



OXFAM INTERSECTIONALITY SERIES

# BUILDING GENDER SENSITIVE RESILIENCE THROUGH WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

LESSONS LEARNED FROM PASTORALIST WOMEN IN  
ETHIOPIA

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*Foto credits: Pablo Tosco*

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# FOREWORD

On March 23-24, 2015, representatives from Oxfam affiliates and partners assembled on the Simmons College campus in Boston, Massachusetts. In a rare opportunity, gender experts and development practitioners donned their student hats to deep-dive into the topic of Intersectionality, an area of academic thought and feminist theory that is evolving into an ever-growing body of development discourse. The event was co-sponsored by Oxfam America, Oxfam Novib, and Oxfam Intermon, in close partnership with the Center for Gender in Organizations at the Simmons School of Management.

Not just a learning space, the Symposium was also a conduit for the generation of knowledge. The centerpiece of discussions was a series of practice papers, authored by Oxfam staff and partners, which explore the issue of Gender and Intersectionality within the broader context of international development work. The intention is to share Oxfam's experience in Gender and Intersectionality with a wide audience in hopes of fostering thoughtful debate and discussion.

Oxfam America extends special thanks to all staff and partners who participated in the Symposium and who shared their expertise through these practice papers. We acknowledge the contribution of the advisory and planning committees, particularly of Sandra Sotelo Reyes (Intermon), Carmen Reinoso (Novib), Muthoni Muriu (Oxfam America), Patricia Deyton (CGO), Alivelu Ramisetty (Oxfam America), Maria Ezpeleta (Oxfam America), Eloisa Devietti (Oxfam America) and Lauren Walleser (CGO). We also recognize the support of Caroline Sweetman and Liz Cooke (Oxfam Great Britain) who made possible the publication of a special virtual issue of *Gender & Development, Intersecting Inequalities*, (<http://explore.tandfonline.com/page/bes/cgde-vsi-intersectionality>). Finally, we thank Irene Munoz (Oxfam International) and Aileen Charleston (Oxfam America) for their collaboration on communications.

Intersectionality is a feminist theory and analytical tool for understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities. The experiences of marginalization and privilege are not only defined by gender, but by other identity factors, such as race, class, and sexual orientation, to name a few – all of which are determined, shaped by, and imbedded in social systems of power.

## INTERSECTIONALITY PRACTICE PAPERS SERIES

- *Active Citizenship of Women and Youth in Nicaragua*, Damarius Ruiz and Carolina Egio Artal (Oxfam Intermon)
- *Building Gender-Sensitive Resilience through Women's Economic Empowerment: Lessons learned from pastoralist women in Ethiopia*, Imma Guixé (Oxfam Intermon)
- *Re-politicizing Intersectionality: How an intersectional perspective can help INGOs be better allies to women's rights movements*, Jenny Enarsson (Oxfam Great Britain)
- *Women's Economic Empowerment and Domestic Violence: Links and lessons for Practitioners working with intersectional approaches*, Mara Bolis (Oxfam America), Christine Hughes (Oxfam Canada), Rebecca Fries (Value for Women), and Stephanie Finigan (Prosperity Catalyst)
- *"Your struggle is my struggle": Integrating intersectionality in work with lesbian women, bisexual women and trans-women in Zimbabwe*, Sian Maseko (Oxfam Zimbabwe) and Sammantha Ndlovu (Sexual Rights Centre)

All papers are available as downloadable PDFs on our websites, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/> and <http://policy-practice.oxfamamerica.org/>, and may be distributed and cited with proper attribution.

# INTRODUCTION

In addition to ethnicity, age, or disability, gender in the Somali region of Ethiopia strongly intersects with pastoralism, a predominant livelihood in East Africa and the Horn. Pastoralist and agro-pastoralist women and men, although making up nearly 15% of Ethiopia's total population, are among the poorest and most vulnerable rural people in the country and remain at the margins of national economic, social and political life.

In order to improve the above situation, Oxfam Intermón and its local partner, Pastoralist Concern, have been working on improving the socio-economic conditions of Somali women and their families in Liben and Afdher zones of Somali region since 1999. Many lessons can be learned from those pastoralist women who have become social and economic leaders in their own communities. While they reveal individual determination and innovation, they also show that the structural causes of pastoralist women's marginalization can be addressed even in adverse environments and complex contexts such as the Somali region. Two main learned lessons from the project are: a) the relevant and significant contribution of women's economic empowerment to resilience building, taking the example of 2011 drought, and b) how to use a variety of approaches that do not contravene the law to address rights-related issues when regulatory frameworks are not supportive.

The paper will explore how the overlap of a double marginalized identity produces particular disadvantages for pastoralist women in Ethiopia, and how the Oxfam intervention in the Somali region is addressing the connection between these disadvantages and poverty and power.

# FINDINGS

## **Brief about the context: pastoralist women in Ethiopia**

In addition to ethnicity, age, or disability, gender in the Somali region of Ethiopia strongly intersects with pastoralism, a predominant livelihood in East Africa and the Horn. Ethiopia has the largest pastoralist population in the region, found predominantly in the Somali and Afar Regions as well as in Borana Zone of Oromia Region and in South Omo Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region. Although pastoralist men and women make up nearly 15% of Ethiopia's total population, use 63% of its land, and contribute about 40% of the agricultural gross domestic product, pastoralists are among the poorest and most vulnerable rural population in the country and remain at the margins of national economic, social, and political life. <sup>1</sup>

The double marginalization of pastoralist women is apparent when one compares gender-disaggregated national and regional data on access to basic services. These data show that pastoralist women suffer from the lowest national rates in access to education (68% of Somali women have no education); access to healthcare (44% suffer anemia, 82% have never heard of AIDS, and only 8.4% of births are delivered by a skilled health provider); and gender based violence (97% suffer from female genital mutilation (FGM)), among others.<sup>2</sup> Despite the numerous key tasks women fulfill in a pastoralist society, they are less able than pastoralist men to participate in the decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods. In addition, pastoralist communities live in an arid and semi-arid environment characterized by major external risks such as recurrent droughts and recently, flooding, which differently affect pastoralist men and women.

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<sup>1</sup> Data from the Humanitarian Policy Group Synthesis Paper, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Data from the Ethiopian Demographic Health Survey, 2011

## **Empowering pastoralist women: change happens with the support from Oxfam and Pastoralist Concern**

Since 1999, Oxfam Intermón and its local partner Pastoralist Concern have worked on improving the socio-economic conditions of more than 2500 Somali women and their families in Liben and Afdher zones of the Somali region through the focus on four main interrelated and interdependent areas of intervention: income generation, social basic services (education and health), harmful traditional practices (HTP), and capacity building for local stakeholders (government, partner and others). As a result of the project, the beneficiary women have started contributing to and playing social and economic roles in their communities, improving their decision-making capacities both at household and community levels, and are now in better possession of assets. In addition, as women and men raised in different group discussions, social perceptions have slowly started to change. For instance, before getting involved in this program, nobody was willing to give credit for the women to run their own business activities. But nowadays, pastoralist women themselves have become one of the reliable creditors in the area.

Although the project initially targeted pastoralist and agro-pastoralist women to assist the most vulnerable, taking special care to reach out to those who faced multiple and often compounding vulnerabilities, gradually, the project has been evolving from a basic needs approach towards a rights-based approach, in spite of the limitations of the Civil Society Law (or CSO law) from 2008 that restricts non-governmental organizations' (NGO) work on human rights and gender equality.

Many **lessons** can be learned from those pastoralist women who have become economic but also social leaders and models in their own communities, since economic power of women translated to get recognition at household and community levels. While they reveal individual determination and innovation, they also show that the structural causes of pastoralist women's marginalization can be addressed even in adverse environments and complex contexts such as the Somali region.



## **Capacity building at the center for women’s empowerment**

Oxfam Intermón and Pastoralist Concern combined “hard” skills training (for instance, on financial management, business planning, and operations) for women collectives, with efforts to build their technical skills, capacities, and competitiveness in the market and to address gender-specific barriers.

Additionally, the Adult Functional Literacy (AFL) training contributed to nurture women’s confidence and leadership capacity as well as boosting assertiveness of women collective members. AFL training helped women to raise their voices and speak in front of groups and in public places, which gave them more visibility and better status in their communities. In this regard, two of the most significant achievements of the AFL were: a) the creation of women’s parliaments in some towns like Dolo Ado to discuss and pass decisions on issues specific to women, and b) the increasing participation of pastoralist women in already existing decision making spaces and institutions at zonal and *woreda* levels<sup>3</sup>. Education also challenged cultural barriers, and for instance, men and women were sitting together to attend the ALF sessions.

## **Building pastoral women’s resilience through economic empowerment**

One of the main lessons learned from the project is that women’s economic empowerment is a relevant strategy for resilience building. In 2011, one of the worst droughts in over 60 years, affecting around 10 million in the Horn of Africa, seriously hit the Somali region. As evidence from different countries shows, pastoralist men and women had different exposure and were affected by drought in different ways, while their capabilities to manage and cope with this drought also differed.

The project made more visible the need to challenge inequality (for instance, regarding access to information, assets, and financial services) that exposes poor pastoralist women to far more risks than men, since one of the few groups who did not need humanitarian aid during 2011 drought were those women and their families benefitting from the project. Using the traditional system of

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<sup>3</sup> Ethiopia is administratively divided into regional states and chartered cities, zones, *woreda* (districts) and *kebele* (wards).

“shirkas,”<sup>4</sup> the project organized women into saving and credit cooperatives and supported them in the start-up of different businesses with the double aim of diversifying and increasing their income. Member women used credit and saving for investment in their business and for livelihoods consumption. The financial services enabled women to decrease their economic vulnerability and dependence significantly. Saving and credit cooperatives also provided a forum for women to exchange information and learn from one another. Economic empowerment also enhanced wellbeing and enabled women to be more active in their communities, thereby enhancing social and political empowerment because of decreased restrictions on their movements, increased decision-making and contacts with men, greater organizational skills and network contacts. As a result, their capacities to cope with drought significantly increased, as shown during the 2011 drought and following shocks suffered in the region.

Much has been discussed on resilience within the Oxfam family and other institutions; however, the project shows that much more emphasis should be given to the relevance of women’s economic empowerment as a critical strategy to build women’s resilience and allow them to cope with, and ultimately thrive, against shocks, stresses and uncertainty, such as one of the biggest droughts suffered in the region.

### **Working on rights by using a different and localized approach that meets the legal framework**

Another important lesson learned from the project is that it is possible to address rights even when CSO regulation prevents foreign funding being used to support some rights-based activities by using different approaches that do not contravene the law.

As already mentioned, there is exceptionally low status of women in the project areas. This low status of women is the product of certain traditional and culturally sanctioned practices that compromise the social welfare of pastoralist and agro-pastoralist women. The most pressing problems are FGM and denial of women’s rights to inherit assets and resources. Another one of the most important cultural practices reflecting, and contributing to the low social status of women is early

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<sup>4</sup> Traditional self-help structures in the Somali region

and unbalanced marriage age. Other marriage practices negatively affecting women's status include exchange and other forms of forced marriage common in the area. In addition, domestic violence against women within marriage is widely accepted in the community. According to the tradition, a husband can beat his wife if she creates problems, such as going out from house without his knowledge, arguing, or refusing sex. The low value placed on women's education and unequal participation in public affairs adversely affects women's positions at households and community levels.

The project has shown considerable ingenuity in devising strategies to interact effectively with government and with society as well as to influence policy and public opinion in support of pastoralist women. Although the 2008 CSO law has limited the opportunities to introduce a rights-based approach, it has also challenged NGOs to look for other ways to work on rights-related issues at a local level, for instance through promoting community dialogues and forums, passing declarations, raising awareness and education, or engaging traditional and other duty-bearers, as it will be shown in the next section.

### **Our unique strategies to tackle Harmful Traditional Practices (HTP)**

In particular, the Oxfam intervention in the Somali region has addressed the connection between pastoralist women's disadvantages and poverty and power through four main strategies, based on the assumption that the advancement on women's rights would be a logical step after achieving a better economic and social position and condition in Somali communities. These strategies have been: a) Raising awareness, building capacities, and educating women and girls; b) Mobilizing and organizing pastoralist women; c) Engaging new key stakeholders (traditional and religious leaders, youth, etc. in women's issues; and d) Providing sustainable and effective livelihoods alternatives (for instance, for those practicing HTP).

Although not all these strategies are new, they showed to be highly effective when implemented simultaneously since they complemented and reinforced each other. The project approached women, husbands, and community and religious leaders and gained their support by understanding that FGM and HTPs do not have a religious ground. Those women performing FGM were given

training for starting an alternative and more profitable livelihood activity. This demotivated them from practicing FGM and some of them, due to the social pressure and raised awareness, became the best anti-FGM campaigners in their own communities.

With FGM and other HTP practices so firmly established in the entire Somali society, stopping this practice is not an easy task and involves radical cultural and social change. Such change requires long-term support; however, the project shows that a comprehensive intervention, involving education and information, mobilization and organization, engagement from different stakeholders as well as local legal reforms (declarations) and programs that empower women can be a first step to deal with FGM and HTP issues.

# CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper tried to explore how the overlap of a double marginalized identity produces particular disadvantages for pastoralist women in Ethiopia, and how the Oxfam intervention in the Somali region is addressing the connection between these disadvantages and poverty and power. Oxfam believes that gender inequality is one of the greatest barriers to poverty eradication and sustainable development, and in all our work, we promote policies and practices that challenge and redress unequal power relations between women and men. However, working on gender equality can be challenging in particular contexts like Ethiopia where NGOs have limitations to promote a rights-based approach, being necessary a gear shift to look for more creative and innovative ways to address rights. Within this context, our intervention in the Somali region reveals that women's economic empowerment is a key strategy to significantly contribute to promote women's rights, build resilience, and alleviate poverty.

However, new and different challenges are approaching. The future of pastoralism in the region is under question. Some studies suggest an annual drop-out rate of 10% from pure pastoralism in Ethiopia. This trend is expected to continue and even increase given different reasons related to conflict, climate change, and lack of political support. It is expected that as education and waged employment grows and men migrate to towns for work, women will likely assume an even greater role in pastoral economies and communities during this transition to new alternative livelihoods in per-urban and urban towns. Our intervention will clearly need to be adjusted to this new context and changing gender roles to ensure that pastoralist women and men enjoy their right to sustainable livelihoods.

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