

“Enset is a Good Thing”: Gender and Enset in Jimma Zone, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Ensete ventricosum (Welw.) Cheesman is a perennial corm crop grown in house yards and consumed predominantly in the south and southwest regions of Ethiopia. Often described as a “woman’s crop” for women’s labor roles in the processing, cooking and selling of enset products, the plant is notorious for the strenuous work involved in its harvest and post-harvest management. Following a qualitative feminist framework, we interviewed male and female enset farmers as well as other experts with regards to enset and gender in Jimma Zone. The data analysis identified four major themes: 1) The benefits and uses of enset; 2) The gender division of labor and decision-making; 3) Gendered challenges; and 4) The technology gap. The discussion suggests some important considerations in terms of scaling up enset production for wider distribution and the potential impacts of these developments on women farmers. Enset is an important crop, especially for women who maintain control over the outputs. Women depend on the crop to feed their families and access money in times of financial strain.

INTRODUCTION

Enset

Ensete ventricosum (Welw.) Cheesman has many names – enset, false banana, *kocho*. A perennial tuber crop, it is grown in house yards and consumed predominantly in the south and southwest regions of Ethiopia. Plant products include a carbohydrate-rich food source (*kocho*, *amicho* and *bullä*) as

well as fiber for making mats and rope. There are also indications that the plant holds some medicinal value (Brandt *et al.*, 1997). Enset ranges from being a staple to secondary food crop in different regions of the country and in 1991, the Ethiopian government declared enset a national crop (Brandt *et al.*, 1997). It plays an important role in national food security (Tsegaye and

Struik, 2002; Negash and Niehof, 2004). Research suggests “those populations depending on enset have never suffered from famine, even during Ethiopia’s tragic drought and famine prone decades of the 1970s and 1980s” (Brandt *et al.*, 1997, p. 5). There is a growing interest in the role that enset currently plays in regions of high consumption but it remains an understudied crop in relation to exploring its challenges and development potential.

Why Gender and Enset?

Often described as a “woman’s crop” for women’s labor roles in the processing, cooking and selling of enset products, the plant is notorious for the strenuous work involved in the harvest and post-harvest management of the crop (see for example, Brandt *et al.*, 1997). However, beyond this preliminary recognition, research focuses on the crop’s contributions to farming households. Using the household as an undifferentiated unit of analysis “fails to capture the gendered nuances of this work” (Frank, 1999). Twenty percent of rural households in Ethiopia are headed by women (FAO, 2011), and women experience the bulk of responsibilities and challenges associated with food price hikes and other food insecurity issues (Urugachi, 2010). However, these gendered analyses were not conducted in regions where enset is consumed. Many questions remain about the gendered nature of household decision-making and control over enset farming (Mitchell *et al.*, 2010). Our research investigates: What gender divisions of labor are associated with enset farming in a region where enset is a secondary crop? How are crop decisions made? And, according to those most directly involved – namely women – what challenges persist and what technology and development opportunities exist in relation to enset production and post-

harvest management? This research contributes to and deepens understandings of the existing association between enset, nutrition and national food security.

Context: Jimma Zone, Ethiopia

Centrally located within the Oromia province in southwestern Ethiopia, Jimma Zone has a population of 136 668 (69 442 male and 68 226 female) (CSA, 2007). While the region’s major agricultural outputs include coffee, *khat* and maize, the majority of rural households also grow some enset, producing a regional average of 323,694.37 quintal (CSA, 2012). Based on Brandt *et al.*’s (1997) categorization, enset in Jimma Zone could be considered a secondary crop produced mainly for household consumption and sale at a small scale in local markets.

METHOD

With this context in mind, a qualitative feminist methodology was implemented to explore the gendered experiences of enset farmers in four *Woredas* of Jimma Zone: Dedo, Manaa, Seka and Sekoru. Following a feminist framework (Harding, 2004) the research brings to the fore the lived experiences of women. It recognizes women as experts in their own lives and that gender (the social construction of male and female identities) shapes how we understand and negotiate our lives. To incorporate a gendered perspective, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the following groups and individuals: Farming families (five women and three men) and Development Agents (DAs) from each of the participating *Woredas*; the gender focal person from the Jimma Zone Agricultural Office; two representatives from the Jimma Agricultural Mechanization Research Center (JAMRC); and a Jimma University researcher specializing in

enset. Interview transcripts were analyzed using content analysis and findings presented back to participants in film format for member checking¹.

FINDINGS

Data analysis identified four major themes: 1) The benefits and uses of enset; 2) The gender division of labor and decision-making; 3) Gendered challenges; and 4) The technology gap.

1) "Enset is a Good Thing":

The women participants describe the importance of enset for keeping their family well fed, "It is better to have a small piece of *kocho* to get energy to do work. You don't get hungry." Another woman says, "*Bulla* is extracted from enset and mixed with butter or oil. It is used for fattening. Especially for thin people if they eat *bulla* daily with butter or oil, it is good." The multiple uses of enset are also highly praised:

We need it for food and it is used for our development. Also the leaf part is used to make bread. The dried leaf is used to make mats, and we sleep on them. For these reasons, enset is very important. Even when people have died, the fibre is used to tie the dead body and it is then loosened when the body is ready to go in the ground. Our enset is very important.

The participants explain that the entire plant is used either as food or fibre, and certain varieties have medicinal value aiding with ailments such as diarrhea or male virility. The majority of the enset produced by the farmers is consumed within the household.

Along with its consumption benefits, enset is also considered a source of financial security. Women decide how to spend the money earned from selling the crop at local markets:

If we also need clothes, we process enset in the morning and go to the market and sell it. Then at night, we come back with clothing. And my husband doesn't ask me, 'where did you get this?' because he saw us processing in the morning.

Income from selling enset products is described as belonging to the women heads of household, for buying staples such as salt, oil, spices and soap. Deciding to sell, however, is a careful balance. When asked when and why enset is sold, one woman explains: "When I face a problem, or shortage of money to buy coffee and salt. We don't sell every day...[I only sell] two wraps, no more than that...because we need it for consumption". Enset acts as a "safety net" for it can be sold and provide income when families are in times of crisis or need.

There are relatively few financial costs with enset production. The plant generates multiple suckers, which are transplanted, and different varieties are shared or traded amongst family members and neighbors. Smaller families with no or young children discuss the need to hire additional labor for planting and harvesting. With the exception of this expense, farmers benefit from a highly rugged plant: "In cases of drought, if there is no rain for one or two years and if the other crops fail, enset will be there for you." While the literature notes the use of cow manure to fertilize enset crops (Brandt et al., 1997), the farmers interviewed did not discuss fertilization or associated manure costs in their farming practices. Enset is valued for being drought

¹ The interviews were filmed and incorporated within a documentary film project. Forthcoming publications will explore this visual dimension of the research and its use as a teaching tool.

resistant, preventing soil erosion and increasing soil moisture content (see also Brandt *et al.*, 1997).

2) Gender Division of Labor and Decision-making:

Traditionally, men plant enset, both men and women weed the crop and women do the bulk of harvesting and processing. One female participant puts it simply:

For the processing of enset, men are not involved. They are involved only in keeping the plantation weed free and at the time of planting. Men don't know how to process. We haven't heard of any men who know how to process.

The labor divisions in enset production are acknowledged amongst the participants, who all describe the most strenuous and time consuming of enset activities as women's work. Along with other household and child-rearing activities, the women report very little free time. One woman explains, "No, we don't have such free time [on Fridays, our religions day of rest]. At that time, we do laundry, wash the clothes and breastfeed. We live with our hunt. [If we want to eat, we need to work]." Enset production is arduous and made even more difficult when considered within the context of women's already burdened schedules. One DA summarizes:

Mostly in our area, women are discouraged. Naturally, women get pregnant, give birth and also take care of children. They prepare food for the family. She has a lot of responsibility in the family. Women also fetch water. There are few husbands who help their wives. In addition to preparing food and taking care of children, she also goes with her

husband to the farm and she does farm work. And she is overloaded. This is due to culture.

These divisions of labor are based on culture and tradition. One participant says, "According to our culture, no one is involved in the processing except women." Many participants when asked about men processing enset laughed at the ridiculousness of the suggestion. Nonetheless, perhaps due to these disproportionate responsibilities in enset processing, women report maintaining control over decisions about when to harvest: "It is decided by me and I process when I am faced with problems." "We are not waiting for [the men's] decision. We process when we need it." Echoing the literature, the participants describe enset as a women's crop (Brandt *et al.*, 1997; Negash and Niehof, 2004). However, this data suggests that women's labor contributions help determine their control over decision-making and economic gains.

What is more, our findings indicate that there are times when women and men transgress these traditional gender divisions. When men are absent, women do all the labor associated with enset as well as other farming duties traditionally done solely by men and boys. One farmer states, "We who don't have husbands are involved in the planting." Other women are adamant about their ability to perform physical labor traditionally considered too difficult for women: "We are not left behind from the men. Even we can cultivate, or dig with a pitchfork!" These women express both the necessity to challenge gender roles by taking up men's work in order to ensure that enset is produced, but also their ability and strength in doing so. Although tradition might keep men from processing enset, research

participants describe change in men's contributions to other household activities. One male farmer encourages his sons to learn how to cook. Another man started fetching water, collecting firewood and cleaning the livestock quarters to help his wife. Recognizing that women are unequally burdened in their work, women and men are transgressing traditional gender norms.

3) Gendered challenges:

Crop loss resulting from disease and rot are of primary concern to the farmers. According to the enset researcher, mole rats, nematodes, wild pigs, and porcupines also impede crop growth but the farming participants describe these issues as historical problems that were not a current concern. Participants are clear that disease resistant varieties need to be identified and distributed. However, plant spacing can also protect crops from disease, as one DA elaborates, "If the distance between plants is too small, disease occurs. The farmers do not follow the science or recommended spacing distance because they want to harvest large amounts of plants within a small area of land." Men and women's traditional responsibilities in relation to the crop should inform how DAs approach supporting farmers. One DA explains, "Mostly, we are communicating with women [when discussing enset]. But men like to produce large amounts within a small plot of land..." This suggests that men, involved in planting, might privilege maximum plant density. Women, involved in harvesting, might be more concerned with the quality of the mature plant. Thus while sharing or developing rot-resistant varieties is critical, this is not enough to prevent the spread of disease through a plantation. When liaising with enset farmers, DAs must communicate with both men and women together so that optimal farming practices can be *jointly* developed.

The participants in this study had not received any training or support in enset farming from the Agricultural Bureau. Instead, one male farmer voiced frustration around the lack of DA knowledge about enset. One DA reports repeatedly requesting training about enset for herself and notes the availability of manuals for fruits and spices but none such resources for enset. Two participants had received support for their male-controlled cash crops (soy bean), demonstrating the gendered imbalance of agricultural support services. Another DA explains how this bias works to neglect enset: "It is not an everyday job... we are focusing more on coffee because it is a coffee-growing region... The majority of our work is on coffee and *khat*." Understandably, these crops bring important resources to the communities, region and country. But with a predominant focus on cash crops, our research suggests the vital potential of subsistence food crops such as enset for strengthening food security appears overlooked.

4) Technology Gap:

Technology developments could significantly reduce women's physical strain and time required for enset processing, while increasing the yield and value of the crop. Listening to the men and women farmers interviewed, we gained a clear sense of their technology needs. Expressed time and again across the four *Woredas* by women farmers is the need for safer, more efficient, sharp metal decortication² tools as well as affordable and efficient squeezing machines. Dull instruments are dangerous, as evidenced by accounts of injured hands and other harvesting

² Also known as 'scrapping', decortication refers to the stage of enset processing whereby the pulp is separated from the fibre of the stem using a labour-intensive scraping process.

accidents. Existing and relatively inexpensive technologies could improve enset production in, for example, ensuring access to safe tool sharpening services. However, this research also shows a gap between women enset farmers' needs and the technologies being developed.

Male DAs and the JARMC report a decortication method where women sit on the ground and use one foot to hold the sheath to the scrapping board. This method is described as unhygienic and it was suggested that it is culturally inappropriate for a man to see a woman in this position. However, all the women describe decortivating by tying the sheath to the board using rope. While the rope method may still have issues regarding hygiene, it would seem to avoid what the men describe as potential embarrassment on the enset plantation. The Jimma Agricultural Mechanization Research Center (JAMRC) has developed prototype technologies for the decortivating and squeezing stages of enset processing, including a metal clamp to attach enset sheaths to the scrapping board, and both wooden and metal squeezers to extract water from the fermented *kocho*. The prototypes are not currently being distributed; the women interviewed report no access to technological developments. According to the JAMRC, there is currently no funding for promotion and distribution of their enset tools. Of course, these endeavors can be particularly costly in rural areas where populations are less dense, distances far and roads that may not be well maintained. Such developments might also not have been a previous priority in areas where enset is considered a women's subsistence crop.

Discussion: Implications of Scaling Up Enset Production?

Currently, there is growing interest in the potentials of enset as a sustainable

food source for Ethiopia, leading to arguments that increased land allocation for the crop would benefit household nutrition (Amede, Stroud and Aune, 2004). As a "woman's crop," scaling up enset production would certainly affect women but *how* might this scaling up have an impact on women, given their already burdened workloads? The increased time and physical challenges to women harvesting and processing a larger crop - especially if there are no developments and distribution of much-needed processing technology - is not discussed in the literature. Increasing the amount of land allocated for enset production might also shift the gender divisions of labor associated with the crop. Moving enset plantations outside of the yard could make it difficult for women to access the crop while also conducting other household duties and childcare. Should increased processing mechanization be further developed, could women lose access to the crop as a source of household food and supplementary income? Frank (1999) argues that technology alone cannot single-handedly address gender inequalities. Technologies are accessed and used within particular social contexts, which need careful deliberation when considering developmental implementations. The Ethiopian government's commitment to and progress regarding gender equity is praised; there has been increased women's participation on local land committees (FAO, 2011). However, despite these strong policies, implementation takes time to be understood and adapted within wider society. More research from a gendered perspective is needed to better understand the potential effects of increasing land allocations and developing technologies to improve enset production.

CONCLUSION

This study is unique for its investigation of the challenges and possible solutions with regards to gender and onset farming in a region where onset might not be considered a priority as compared with larger cash crops. The research reveals that strong gendered divisions structure onset farming from planting to post-harvest management and raises questions in relation to how the development of onset production might impact food security. Participants express general consensus that men and women are and should be considered equal, despite observations that strong cultural traditions structure onset-farming practices. These structures seem to persist despite changing beliefs and practices around gender equality in other aspects of home and farm labor. However, a perceived lack of interest from agricultural developmental agencies, at least in Jimma Zone, has left the women we interviewed spending long hours harvesting and processing the plant sometimes with dull and dangerous tools. We suggest that there could be very simple, relatively low-cost solutions to alleviating some of this physical work. Other more innovative technologies could also be further explored. Moreover, this research suggests some important considerations in terms of scaling up onset production for wider distribution and the potential impacts on women farmers. Despite these challenges, onset processing should not be regarded only as a burden to women. The women farmers repeatedly expressed the benefits of onset in their lives. Onset is an important crop, especially for women who maintain control over the outputs. Women depend on the crop to feed their families and access money in times of financial strain. "Onset is a good thing," and has the potential to offer even more.

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