

The Role of Cooperatives in Promoting Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women: Evidence from Multipurpose Cooperative Societies in South-Eastern Zone of Tigray, Ethiopia

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In developing countries, among the poor, rural women are the poorest and more vulnerable. Cooperatives can be used as breeding grounds for socio-economic empowerment of women. To this light, the major concern of this study is to analyze and assess the role of cooperatives in promoting socio-economic empowerment of women. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used for this study. Primary data were collected through interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions and secondary data were collected from internal documents of the cooperatives. Out of the target group 75 multipurpose cooperative societies (MPCs), the researchers purposively selected MPCs established before 2005. Out of the selected target group MPCs, 25% were randomly selected and 30% of women members were also selected randomly. Nevertheless, the collected data is analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results of the study indicated that women participation in cooperatives is very limited. More than 80% of the respondents are involved in farm activity and only 5% are engaged in paid work. 90% of the respondents have joined their cooperatives to access financial sources and improve their bargaining power. Nevertheless, the results reveal that women members have improved their income, livestock holdings, autonomous decision making and spending power after joining their cooperatives, but, its regularity is limited. Participation in important affairs and management positions of their cooperatives level and access to training of the women members is still limited and hence governmental and non-governmental organizations need to consider gender equality in their cooperative members' capacity building programs.

Keywords: Cooperatives, women, participation, socio-economic empowerment

Introduction

Promoting women's empowerment is essential because in most cases women are responsible for their children and for their family, thus empowering women is empowering the society in large (world bank, 2001). The global statistics show that Women are in charge of 60-80 percent of the world's work, and produce 50 percent of the food. Despite the fact that their contribution is significant, they have limited economic advantage and access to productive resources (Lawless et al., 1996; Mayoux, 2009).

History has shown a number of approaches to development have been employed to solve the socio-economic ills of the third world. However, these approaches failed to achieve their goals partly because they completely ignored women and their contribution to the efforts of development (Easter, 1999). Throughout history and in many societies, inequalities of women and men were part and parcel of an accepted male-dominated culture. One of the basic factors causing unequal share of women in

development relates to the division of labor between the sexes (Prakash, 2002).

Cooperatives can be used as breeding grounds to empower women by enhancing their specific knowledge and capacities. The government of Ethiopia recognizes and supports multi-purpose cooperatives to actively participate in the development process towards employment and women empowerment.

7% of African population is involved in cooperative business. Despite of the advantages of the model, women participation in the economy and leadership position is very low. Women membership accounts less than 30% and their participation declines for upper positions (Majurin, 2012). It is not an exception to Ethiopia, where women represent only 18% of cooperative membership (Emana, 2008). There are many factors which limit women's participation in cooperatives among them limited access and control over productive assets are highly pronounced (Desta, 1999; Habtamu et al., 2004 & Majurin, 2012). Thus, gender inequality brings a burden on women and women are adversely affected by poverty.

Although the problem of gender inequality is a universal phenomenon, it is highly pronounced in developing countries like Ethiopia. The structure of the Ethiopian society, Tigray in particular is highly patriarchal in nature where it is characterized by male domination in all spheres. To this fact, government and non-government organizations are actively working to promote women empowerment. However, the male hegemony has not yet changed.

This study, thus, deal with the role of cooperatives in promoting socio-economic empowerment of women in south eastern zone, Tigray region, Ethiopia with specific objectives to identify women's economic participation in cooperatives, and to assess the role of cooperatives in social empowerment of women. The paper is organized in to five sections. The second section composes review of related literature; the third section describes the research methodology used, the Fourth section deals with analysis and discussion of the results and the fifth section is a summary and conclusion of the results.

Literature Review Concepts and Meaning of Cooperatives

The philosophy of cooperation is evolved around 18th century in Europe with the notion of protecting economically poor people from the exploitation of economically powerful (Subburaj, 2003). Cooperatives are democratically owned and governed enterprises guided by the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. They put people at the heart of their activities and allow members to participate in the decision-making (Kimberly & Robert, 2004). Cooperatives generate considerable socio-economic benefits to their members. From the economic stand point, cooperatives improve income and bargaining power of their members. While the social purposes of cooperation are more diverse than economic purposes. They provide a unique opportunity to members to education and training; encourage active participation in meetings, committee membership and leadership positions (Majurin, 2012).

Concepts of Women Empowerment

Most women in developing countries do not have access to education, productive resources and other services. Such discrimination hampers them not to earn incomes and not to actively participate in socioeconomic and political conditions (Kebeer, 1999). In order to solve the problem, women empowerment becomes a global agenda. The term

'women empowerment' has become popular in the development field since 1980s. It is vividly recognized that women empowerment is essential for sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction in developing countries. Women empowerment is defined differently by different scholars. Mayoux (2005) and Mosedale (2005) define women empowerment as a mechanism where women become strong through increasing their confidence to make appropriate choice and control over resources. Naryaan (2002) on the other hand define women empowerment as increasing control and ownership of assets to influence and bargain over any decision that affects their lives.

Although women empowerment is not a sufficient condition, it is still a necessary condition for development process. Thus, women empowerment has three dimensions. Social dimension signifies respectable and non discriminatory positioning in the society. Political dimension signifies involvement in the governance of organization and administrative positions, and economic empowerment is enabling women members to have equal in employment, spending, ownership of production means and sharing benefits (Prakash, 2002).

Cooperatives in Promoting Social Empowerment of Women

Although cooperation is viewed as an organization for the promotion of economic interests of its members, it does not confine itself only to the economic aspect. It also permeates the social aspect of life and aims at establishing a new democratic social order based on freedom and equality, where people live in harmony, caring and sharing like a family, where there is a unity of spirit and common economic bond (Karunakran, 2004; Warman & Kennedy, 1998). Cooperatives have a role to play in alleviating different shocks, and paving the way towards recovery that is socially and economically sound and sustainable. Ultimately, cooperatives can create a safe environment where women increase their self-confidence, identify their own challenges, make decisions and manage risks. As a result, women are empowered and become active agents of change, entrepreneurs and promoters of social transformation who can improve their own lives and those of the community. Majurin (2012) revealed that cooperatives are also effective points of entry for addressing a broad range of gender equality issues such as unpaid work, shared responsibilities and gender-based violence.

A study by Gita (1993) depicted that 57.7% of women in cooperatives take initiatives to organize

cultural programs in their community as against only 10.7% of women in unorganized sector. Cooperatives have been successful in not only increasing social participation of women but also in developing drives, initiatives and leadership qualities. However, to date women's active involvement and leadership in agricultural cooperatives continue to be rather low (USAID, 2005).

Women's Economic Participation in Cooperative Societies

Economic empowerment increases women's access to economic resources and opportunities. If women's access to productive resources were the same as men's, women's contribution could reduce the total number of hungry people by 12 to 17 percent in support of Millennium Development Goal 1 of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger (FAO, 2011). Global statistics show that women's participation in most types of institution is low. Participation in rural cooperatives is no exception. In the developing world, there are many social pressures that make difficult for women to play an active role in leadership and improve their living standards (FAO, 2007).

Even though cooperatives are open for both men and women, participation of women in terms of membership and leadership position is still minimal. Thus, there is still much to be done to strengthen women's participation in cooperatives. As a matter of fact numerous women-based cooperatives demonstrate that women are capable of developing their own businesses and improve their technical knowledge and organizational self-help capacities (McKay, 2001). Cooperatives provide plenty of opportunities to their members to involve in different income generating activities such as petty trade, the establishment of irrigation schemes, agricultural production and process, etc (Young, 1992). The recent scenarios show that women are not born for reproductive work only, but they are also active entrepreneurs recording a rapid growth in their business.

In Africa, women are known to produce up to 80% of the food. However, they receive very limited inputs like only 7% of agricultural extension services, less than 10% of the credit offered to small-scale farmers, and own only 1% of the land (FAO, 2011). In this context, women are often found concentrated

in subsistence agriculture and unpaid farm work. The cooperative and self-help model can change this by enabling women and men farmers, or women only, to come together for purposes of acquiring inputs, production services, and marketing of their produce, etc . Apart from being able to access economies of scale as providers of services or products or as consumers, participating in a cooperative as a member, elected leader also brings an enhanced status and voice (Kumar, Savarimuthu & Ravichandran, 2003). Economic empowerment increases women's access to economic resources and opportunities including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development and market information (Eyben, et al., 2008). Increasing the role of women in the economy is important for economic resilience and growth; however, their integration into the formal sector is still constrained by limited access to credit, property, technology and technical skills (Johnston & Ketilson, 2009). Through cooperatives, millions of women have been able to change their lives - they have found a route towards self- empowerment and development that works for them. Cooperatives have contributed to improved livelihood and better economic decision making of women (Nippierd, 2002).

The Study Area

Ethiopia is composed of nine regional states and two city administrations. Tigray region is one of the regional states, which is located at the northern part and owns a total area of 54,572.6sq.kms. It is surrounded by two regional states and two neighboring countries; to the east by afar regional state, to the north by Eritrea, to the west by the Sudan and to south by Amhara regional state. Tigray is divided into Seven major administrative zones of which south eastern is one of these zones. The rest includes: the Western zone, Northwestern, Central, Eastern, Mekelle and Southern zone.

The 2007 Population and housing Census results put the total population of Tigray region is nearly 4.5 million of which 49.2% are male and 50.8% are female and 80.5 % live in rural areas. South eastern zone include 4 weredas¹ these are Seharti-Samre, Hintalo-Wajrat, Enderta and Degua-Temben with 79 Tabias² lay on 4,961.8 square kilometer area to the south eastern part of Tigray. It contains a total population of 559,717 (CSA, 2008).

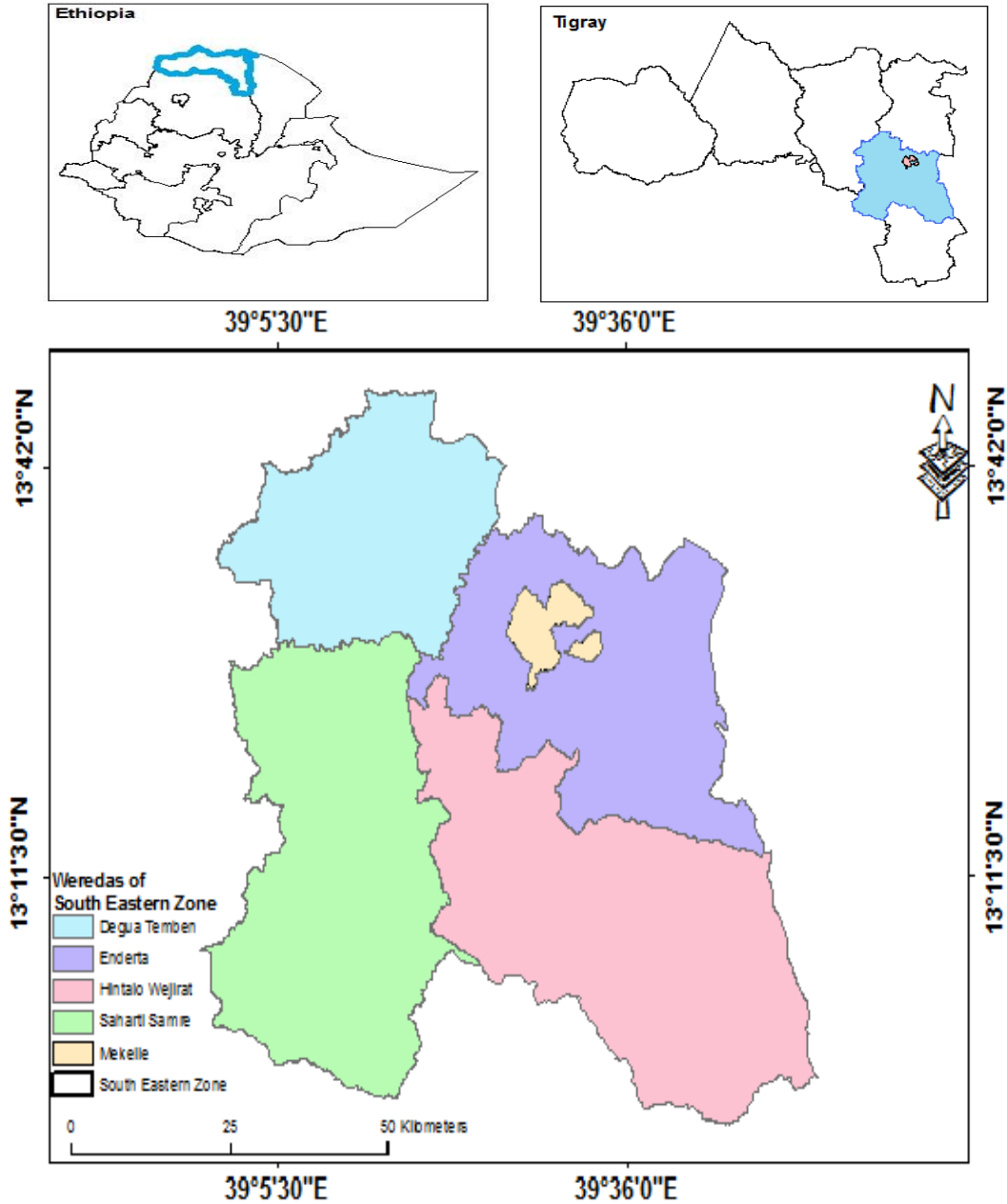


Figure 1. Location map of the study area. Source: BoFED (2012).

Data and Methodology

Sampling design and sampling techniques

The researchers have employed a multi-stage cluster sampling. To select the sample cooperative societies out of the target group 75 multipurpose cooperative societies found in the study area, the population was clustered into four cluster groups based on their respective wereda geographical location. Elements of

the cluster were screened with respect to a criterion, multipurpose cooperative societies established before 2005 only were considered as member of the population. Out of this selected target group multipurpose cooperative societies 25% were randomly selected from each wereda. To select the sample women respondents, 30% of the female members of the selected multipurpose cooperative society were selected randomly.

Method of data collection and source

Both primary and secondary sources of data were used. Primary data were collected through interview, questionnaire and focus-group discussions. Interviews were conducted with management committee of the selected multi-purpose cooperatives and cooperative promotion office experts. The questionnaire was administered with randomly selected women members of the selected multi-purpose cooperative societies and a focus group discussion with female members of the selected cooperatives were made in each wereda. In addition to the interview, questionnaire and Focus group discussion, secondary data were collected from internal documents of the cooperatives societies and cooperative promotion offices.

Method of data analysis and presentation

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and presented using tables so as to easily present and interpret the collected data. The researchers have employed descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation and percentage to analyze the collected data with regard to the different variables of socio-economic empowerment of women.

Results and Discussion

Demographic characteristics of respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents under this study is composed of age, marital status, occupation, educational level, family size and family membership status. The results of the survey show that about 80% of the respondents are in the most productive age category (14-45) and more than half of them are married and have five family members on average.

Moreover, the results indicate that 55% of the respondents have completed primary school and above and only 45% of them are illiterate. The lower participation of illiterate members in joining the cooperative society may be due to the complexity of formalities required to join the cooperatives, in which illiterate members are not able to do so. Nevertheless, 52.50% are head of their family. From the focus group discussion, it is extracted that women who are household heads and obviously have more socio-economic problems, thus, they join their cooperative societies to address their common livelihood needs in an organized manner. Furthermore, women household head might have better freedom to participate in cooperatives than women who are housewife.

Furthermore, results of the survey depict that 80% of the respondents are involved in farming activity to generate income for their livelihood, which is consistent with the national statistics. On the other hand only 20% of the respondents are involved in non-farm income generating activities. Most importantly, only 5% of the respondents are engaged in paid work which shows a very few women are engaged in income-earning job.

Women social empowerment in cooperative societies

Prakash, (2002) emphasized that social empowerment of women is a process whereby women are able to exercise their rights and duties with confidence, and they are able to participate in the management process of their cooperatives. Hence, cooperatives are important business model to work as a ground for reaping women empowerment mechanisms. Thus, the following tables discuss the participation of women in their cooperatives in terms of membership, participation in committee, board and management, autonomy in personal decision making, participation in meetings and information sharing.

Table 1. Reasons for joining cooperatives.

Variables	No. Obs.	Percentage	Cumulative
Access to credit	40	25.00	25.00
Improve savings	38	23.75	48.75
Increase bargaining power	63	39.38	88.13
Reduce marketing risks	18	11.25	99.38
others	1	0.62	100.00
Total	160	100.00	

Table 1 reveals that about 50 % of the respondents joined their cooperative society to access alternative financial mechanisms to borrow or save money. While 39.38% of the respondents joined the cooperative societies to increase their bargaining

power. During the focus group discussion, the members strongly emphasized that cooperatives are alternative means to solve economic and social problems of members.

Table 2. Respondents' position in their cooperative society.

Variables	No. Obs.	Percentage	Cumulative
Member	117	73.13	73.13
Board member	10	6.25	76.88
Committee member	27	16.88	93.75
Chair-person	6	3.75	100.00
Total	160	100.00	

Respondents were asked to describe their position in their cooperative societies and table 2 depicts that 73.13% of the respondents are ordinary members, with lower participation in board and chair person positions accounting 6.25% and 3.75% respectively. The more women are participating in different positions of their cooperative society the more women will be socially empowered, however, the above results show that less than 30% of the

respondents are involved in management position of their cooperatives. This is consistent with Majurin (2012) showing women's participation declines when it goes to upper position. This might be due to lack of commitment or know-how of the management of the cooperatives to break the beliefs and customs of the society that hinder women's participation in management positions.

Table 3. Personal Autonomy of Respondents before and after Membership

Variables	Always		Sometimes		Never	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Visiting friends or relatives	18.13%	36.00%	58.75%	60.25%	23.12%	3.75%
Visiting health services	25.62%	32.50%	55.63%	65.62%	18.75%	2.25%
Visiting nearest market	29.38%	43.00%	43.12%	53.25%	27.50%	3.75%
Personal income control	13.75%	41.75%	35.63%	50.75%	50.62%	7.50%
Access to media	22.50%	51.24%	28.75%	35.63%	48.75%	13.13%
Family planning	31.88%	46.87%	25.63%	35.00%	42.49%	18.13%

To assess the personal autonomy of women members before and after joining the cooperative societies, the respondents were asked to rate the frequency of making personal decisions on their social activities. Different measures of personal autonomy are identified, thus, overall results shown above depict that women members are able to exercise their decision making power after joining the cooperatives. In all metrics, their personal autonomy in decision is improved from what it has been before joining the cooperatives. But, still, there are many women who are not able to make decisions on their will. Moreover, the number of women making regular autonomous decision is also limited accounting less than 50%, except for access to media. Before, joining

the cooperatives about 50% of the respondents had no power to make decision on personal income, family planning and access media. However, after joining the cooperatives, their autonomous decision making ability is improved significantly compared to the other metrics. From the focus group discussion conducted, it was clearly depicted that those women members who are head of their family have a regular personal autonomy to control over their income and productive assets. Despite the limitations exist in making personal decisions; the improvements might be due to education and trainings provided by cooperative societies to create awareness of members on different perspectives.

Table 4. Women members' participation in the affairs of cooperative society.

Variables	Always		Sometimes		Never	
	Obs.	%	Obs.	%	Obs.	%
Elect or be elected	78	48.75	55	34.37	27	16.88
Meeting attendance	108	67.50	31	19.37	21	13.13
Profit allocation decision	47	29.38	64	40.00	49	30.62
Business expansion decision	59	36.87	66	41.25	35	21.88
Asset control decision	65	40.62	80	50.00	15	9.38
Voting according to own decision	42	26.25	102	63.75	16	10.00
Participating in any trainings	23	14.38	88	55.00	49	30.62

Respondents were asked to rate frequency of their participation in their cooperative society's affairs. Thus, the results shown in Table 4 above depict that, except for attendance in meetings, less than 50% of the respondents participate in the affairs of their cooperative society. Most importantly women's participation in trainings, profit allocation, decision

in business expansion and asset control is very low. Furthermore, only 26% of the respondents are able to regularly vote without interference from other members, candidate or family member. This implies that women members of the cooperative societies lack regular participation in the major affairs of their cooperative societies.

Table 5. Means of information channeling to members .

Variables	No. Obs.	Percentage	Cumulative
Management	44	27.50	27.50
Committee membership	27	16.87	44.37
Meeting	62	38.76	83.13
Member	27	16.87	100.00
Total	160	100.00	

Information channeling should be transparent and accessible to all members without any difference, so that members will have knowledge about their cooperative society. Table 5 shown above depicts that majority of respondents' access information during meetings in the form of annual report. However, members who are part of different committees or management committee and some

members who are families, friends and neighbors of people involved in management access to information from the management body. Only about 16% of the respondents share information from fellow members. Thus, it can be depicted that there might be differences in timing and quality of information disseminated to members.

Table 6. Schooling status of respondents' children.

Variable	No. Obs.			Percentage		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
Availability of school aged children	132	28	160	82.50	17.50	100.00
Children sent to school	109	23	132	83.02	16.98	100.00

One of the advantages of joining a cooperative society is to promote members' awareness on educating their children. Respondents were asked whether they have school aged children and do they send their children to school. 82.5% of the respondents said that they have school aged children. Out of those who have school aged children, 83.02% of them have sent their children to school. Thus, it can be concluded that the awareness creation campaign run by cooperative societies have enabled the members to send their children to school. During the focus group discussions, it was clearly emphasized that information sessions conducted by

cooperative societies and kebele administration have contributed a lot to greater access of school to children.

Economic participation and empowerment of Members

Cooperatives are important business entities in enhancing the economic condition of their members by improving their bargaining power and income. Thus, this section discusses the contribution of cooperatives in promoting economic empowerment of women.

Table 7. Women members' spending decision-making power before and after membership.

Variables	Always		Sometimes		Never	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Buying HH Furniture	7.5%	37.50%	81.87%	60.65%	10.63%	1.85%
Educational Expenditure	18.12%	58.12%	65.00%	33.75%	16.88%	8.13%
Medical Expenses	20.62%	35.00%	50.00%	46.25%	29.38%	18.75%
purchasing women's cloth	17.50%	52.00%	76.88%	47.25%	5.62%	0.75%
Purchasing children's Cloth	19.37%	45.00%	75.00%	53.12%	5.63%	1.88%
Access to saving and credit Services	1.25%	55.00%	26.25%	33.75%	72.50%	11.25%

The set of indicators used above represents a family decision making indices which measure a woman's independence from her spouse in making decisions in spending. These economic activities are constrained to women living in traditional patriarchal systems. Control over money and other important household matters have been seen as a function of the family structure. Results shown in table 7 reveal that after joining the cooperatives, the respondents have shown improvement in spending decision making. On

average about 50% of the respondents sometimes make decision on spending. But, there are still many women who are not able to make spending decision on important expenditures such as education, medical and about 11% do not have access to credit and savings service from their cooperative society. However, an important finding shows that 55% of the respondents improved their access to credit and savings services after joining their cooperatives.

Table 8. Crop production potential of sample respondents.

Crops (Qtls)	No. Obs.	Mean	Std.Dev.	Min.	Max.
Before Membership	160	4.52	5.99	0	32
After Membership	160	6.80	8.41	0	37
Mean Difference		2.28			

The major crops grown in the study area are wheat, sorghum, teff, beans, barely, chickpea, maize and onion. The crop production capacity of the respondents before and after cooperative membership is depicted in table 8 hence, the average crop production capacity of the respondents is found to be 4.52 and 6.80 quintals/hectare before and after cooperative membership respectively. On average the

respondents have increased their crop production by 2.28 quintals after cooperative membership. The increased crop productions may imply that cooperative societies play a pivotal role in enhancing the production and productivity of farmers by supplying necessary agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, chemicals and improved seeds on time and at fair price.

Table 9. Livestock ownership of sample respondents.

Livestock (TLU)	No. Obs.	Mean	Std.Dev.	Min.	Max.
Before Membership	160	1.14	2.19	0	17.5
After Membership	160	1.51	2.04	0	12.5
Mean Difference		0.37			

Animal rearing is the second most important economic activity of farmers in rural Ethiopia next to crop production, for which animals are used for generating income (by selling animal products such as milk, meat, and egg), transport and sources of organic fertilizer and fuel (animal dung). The other importance that livestock play in rural communities is as a measure of wealth and prestige. Therefore, farmers use to rear different types of livestock such as cattle, sheep, donkey, mule, horse, and chicken, which are most common in the study area.

Accordingly, keeping the standardization of analysis, the livestock number was converted to Tropical Livestock Unit (TLU) (See Appendix: I). Thus, results shown in the above table 9 revealed that on average women members own 1.14 and 1.51 TLU of livestock before and after of membership respectively. This implies an improvement in livestock holding of the members. The change in livestock ownership after cooperative membership could indicate the economic importance of cooperatives for women as means of making productive asset and improving income generation.

Table 10. Percentage of shareholding by women members.

Shareholding (%)	No. Obs.	Percentage	Cumulative
1-3	93	58.13	58.13
4-7	48	30.00	88.13
8-10	19	11.87	100.00
Total	160	100.00	

Cooperative Proclamation No. 147/98 of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia outlines that any member should join a cooperative society by purchasing not more than 10% of the shares outstanding. The main payments required from each potential cooperative member are registration fee and share capital contribution as decided by the general assembly. Results shown on table 10 depict that about 12% of the respondents own a higher share capital and 58% of the respondents own only 1-3% of

the share capital of their cooperative society which is below average. Consequently, women members' shareholding might be constrained due to lack of ownership of productive assets. Moreover, the focus group discussion made emphasized that those women members who have better awareness about the benefits of cooperatives and most importantly those who are having or had a position in the cooperatives are likely to own higher number of shares.

Table 11. Women members dividend utilization purposes.

Dividend used for	No. Obs.	Percentage	Cumulative
Consumption	28	27.72	27.72
Property acquisition	36	35.64	63.46
Purchase of additional shares	30	29.70	93.16
Purchase of livestock	3	2.97	96.13
Others (paying loan)	4	3.96	100.00
Total	101	100.00	

Cooperative members have the legitimate right to use the dividend income they obtained for what they feel is productive and appropriate. Table 11 reveal that, about 28% of the respondents use the dividend income for consumption while 70% of them use the

dividend income for strengthening their economic lives by purchasing property, livestock and additional shares. This might imply that women are keen in building their productive assets if they get the access and power to do so.

Table 12. Women members' business transaction with their cooperatives

Economic activities	No. Obs.	Percentage	Cumulative
Purchase of merchandise	53	33.13	33.13
Purchase of agricultural inputs	73	45.62	78.75
Sell of grains	16	10.00	88.75
savings	18	11.25	100.00
Total	160	100.00	

Cooperative enterprises can be organized to undertake promising business operations according to the needs of their members. Thus, cooperatives work as suppliers of consumer goods, and inputs and members participate in selling of out-puts and

purchase of products and services of the cooperative society. Therefore, table 12 depict that about 89% of the respondents participate in purchase and sell of agricultural merchandises.

Table 13. Members income after cooperative membership.

Income increased	No. Obs.	Percentage	Cumulative
Yes	146	91.25	91.25
No	14	8.75	100.00
Total	160	100.00	

Being economic enterprises, cooperatives play a crucial role in enhancing the economic wellbeing of their members. One of the visible economic contributions of cooperatives is improving members'

income. Table 13, show that 91% of the respondents emphasized that their income is increased after membership while 8.75% of the respondents have not seen change in their income level.

Table 14. Respondents' monthly expenditure condition after cooperative membership.

Expense item	Increased		Decreased		Unchanged	
	No. Obs.	%	No. Obs.	%	No. Obs.	%
Food	153	95.63	3	1.88	4	2.5
Clothing	151	94.38	3	1.88	6	3.75
Health	92	58.23	14	8.86	52	32.91
Appliance	74	46.25	11	6.88	75	46.88
Fuel	58	36.25	85	53.13	17	10.63
Education	129	80.63	11	6.88	20	12.50
Festivities	76	47.50	3	1.88	81	50.63
Transportation	130	81.76	6	3.77	23	14.47

Food expenditure is one of the major family expenditure components because it is basic to survive being healthy, energetic and economically productive. The results shown above depict that the respondents' food, clothing, transport, education, health and festivity is increased after their membership in cooperatives. This might imply a large percentage of the respondents have gained economic power in order to cover their basic life expenditures. Most importantly, 47.5% of the respondents have increased their spending in festivities. These extra spending on social festivities could have their own negative impact on the overall economic wellbeing of households in the locality as it leads in extravagant resource utilization.

When the respondents were asked whether their annual income is sufficient to cover their household consumption requirements, 95% of them have said their income is not sufficient enough to satisfy their family's consumption demand. Thus, besides to farming the respondents are engaged in additional income generating activities.

Conclusion

In developing countries, among the poor, rural women are the poorest and more vulnerable. Although the problem of gender inequality is a universal phenomenon, it is highly pronounced in developing countries like Ethiopia. The results of the study indicated that women participation in cooperatives is very limited. More than 80% of the respondents are involved in farm activity and only 5% are engaged in paid work. The socio-economic dimension of empowerment depict that 90% of the respondents joined their cooperatives to access financial sources and improve their bargaining power. However, their participation in management position is minimal. Furthermore, they are not actively participating in the affairs of their cooperative society except attending meetings. Nevertheless, the results reveal that women members have improved their autonomous decision making in

executing social activities and they have also improved their decision making after joining their cooperatives. But, the regularity of social and economic decision making is limited. Most importantly, the respondents have emphasized that their income and livestock ownership is increased and consequently, their expenditure on food, clothing, transport, education, health and festivity has been increasing. However, their regular income from farming and income from the cooperatives is not sufficient to cover their expenditures.

To sum-up in majority of the metrics used the respondents have shown improvement in their socio-economic status, however, there are still limitations that hinder women from active participation in their cooperatives. Thus, considerable awareness creation and women empowerment advocacy activities and policies should be derived by appropriate stakeholders.

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Notes

1. Wereda refers to an administration level equivalent to district and is below a zone level.
2. Tabias refers to the lowest administration levels in Ethiopia in which a group of Tabias make up a wereda.

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