

## **Opportunities and Challenges of Women's participation in decision making at local government administration: The Case of Debre-Tabor City Administration, South Gondar Zone, Ethiopia in the Post-2010 Period**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on the study of opportunities and challenges of women's participation in decision making. The purpose of the study is to examine challenges that women face in their decision making and reflect on the opportunities that are being undertaken by stake holders and the local government. A qualitative research method utilized in the study to get an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The researcher used case study research design which helps to deeply study a phenomenon. The researcher employed thematic analysis. This study used purposive and referral chain sampling techniques. The finding of the study is based on semi-structured-interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Empirical data gathered through interviews and FGD in Debre Tabor City Administration. The research findings indicated that women faced a number of constraints to participate in the decision making of local government. These constraints were cultural beliefs, illiteracy and low level of education, economic and financial problems, religion, nature, homework, negative perception of the society, men oppression and chauvinism, lack of confidence and interest among women and weak bureaucracy. Within those challenges, there were opportunities which enabled and designed to maintain women toward the decision making participation. Those opportunities were international law and convention, constitutional and different legal orientation, packages, programs, policies and initiatives, different women's governmental structure, education, training and awareness, preparation of periodical meeting, economic empowerment and the quota system. The study recommends the creation of an enabling environment for women's decision making ability empowerment.

**Key words:** Women, Decision making, Challenges, Opportunities,

### **INTRODUCTION**

Recently, women's participation in decision making is getting wider and wider. In a democratic system it is impossible to say gender equality and the democratic values have applied without considering the role of women in decision making. Nations in their journey of consolidation of democracy highlight the decision making empowerment of women. They have adopted international law and conventions to maintain women's decision making participation, earthly, i.e., the United Nation Charter on human rights and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Gylman, 2008).

In most societies women constitute more than 50% of the population. Women are contributing a vital role on social development. Women have key roles in the community. They are mothers, home workers, home managers, and community organizers and socio-cultural and political activists. Albeit, most of the time women are less organized and they are discriminated from their decision making, socio-cultural and political activities. Women have not played roles in decision making and politics and they do not hold other higher government positions (Booke, 1972). Their will and interest to decision making participation is taking a way.

The natures of political systems, culture, religion and men domination of the political arena makes women to be invisible in decision making. In the world, country, region and local level women's participation in decision making is very low. For instance in 2005 the World Fund stressed that world women are under-represented in parliament and other high level decision making bodies (Ama & Ekundayo, 2014). Beyond this women are not decision maker for their own issues and they do not participate in meetings which are interest to them (Askale, 2005).

There are different issues that challenge women to participate in decision making. Those challenges can have social, cultural, religious, illiteracy, economical and masculine root with among others. In society, it is observed that women are not capable of handling administrative issues. Women discriminated in the culture which reflects patriarchal or masculine view. Lack of education makes women ignorant to protect their rights. Men oppressions toward women's decision making have existed. Lack of adequate finance weakened women's decision making ability. Shortage of time is also become tackling for women's decision making participation since women are over-burdened with house duties and hardly find time to engage in decision making. In addition to this, marriage, birth, religion and dogma play significant role by marginalized women from participation in decision making (Ama & Ekundayo, 2014 & Shmelis, 2015).

In African countries women access to decision making process and political participation is very low (Ama & Ekundayo, 2014). In Ethiopia even though there are legal recognition and institutions which promote women's empowerment, women participation in decision making is still weak. The culture, the patriarchal hierarchy and the community have played role on the suppression of women's decision making activities. The culture is never appreciating women participation in decision making equally with man. The patriarchal structure always sees man as superior (Shimels, 2015).

In community issues women's participation is insignificant. Further for women concerned, the decision makers in community issues are men. In governance and parliament position the numbers of women who are actively engaged are few in number. In local level women have been neglected from political participation for long time and lose their rightful place in local decision making, in local policy making and governance. (Richa, n.d).

Women participation in decision making is essential for women's interest to be incorporated into governance. Women participation in politics and in leadership would help to solve a lot of problems associated with poverty and inequality (Burchard, 2014). It helps to balance decision-making concerned with education, reproductive health, agriculture, trade, community needs, political representation and gender equality. The process of improving women's participation in decision making at local level is essential to achieve economic and political development of the society.

In Ethiopia women's participation in decision making at regional administrations, city administrations and district governances is also very low when it compares with men (Meskerem, 2007; Medhanit & Sofanit, 2009). This problem may deal with illiteracy, backwardness; cultural, social, economic and religion barriers (Meskerem, 2007).

The research by focusing on South Gondar Administrative Zone city, Debre-Tabor examined the opportunities that enable women active participant of decision making. It also examined the challenges which have been barriers to be active participant of decision making. It further forward ways how gender equality and women's participation in decision making is maximized.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Description of the Study Area

**Location:** Debre-Tabor is a city administration in North Central Ethiopia. Debre-Tabor city is found in South Gondar Zone Amhara region of Ethiopia. Geographically, Debre\_Tabor is located from 100 km South East Gondar and 50 km East of Lake Tana. It lies between 110 51'N latitude and 380 1'E longitude.

**Population:** Total population of the Debre-Tabor city according to the 2015 report of Debre-Tabor City Administration Mayor Office is 78,706. Among them 37,683 are males and 41,023 are females. Further according to the 2007 national census of Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia and the 2015 report of Debre- Tabor City Administration Mayor Office, the majority of the inhabitants are Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. 96.72% of the total population is Orthodox Christian. 2.54% of the total population is Muslim. The remaining 0.74% of the total population is followers of other religions.

Finally let the researcher elaborates the reason of why he choices Debre Tabor city as study area of the research. The study took in Debre Tabor City Administration. This city is selected because the accessibility, time and economic factors. In addition to this the searcher lived in Debre Tabor for long time and experienced or observed such problem. Further Debre Tabor was a city where women's participation in decision making is passively operating. In sooth, this facilitated to do a research for why women were weak in their decision making participation.

### Research Approaches

The research approach of this study was qualitative. Qualitative research uses to interpret social reality from people's believes and practices (Berg, 2001). It is consistent with constructivist paradigm. It explores meaning, purpose and realities. Realities are subjective, multiple and socially constructed by its participants. Through qualitative research it is possible to discover and understand the experiences, perspectives and thought of the participants (Bryman, 1998).

This study explored the truth, beliefs, experiences and realities from the participants. It understood opportunities and challenges of women's participation in decision making from the participants' perspectives. Thus the research approach was basically a qualitative research. This approach involves the gathering of qualitative information which is non- numerical and detailed and in-depth understanding about the research topic.

## Research Design

The research design employed case study. Robson (2002) refers to a case as the situation, individual, group whatever it is that one interested in. And a case study refers to research that focuses on a single issues. In addition to this case study is a particular suitable design to examine the issues and process of what happen and to understand the problem on the other hand (Merriam, 1998).

Thus this design is preferable to understand the cases that challenges women's participation in decision making. In addition to this, it enables the researcher to investigate what opportunities are put by stakeholders to initiate women's participation in decision making.

## Sampling Procedure

In this study non-probability sampling, namely, purposive sampling and chain referral sampling employed to select the participants of the study. The researcher selects non- probability purposive sampling design which is reliable and appropriate for this study. Since the research is qualitative and its goal is seeking to examine what is and more concerned with deeper understanding of the research problem rather than generalization.

Researchers select participants purposively when they believe that those participants are key informants and especially important to articulate a view (Nosrat, 2010). The researchers will select participants through chain referral sampling when they believe that the participants are likely to know the other participants who share the characteristics that make them eligible for inclusion in the study (Platt et al, 2015).

Purposive sampling applied to identify interviewees with stakeholders: City Council Speaker; well experienced Women Councilors of the city; Women, Children and Youths Association Office Officer at Debre Tabor City Administration; Women and Children Branch Office Officers at 4 Kebeles. And also purposive sampling used to make interview with religion leaders to understand religions orientation toward women's participation in decision making. I.e. with Ethiopian Conjoined Orthodox Church, South Gondar Zone Sermon Office Officer and an Islamic Feqeh Instructor and an Imam of a mosque in Debre Tabor city.

Purposive sampling also applied to identify participants for the FGD which classified in 2. Participants of FGD 1 were purposively from active members of Women Association at city administration. The researcher choice those participants because for the past ten years they are active members in Women Association and they come from different background and experiences opportunities and challenges toward women's participation in decision making.

The researcher made FGD 2 with active members of Women's Association at Kebele 02 purposively because through participant's information and observations it was possible to know more women participant in women issues at city level are came from this Kebele than others. From them it was possible to know the very challenges women have experienced before and during decision making participation and the opportunities that increase their decision making participation.

Through chain referral sampling it was possible to identify women who are active Village to Village Coordinators of Women for empowerment purpose for more than 5 years; and women who served in political parties. Those women interviewed because they can provide rich,

accurate and helpful information. They well experienced, observed and knew how women are challenged from the corner of their family to the corner of their society toward participation in decision making process.

### **Sources of Data**

The data collected through primary and secondary sources. And the time framework of the study is in the post- 2010. This time framework coincides with the GTP of Ethiopia (since 2010). This GTP of Ethiopia takes women political, social and economical empowerment as one of its mission at national, regional and local level. In the post 2010 examining opportunities and challenges of women's participation in decision making at local and city level was the aim of this study.

**Primary sources:** Primary data collected from interviews and FGD and observations. This research used semi-structured interviews. In semi-structured interview the interviewer is prepared to be flexible in terms of the order in which the topics are considered and to let the interviewee develop idea and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher (Denscombe, 2007). The possibilities of updated and controlling interview tools based on the emerging data also enable the researcher to access the needed data and to avoid bulky information.

The researcher used FGD. Through FGD it is possible to explore attitude, perception, feelings and ideas about a specific topic (Denscombe, 2007). The rational of the researcher to use FGD is that participants are organized together, homogeneously from different background for the same purpose. Homogeneity of participants for the same purpose enables the searcher to explore issues which directly or indirectly related with them.

**Secondary sources:** The study collected secondary sources of data from published and unpublished documents, journals, books, magazines and newspapers which have direct relations to the study.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

Data collection and data analysis must be a coincident process in qualitative research and data analysis is taking place throughout the data collection process (Cresswell, 2003). Data collected from the interviews of participants recorded and transcribed. Every interview recorded before the end of conversation to ensure that the recording was done. Dealing with the focus group, important concepts of the discussion recorded before the end of the meeting. The data which was collected from interview and FGD organized based on the objective of the study and analyzed through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative analysis. It is used to analyze classification and present themes (patterns) that relate to the data (Zagreb, 2012).

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is the way of being sure the accuracy of finding from researcher and participants. To insure the trustworthiness of the research the researcher employed triangulation method after which the findings were correlated. The interview guide, discussion guide,

participants and the type recorder used during the protest. This process helped the researcher to identify the ambiguities, unrealistic and wrong questions before the main interview. The researcher used simple language and description to convey the findings. The researcher also used peer examination. Teachers and friends served as a peer examiner. Above all, the researcher also employed multiple sources of data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Opportunities of Women's Participation in Decision Making

**The adoption of international law and convention:** Ethiopia adopted the United Nation Charter on human rights and National Action Plan for Gender in 1981. By considering this in 1992, the Ethiopian government has established Women's Affair office within the prime minister office and the office is headed by women with rank of a minister (Okumo et al., 2008).

**Constitutional and different legal orientation toward women:** The Ethiopian government formulated national policy on women in 1993(Shimels, 2015). The objective of this policy is to achieve equality between men and women in economical, social and political life. This enables women to hold public office and to participate in decision making. The FDRE constitution which is adopted in 1995 guarantees women equal rights with men and provides affirmative action to remedy gender inequalities (FDRE Constitution, 1995). In addition to this, in Ethiopia a new family law came to effect in July 2000(Shimels, 2015). This family law is focusing on the advancement of women, affirmative action, provision for higher education, employment and promotion in the work place (Taddasse et al., 2013). Particularly, the Amhara National Regional State issued family code in June 2003 which give giant value for women.

**Packages, programs, policies and initiatives toward women:** Different packages, programs, policies and initiatives are practiced. This has its own opportunities by appreciating and pushing women toward politics. For instance, there is Ethiopian Women's Development and Transformation Package and the vision of this package is to achieve equal participation of women on social, economical and political space at all level. Since 2006 the package has practiced to realize its vision (FDRE: Women Affairs Ministry, 2006).

In addition to this, under the roof of United Nations, there was Ethiopian Joint Programme on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. This program stayed from July 2012 to December 2015. Its aim was to improve women livelihoods, increased opportunities for education and leadership and decision making. It worked with federal and local governance institutions to maintain gender equality, women's empowerment and promote the rights women and girls (Joint Programme Document, 2015).

The World Fund Program is also one Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) which empowers women economically. In Debre- Tabor City Administration women were beneficial from the debt of World Fund (ibid). These in turn create good opportunities for women active involvement in decision making.

Further, in the 1993 the government of FDRE issued the National Ethiopian Policy on women. Due to women's disadvantage position in the society the aim of this policy is to institutionalize the political and socio-economic rights of women. This policy has created different women

structure in government institutions to empower women and political empowerment is one among the others (Michiko, 2006). By structured women in different wings this policy has worked the empowerment at federal and local level.

**Different governmental structure of women:** There are different structures of women in the local governance that help them for further political empowerment. These are Women Federation, Women Association and Women League.

**Education, training and awareness:** Women who are illiterate and have not skill about politics have taken training to empower themselves. Related with this, the finding from interviewees and FGDs reported that access of education, adult education, open vocational and special skills linked with women's ability to create space for themselves in decision making.

**Preparation of periodical meeting:** As it is stated by key informants, in Kebeles, the Women Association has prepared meeting monthly. At the city level, the meeting also has occurred monthly. In the meeting through their Kebeles and city women have discussed every issues concerned with them. Political discussion is one among the other which increases women influences in decision making understanding.

**Economical and financial empowerment:** Strength or empower women economically and financially create confidence for women to play great role in decision making. Dealing with this more than half of the participants had consensus. Economic empowerment increases Women's confidence and initiates them to open their eye for political participation and decision making. Even be independent economically will reduce other oppressions of women and give them air to breath about politics and discusses their issues. The finding is supported by Domingo et al. (2015) who reported that economic empowerment enables women to influence over decisions with in the household and political activities outside the home.

**Applying the quota system:** This refers to the allowed maximum number to be needed. The local governance put quota for women to increase their participation in decision making. The experience of one key interviewee told that quota which is 35% reserved for women by the government is one alternative to increase women's position toward public office to be architect of decision making. Accordingly, this would allow women to influence policy making and to challenge the inequalities that women currently confront in many areas, including politics, employment and education with among others.

### **Challenges of Women's Participation in Decision Making**

**Illiteracy and low level of education:** As Amna (2012) illiteracy or low level of education is the common problem which hinders women's participation in decision making at local level. Concerned with this, the explanations of the participants told us illiteracy and low level of education makes women's participation in decision making low. Women, who are illiterate and in low level in their education, have faced challenges to come on the position of decision making.

**Economical lethargic:** Women who are weak in their economical power never want to take part in any decision making process. Dealing with this interviewee 9 had this to tell: "Women who are not enough strong financially and economically run to fulfil day to day needs rather than to participate in the community meeting and in any decision making process".

Significance number of participants of FGD 2 also have the same experience with the before mentioned interviewees on economical challenge for women's participation in decision making process. Thus being weak economically is one challenge among others for women's participation in decision making.

**Culture:** Culture is the other challenge on women's participation in decision making. For long time in Ethiopia the culture never appreciates women to do tasks out of home and to equally participate with men in economical, political and social issues. This problem still reflected on women's participation in decision making at the local level. The experiences of the participants told us how the culture customizes the task classification. Rearing children and work at home are given to women. And then task classification has negative impact on the process of women's participation in decision making.

**Negative perception of the society toward women's participation in decision making:** The society believes that women are not capable enough to do something equally with men. This perception has impact on women's participation in decision making. Related with this interviewees 2 and 5 revealed that the society never thinks that women can maintain change when they involve in community issues and decision making process. In the society men take higher place and have knowledge on community issues than women. Women are not equal with men and cannot do what men do. Women toward their participation of politics are not appreciated since this is taken as the work of men.

**Man's oppression and chauvinism.** As Abdul et al. (2011) men's oppression, chauvinism and anarchy marginalize women's participation in decision making. Most participants told me that the masculine view and the patriarchal culture has still not avoided and man oppression and chauvinism has continued. This has also its own impact on women's participation in decision making. Most women are not participating in politics and in decision making because men oppress women and men not believe on women's capability toward decision making.

**The husbands:** The husbands, who are commonly taken as the house holders in local and grass root levels, influence women to do only the activities at home. Related with this, interviewee 5 and one participant of FGD2 explained that men dominant over women. Still what we call husband and educated husband have not willing to appreciate women work out of home however women who have not married are more participant in community issues than married women.. The above experiences tell us husband and even educated husband never permit their wife to go for participation on issues. But women who have not married have more freedom to participate on political issues than married.

**Men decision makers and leaders:** In public office men oppressions and chauvinism is also the other challenge that hinders women's participation in decision making. Men decision makers, leaders and officials have challenged women toward decision making position and doing decision making. In public office the political arena is organized according to male norms, values and life styles. In short there is masculine model of politics in public office.

The experiences of the participants reflected of what was happening to women. Women are challenged by men officials and decision makers to do decision making and to have decision making and leadership position because men assume that women are not capable enough to do that. Thus still the patriarchal culture has not eliminated. Women in the eye of men officials and decision makers are not capable enough to do. Women are seen as weak in any condition.



**Religion:** Religion by case of its interpretation and doctrine for many years has stayed a challenge for women's participation in decision making. Related to this Muslim participants told us women who are Muslim cannot participate in decision making because the religion doctrine and the Qu'ran not allowed doing so. In Islamic religion women are considered as the supporter of men. They are sensitive and hot headed to make decision and come on the position of politics and leaders. Further women cannot participate on community issues with men since they invite men for adultery action.

This finding agreed with Nahar and Humaidan(2013) and Shmelis(2015) who reported that Islamic religion and doctrine are conservative and patriarchal and it see women as incapable enough and hot headed in decision making. And in addition to this women not allowed to join the crowded men and come out of home for any purpose because they can be the cause of adultery.

From the angel of Orthodox Christianity interviewee 14 told that in Orthodox Christian Church women can do anything and participant in any issues equally with men.

From this it is possible to infer that women's participation in decision making from the angel Islamic religion has not space but in Orthodox Christianity woman can participate and influence the decision making arena equally with men. Albeit, the misinterpretation and misguided doctrine, which is based on the Bible of Orthodox Christianity, is preventing women from doing something and participating on community issues equally with men.

**Home work:** Mostly it is common to see women in home. It is possible to say more women are home makers. Dealing with interviewee 5 said the following: "rearing children and home making are the critical problem which hinders women to attend local issues". Interviewee 11 also had this to say: "There are priorities in life and priorities for women are their family. They rear children and prepared things in home. I mean the political action and other activities are allowed for women generally, but they come after family and home". The finding is supported by Mofoluwawo (2014) who reported that women are confronted with competing domestic work and responsibilities than participate in politics.

The above experience of participants tell us the priority for women is not participation in decision making. The priorities for women are their home, family and children. So they kill their time by threat their family, children and by doing the home work. This actually hinders women to come out from their home and participate in any political and decision making issues.

**Lack of confidence and interest among women:** AS Mahat (2003) reported that lack confidence influences women's participation in decision making. In addition to this, United States Agency for International Development (2014) reported that lack of interest is the key barriers to advancing women's participation in decision making. Since women have come with different oppression make up, they lack confidence and interest on local issues. Dealing with this interviewee 3 said that "women are not confidential to participate in local issues because during the political meeting there is bias, no one gives a chance for women to speak and no one hears what women said".

During FGD 1 some participants revealed on still they faced lack of confidence to be active in the political arena because men and the society degrade them and their works. Even often during decision making at political meeting the voice of women are not heard. This has significant role

to reduce their confidence. Dealing with this participant 2 in FGD1 said the following: “Most often, the men’s views are much more important than the women’s view. Particularly those who have illiterate women are not bothered at all when they raise their hands to contribute to discussions.”

From this it is possible to induce that lack of attentions for women at the political meeting is one cause which pursue lack of confidence.

**The existence of unfair, reticence and complex bureaucracy work on the beholders in the local governance:** As Zende (2011) sometimes in the local governance through equality and justice means women are not beneficial from the political and decision making leadership. This problem has seen in government organs and opponent political parties. This makes women uninterested to the position of decision making.

Dealing with this the finding from the participant told that the political arena and leadership are hold by small elite group. The elite group comes to power through personal relationships and informal networks. In addition to this among those who are concerned on politics there is no open political decision making. Further there are complex bureaucracies, hierarchies and legislatures in the political parties. So the before mentioned issues are barriers of women’s movement toward decision making. The finding of this study go line with Zende(2011) who reported that rigid bureaucratic structure with the action of non- cooperation from the government officials/bureaucrats and the fear from the legal protection and personal networks are hindered women journey of active participation in decision making..

## IEEESEM CONCLUSION

This paper has provided some implications of opportunities and challenges of women’s participation in decision making. Women constitute unsatisfied position in decisions making position, public office and community meeting either in Kebeles or city level as a result of social, cultural and religious attitudes which often tend to relegate women to the background. At the side of men, very few men, even among the educated men, allow their wives to participate in decision making. The decision making and public office were mostly influenced by men because they tend to practice the dominant hierarchical culture.

Inadequate education is still a major constraint to women political participation. Women still constitute a larger percentage of the illiterate groups in our society. That could be attributed to the fact that most parents and families prefer to send sons to school than Daughters. Moreover because of different oppressions women lose their confidence, fear insult and criticism when they come on the political career.

With the existence of those challenges there are different opportunities stretched to maintain women on the political space. The adoption of different international laws and conventions, the constitution and different legal orientation toward women, polices, programs and initiatives of women, different governmental structures of women, education, training and awareness, preparation of periodical meeting, economical and financial empowerment and the quota system can take as opportunities that enable women to be active on political participation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study the following specific recommendations are provided to the concerned bodies to deal with.

- ✓ The local government should seriously continue to give adult education and education for women. It should also facilitate economical benefit for women.
- ✓ The local government should also give attention for the existence of women in the city council because this creates a good advantage for the echo of women political empowerment and for the consideration of women in policy making.
- ✓ Awareness creation: Women, Children and Youths' Affairs Office of the city must always organize periodic seminars, workshops and training for women to have awareness about equality, rights, to stand for decision making and decision making position. In addition to this it should also give education and training for the society to change negative cultural perception toward women. Parallel to this, it is necessity to go down grassroots and create awareness on women about men violation, equality and rights.
- ✓ Give training and awareness for men officials: The local government should give training and awareness to men officials around women related decision making issues to justify and keep women's rights and interest.
- ✓ Muscling Affirmative action: The stakeholders compensate women's cultural and religion damage by doing affirmative action since cultural and religion damage has still observed in the local level.
- ✓ Finally, it recommended that at least 40% seat must be reserved for women at the city council and kebeles council.

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