cost is often prohibitive for poorer producers, especially women and other marginalized groups. Effective use of new technology, particularly among women who have limited experience of the sector, also requires training to develop confidence and skills.*

### 3. Influence cooperative governance: reform of membership rules.

The dual membership policy implemented by Agunta cooperative in Amhara dramatically increased women's membership. If similar policies were implemented regionally or nationally, many more women in joint- as well as female-headed households would be able to participate in cooperatives and have formal recognition of their role in agricultural production and marketing. However, formal



Honey producers from Meserethiwot cooperative. Photo: Berhanu Denu

membership alone is not sufficient to ensure women's active and meaningful participation in cooperatives. Complementary support is required to develop women's business and leadership skills (see 5 and 6 below).

*Development actors need to advocate for wider changes to discriminatory cooperative by-laws to encourage more rapid integration of women.*

#### **4. Link informal women-only groups to mixed formal groups to enhance access and benefits of women.**

By establishing women-only SHGs, NGOs have ensured that their members are able to develop leadership skills that build their confidence when speaking and participating in more formal group situations and in front of men, and become familiar with group organization and functioning. This has enabled women in Amhara to emerge as leaders within formal cooperatives as well. Moreover, women who are members of both SHGs and formal mixed producer cooperatives experience greater overall benefits, especially as the latter facilitate access to more profitable markets.

*Development actors need to promote linkages between informal women-only and formal mixed groups to ensure that women have access to and benefit from formal marketing groups.*

#### **5. Provide direct support to marginalized women.**

Women of a lower social status face numerous barriers to their participation in formal CA groups and, without support, are less likely to participate than better-off women. In the case of Amhara's honey sector, NGO interventions recognized this and worked with communities to identify the specific needs of different groups. They provided targeted support to marginalized women and households, especially female-headed households, to help overcome these barriers.

*Development actors establishing CA groups need to design processes to identify barriers to participation and assess the needs of different social groups. They should also build in the time and financial resources needed for less well-off group members to collectively or individually acquire relevant assets to ensure that interventions can reach women from female-headed and other marginalized households.*

#### **6. Gain men's support for women's participation.**

The support of husbands has proved critical to the ability of women members to engage effectively in CA groups. Attitudes towards women in honey production are changing, as a new local saying reflects: "Without a woman's hand in it, success in beekeeping is like a dream of having a milking cow in the sky." By raising the awareness of men from targeted families, and of male leaders in formal CA groups, development actors have been able to demonstrate how the whole household and wider community can benefit from women's participation in groups. These strategies have successfully overcome men's resistance to women's engagement in CA, and encouraged husbands' involvement in and support for their wives' CA activities, thereby creating the conditions for women to progressively get more involved in decision-making and leadership.

*Development practitioners need to gain men's buy-in for, or reduce their resistance to, women's active participation in groups, with both an awareness of local socio-cultural norms and clear arguments as to the benefits of change. Identifying supportive male leaders to act as advocates and successful female 'role models' can help shift men's attitudes.*

#### **7. Influence government policy on CA.**

According to the 1995 Cooperative Law, only one umbrella cooperative can be established per *woreda* in Amhara. Cooperative members can also be members of informal or SHGs, but extension services and access to formal credit are only available to formal cooperatives. This law has limited the expansion of the sector and prevented women's groups from directly accessing existing services and benefits provided by the Ethiopian government. Development actors are currently advocating for the formal recognition of women's savings groups and SHGs to allow them access to existing government support, and for a loosening of the restriction on the number of cooperatives per *woreda*.

*Development actors need to work with CA groups and other value chain actors to identify policy constraints to wider women's participation in market-based CA and develop an evidence base to advocate for changes in the enabling environment. This will ensure that a supportive environment exists to scale up the potential impact of project interventions.*

#### **8. Promote diversified relationships between WCA groups and the private sector.**

As mentioned above, the alliance between Meserethiwot cooperative and its private-sector partner, Ambrosia PLC, has brought a number of advantages to members. However, many women honey producers in the cooperative are unhappy with the restrictive conditions on which Ambrosia buys their honey, as the company's demand to be the sole buyer limits market opportunity and flexibility. The agreement with Ambrosia also limits opportunities for women to engage with other market actors, and therefore to develop their marketing skills.

*Development actors should, ideally, support WCA groups to establish a diversity of market linkages – local and national, as well as potentially international. Promoting an active role for at least some WCA leaders and members to engage in new market environments or direct market negotiations with buyers is important, in order to strengthen women's marketing knowledge and capacities.*

#### **Notes**

- 1 'Ethiopian Central Statistical Authority Report' (2009).
- 2 World Bank (2005) 'Well-Being and Poverty in Ethiopia: the role of agriculture and agency', Report No. 29468-ET, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTETHIOPIA/Resources/well\\_being\\_0605.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTETHIOPIA/Resources/well_being_0605.pdf)
- 3 A *woreda* is the third-level administrative division in Ethiopia.
- 4 'Ethiopian Central Agricultural Census Commission (CAAC) Report' (2003).
- 5 B. Denu (2012) 'Report on Pilot of Phase III Quantitative Research on Women's Collective Action in Ethiopia'.
- 6 Denu (2012).
- 7 S. Baden (2013) 'Women's collective action in African Agricultural Markets: The missing link for empowerment?'
- 8 A *kebele* is the fourth-level, smallest administrative division in Ethiopia.
- 9 For more information see Oxfam's Enterprise Development Programme, <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/edp>
- 10 Denu (2012).



## Women in collective action: Bosena Atnafu

Bosena Atnafu, 40 years old, is seen as one of the most successful women beekeepers in Amhara region. She is a well-respected member of her community and an executive committee member of Meserethiwot honey cooperative. She has succeeded in spite of having had a relatively difficult childhood, never attending school and getting married at an extremely young age (eight years old). As a married woman, she had to carry out all the traditional duties and responsibilities expected of rural mothers in the region, without much support from her first husband and his family. A combination of factors has enabled Bosena to succeed as a businesswoman, including her personal qualities and skills, her participation in Oxfam's intervention activities, and the support of her second husband.

Bosena is known for being proactive and adopting new ideas before others in her village. It is because of this quality that she was the first woman sent for training by Oxfam to help form women-only groups in the area. After the training, Bosena was asked to select 20 women from poorer households to join her in establishing a village women-only group, called Serto Madeg. Her selection



Bosena Atnafu stands in front of the beehives in her back garden in Debir Mender. Photo: Tarekegn Garomsa

criteria for membership included trustworthiness, being an active member of the community, readiness to work with others, ownership of at least one beehive, and having enough assets to be able to participate in group activities.

Bosena likes to try new activities and understand how things work. She had already tried beekeeping on her own, before Oxfam's intervention, and had studied bees' anatomy and behaviour in detail. During the beekeeping training sessions provided by Oxfam, the trainer asked the group a series of questions that no-one but Bosena could answer. Her knowledge really impressed the trainer, who recommended that she become an executive committee member of the honey cooperative.

Under the rotational leadership model practised by Serto Madeg, Bosena was elected as chairperson for the first six months. The other members believe that the example set by her is the reason why the group is performing better than the other nine groups in the area, and she is seen as a role model for other women in the village. In addition, Bosena has been elected to the executive committee of Meserethiwot cooperative, in recognition of her leadership skills and knowledge of beekeeping. The committee realized that, although she is not literate, she performs very well at representing the interests of women and attracting more women members into the cooperative. She is the first woman to hold a senior position on the committee, which has broken with the traditional thinking that this kind of position is only for men.

Bosena feels she has a very close and supportive relationship with her second husband. He encourages her to go to meetings and even advises other husbands to support their wives in CA group activities. Bosena recognizes that she would not be able to carry out her group roles and responsibilities without his help.

Bosena appreciates the support provided by Oxfam, such as training, encouragement to take on leadership positions, and access to financial support. Oxfam has also provided her with assets, including modern hives and safety equipment. She says that without Oxfam's support, *"I would remain just like any housewife in our village with no information about the external world... I would not attend meetings, let alone lead them... I could only play a very minor role in the beekeeping sector."*

### For more information

Visit Oxfam's Wiki on women's collective action at [www.womenscollectiveaction.com](http://www.womenscollectiveaction.com)

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The information in this case study is drawn from the final phase of the women's collective action research project. For further information on this phase, please see S. Baden (2013) 'Women's Collective Action in African Agricultural Markets: The missing link for empowerment?', available to download from <http://womenscollectiveaction.com/Phase+III>



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