

# Gender issues in donkey use in rural Ethiopia

by

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## Abstract

*The role of livestock within a farming system must be considered not only in terms of how people perceive and interact with their animals, but also how relationships between members of the society affect the activities which livestock perform. This paper looks at the role of donkeys in rural Ethiopia, with particular emphasis on how utilisation, management and attitudes differ between men and women. Three case studies are presented, based on discussions which were held with male and female farmers in different areas of the country - the west (Eastern Harerge), the north (Central Tigray) and central (Eastern Shewa). Information was obtained concerning social, economic and cultural factors which influence the use of donkeys in farming systems. The study confirms that in terms of attitude, donkeys are closely associated with poverty, and in all areas there is social stigma attached to using donkeys for certain activities. At the same time, however, the respondents commented that in at least two of the three areas, the attitudes towards donkeys are changing, and they are actually increasing in 'social value'. It appears that despite certain limitations due to attitudes and technologies available for donkeys, women have shown that they can especially benefit from using donkeys, both for domestic and income generating activities. The paper concludes by discussing the potential of increased access to donkey ownership as an effective entry point for assisting women, and the need for further investigation and a better understanding.*

## Introduction

One cannot understand a society without understanding the various relationships and systems which exert pressure on each other, both for continuity and for change. The role of livestock within a farming system must be considered not only in terms of how people perceive and benefit from their animals, but also how relationships between members of society affect the roles and activities which livestock have in the systems. This paper looks at the role of

donkeys in rural Ethiopia using a case study approach.

Discussions were held with male and female farmers in three different areas of the country—the west (Eastern Harerge), the north (Central Tigray) and central (East Shewa). The study locations were chosen at random. In each location, focus group discussions were held, with about 60 men and women. On average, 40% of the participants were women. When appropriate, individual interviews were conducted. Guided by an interview questionnaire, the process was informal and iterative, allowing farmers to share according to their experience. In all three locations the interviewers faced a similar reaction from the farmers—surprise that questions were being asked about donkeys! Their reaction alone attests to the situation of donkeys in Ethiopia—that of minimal attention, especially from 'outsiders' or 'experts'.

The three areas, a combination of high and middle elevation regions, vary considerably in geography, climate, and ethnic composition. According to Admassie et al (1993), the density of donkeys also differs substantially between the three areas, with Tigray Region the highest at 25 donkeys/km<sup>2</sup> followed by Shewa zone at 13 donkeys/km<sup>2</sup> and Harerghe at nearly 4 donkeys/km<sup>2</sup>. However, according to Wilson (1991), household ownership of donkeys does not necessarily reflect the density figures.

This study found that in Shewa zone, 85% of the households surveyed owned or kept donkeys, with the average of 2.7 donkeys per household. In Tigray, though the region has the highest density of donkeys in the country, the average percentage of households having donkeys was only 49%, with an average of 1.5 animals per household. In Harerghe, a study by Feseha and Yoseph in 1995 indicated that donkey ownership in East Oromia (which includes Harerge) is nearly 100%, with the majority (70–75%) owning one donkey.

This paper is not an empirical study nor a thorough examination of donkey use in rural

Ethiopia. It does, however, intend to shed some light on a subject area which historically and presently is little understood. The intention is to identify areas for further study and investigation.

## Results of group discussions

### *Use and ownership of donkeys*

The results of the discussions on the use and ownership of donkeys are presented in Table 1.

There appears to be some consistency in the three areas studied in that in male-headed households, men have more say in the use of the donkeys than their wives. However, in female-headed households the women has full control over donkey use. This differs from owning oxen where a female head of household can own oxen but she cannot use them, and her amount of control over the oxen differs considerably between areas and households.

A pattern also emerges around income generation activities involving use of donkeys.

Income-generating activities are usually

undertaken by men and they take precedence over domestic work. However, there is a high level of use of donkeys for domestic activities, and women earn income from donkey transport in all areas except Eastern Harerge.

The use of donkey technologies is extremely limited. Carts are used in only one area. For plowing, the barrier seems to be defined socially or culturally rather than by the physical capacity of donkeys. In Eastern Shewa, farmers felt that plowing with two donkeys is not possible as:

it is completely unknown and people would not accept it

the donkey needs the oxen to keep it walking in a straight line

it would be too difficult for the donkey and its health would suffer.

### *Donkey health and nutritional requirements*

The results of the group discussions on the health and nutritional requirements of donkeys are presented in Table 2.

**Table 1: Use and ownership of donkeys**

|   | <i>Eastern Shewa</i>  | <i>Central Tigray</i>  | <i>Eastern Harerge</i>   |
|---|---|--|--|
| Who owns donkeys?                         | Men in male headed households (MHH).<br>Women in female headed households (FHH).  | Owned by both but men have final decision in use in MHH. Women own in FHH.   | Differs according to area - either men own, or donkey is considered owned by both men and women of family.   |
| Who uses donkeys and for what activities? | Mainly used for carrying water for domestic use (6 hour trip) by women and children. Used by men for carrying firewood for domestic use. Both men and women use for carrying crops to the market. | Both men and women use for domestic work, eg, carrying water, firewood, stones, grain to mill and market. In MHH, men use for business, eg, carrying firewood (10 Birr/day), carrying salt from Danakil Depression (8 days away). In FHH, women use for business such as carrying firewood or stones, and renting out. | Women use for domestic use, eg, carrying water and grain to mill. Men use for taking chat and vegetables to market and manure to the fields. Income generation activities take precedence over domestic use (especially chat transport). |
| What technologies are used with donkeys?  | Wooden carts with metal wheels used to carry water barrels and crops are used.  | The only technology is panniers for carrying water and salt. There are examples of donkeys yoked with oxen for plowing. This is a sign of poverty. Yoking two donkeys unheard of and socially unacceptable.  | Only used as pack animals. No example of using donkeys to plow, though interest expressed.   |

**Table 2: Health and nutritional requirements of donkeys**

| <i>Eastern Shewa</i>   | <i>Central Tigray</i>  | <i>Eastern Harerge</i>   |
|--|--|--|
| Very little care given, especially as compared to oxen. Grazing is a problem due to dryness of area. | Farmers feel that donkeys require less care than oxen. However, when they get sick they die quickly. No examples of taking donkeys to veterinarian. Men and children look after grazing. Only given additional food if being rented out. | Veterinary care for donkey not practised. Traditional medicine often used. If women use donkeys they are responsible for ensuring grazing is provided. |

Farmers from all areas shared a common perspective that donkeys received very little care. If there are health problems they may be treated using traditional medicine, though the usual practice is not to treat at all. The attitude towards donkey health seemed to be that treating donkeys for disease was difficult anyway, as they tend to die when they get sick.

Generally, donkeys are seen as easier to feed than other animals such as cattle, as they will 'graze anywhere'. Therefore, donkeys are seen as 'low maintenance animals' and easy to care for.

#### ***Socio-economic factors affecting donkey utilisation***

The results of the group discussions on socio-economic factors affecting donkey utilisation are presented in Table 3.

In two of the three areas, the price of donkeys has increased as their importance in local livelihood strategies has increased. One contributing factor is that they remain more affordable than oxen, especially considering that their maintenance costs are low.

In Shewa and Tigray, the changing rural conditions have generally convinced farmers that donkeys provide greater assistance against food insecurity than oxen. This is based on their experience that oxen are only used for a few days of the year to prepare the land for sowing. Donkeys, however, are used year round to ease the burden of domestic transport and enable water to be obtained from distant sources. As well, donkeys can be used easily to generate income by transporting goods or to rent out as is the case in Tigray.

Data collected seems to indicate that attitudes towards donkeys are changing, in response to the changing rural environment. In Shewa the situation has been influenced by the availability of

domestic water and in Tigray the decreasing reliance on agricultural income. In Harerge a major influence has been the expansion of chat as a cash crop and the suitability of donkeys for transporting it.

In compiling the results of the interviews there appears to be a gender perspective on donkey use and benefits (ie, perspectives differ between men and women which appear to be based on the different opportunities and constraints of men and women rather than other factors). This is especially clear in female-headed households, which feel there are high potential benefits from owning donkeys (in Shewa and Tigray). Men seemed to feel that donkeys are a means to obtain income more easily. On the other hand, women appreciated that using donkeys provided an entry point for them to be engaged in various income-generating activities, in addition to assisting in domestic work. Donkeys were seen as an appropriate asset for women, and there was no need to aspire to an alternative, more mechanised form of transport.

#### ***Comparative advantages of donkeys in agricultural production systems***

The group members were asked to compare the characteristics of the four animals (donkey, ox, mule and horse) used in agricultural systems. The characteristics were strength, health, ease of management, feeding requirements and economics. Strength was understood primarily as endurance; health as the ability of the animal to withstand diseases or to not require extensive veterinary attention; ease of management refers to the need to train the animal and its compliance with its owner during use; feeding requirements evaluates the need to provide extra food to the animal in addition to grazing. To evaluate the economics of an animal, farmers were asked to compare the four animals, considering the purchasing price, daily

**Table 3: Socio-economic factors affecting donkey utilisation**

|  | <i>Eastern Shewa</i>  | <i>Central Tigray</i>  | <i>Eastern Harerge</i>   |
|--|---|--|--|
| What are the local costs of donkeys?                         | In 1992, the price of a donkey was 300-400 Birr. Now the price is 600 Birr - which is not much different than for a young bull (800 Birr). (US\$ 1 = Birr 6.3).                   | Current cost of donkey is between 350-450 Birr, significantly less than an ox (1000 Birr). (US\$ 1 = Birr 6.3).  | Prices vary between 300-700 Birr. Prices are higher in chat growing areas as they are used to transport chat to market. (US\$ 1 = Birr 6.3).                               |
| How do people see donkeys as compared to oxen?               | Unanimous agreement that in times of stress, their oxen would be sold before their donkeys. "If you don't have a donkey, you are a donkey yourself"                               | Overall agreement that donkeys are more likely to survive than oxen in times of stress. There was heated debate on whether oxen or donkeys would be the last animal sold in a crisis. Current market analysis shows that oxen prices have fallen more than donkey prices.  | Donkeys are more popular when there are cash crops to be transported.  |
| How do people perceive donkeys now, as compared to the past? | In the past donkeys were not to be part of a dowry payment to go with a new bride. This attitude has changed and now donkeys are considered acceptable for marriage transactions. | In the past, oxen were crucial as land size was large and grazing plentiful. However, this is no longer the case. Donkeys are now crucial for survival as they can be used for off-farm income generation. They are a key livelihood coping strategy. Donkeys played an important role in the 30 year civil war. | No comment   |
| Gender differentiated perspectives on donkeys?               | Donkeys are much more valuable to women than oxen, as they have full control and they can support their families from income generating activities.                               | Women headed households much prefer donkeys to oxen. There is a high demand from women to obtain credit to purchase donkeys in order to support their families.  | It is not common for women to own or use oxen so they are keen to use donkeys. Women do not have experience of using donkeys for income generation, only for domestic use. |

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Photo: Paul Starkey

*Photo 1: Girl with donkeys carrying water, near Debre Zeit, Ethiopia*

expenses and returns to the household from using the animal.

This exercise of comparison generated animated discussion and debate among the focus group participants. In general, donkeys were rated higher than other animals, especially in ease of management and feeding requirements. Oxen were given higher ratings for strength. In terms of economics and health, donkeys were again rated the highest, though oxen were also considered strong in these aspects.

## **Discussion**

### ***Role of donkeys***

In all areas studied, donkeys are used almost exclusively for transport, with limited range and variation in terms of technologies used. Research into strategies for expansion of cart use could offer farmers significant transport-related options. The only example of cultivation with donkeys is when an ox is yoked with a donkey. The idea of yoking two donkeys to plow is very new to highland farmers, but is worthy of further study and effort to promote.

### ***Gender differences***

Gender emerges as a major issue in that respondents were able to differentiate donkey utilisation according to whether an activity was done by men or women. In no location did the

respondents indicate that all activities were done equally by both. In some areas the distinctions are quite clear, for example that women only use donkeys for carrying water, while in other locations there was significant similarity in the activities performed by women and men. Women who are heads of households seem to be able to take advantage of the income generating potential of donkeys to a greater extent than women in male-headed households.

In all areas it seems that women have some level of access to use donkeys. It is especially noteworthy that in some areas women are able to use donkeys to assist them in their domestic responsibilities such as hauling water and firewood. Women's use of donkeys for economic returns seems limited to female-headed households. However, even this opportunity is significant in that it indicates there is cultural acceptance of women benefiting economically from donkey use. In male-headed households, it appears that men use donkeys for business activities—which usually take precedence over domestic work.

An increase in women's access to donkeys and appropriate technologies will not only reduce the time required for domestic 'female' responsibilities, but may also influence women's access to other resources. According to Dessalegn



Photo 2: Woman and a donkey in Tigray, Ethiopia

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Photo: Kathy Marshall

(1991), the introduction of the wheeled cart pulled by donkeys in the Rift Valley (Eastern Shewa) has benefited both men and women greatly. In addition to hauling water, carts are used to carry goods to and from the market. Dessalegn states that such access to carts has enabled women to be more involved in market activities. This is a good example of appropriate technology which combines income generation with a domestic labour saving function.

The increasing demand by Tigrayan women who head their households for credit to purchase donkeys is significant in that they will be able to enter into the business sector which is, to a large degree, dominated by men. The possible implications of this change go beyond the positive impact on the household economy, but may include changes in gender relations as women become engaged more actively in the market.

#### **Health and nutrition**

In all areas, the health and nutritional aspect of donkeys was given very low priority in the households surveyed. This may be partly due to the perception that donkeys do not require a lot of care—‘low maintenance animals’—and that when donkeys do get sick they are quick to die. It may also be due to the donkey’s traditional low status, especially in relation to oxen. In some areas, donkeys are used continuously without a break, a

situation certain to reduce their work output and life expectancy. An interesting issue to investigate may be the significance of poverty, as compared to level of awareness, on the incidence of donkey abuse and poor management.

#### **Management and perceptions**

In the areas where donkeys and/or their services are hired out, there is high potential for profit. The low purchase price and low ‘running’ costs can be recuperated in a short time. Income could be enhanced with the addition of appropriate donkey carts or packing technologies, and with additional donkeys.

Farmers are quick to acknowledge that donkeys traditionally have a low ranking within the ‘hierarchy’ of livestock ownership. This is reflected in the many sayings and beliefs which are found throughout the country, which in most cases denigrate donkeys. However, this informal survey process has provided an opportunity to discuss the changes which are occurring, at least in some areas, in perceptions towards donkeys. It appears that such changes are closely tied to poverty, and the struggles rural people are facing to survive. In such conditions donkeys provide crucial services which are not provided by oxen or other livestock. In all areas there are limitations to the extent to which donkeys are utilised within the farming system. It is worth noting that such

limitations are not derived from physical constraints alone. Culture and traditional beliefs play a significant role in defining what activities donkeys will or will not be used for and who makes such decisions in households.

### Conclusions

This paper highlights the key issues which emerged from an informal survey process undertaken in Ethiopia to provide some insight into socio-economic issues of donkey use. Though limited in its coverage and scope, the survey process did provide an introduction into how farmers perceive donkeys within their livelihood strategies, and what issues need further investigation. A consistent finding in all three areas surveyed was that though donkeys have historically played significant roles in rural economies, they tend to be perceived as a secondary animal, especially in relation to oxen. This attitude was directly evidenced by the surprise which all respondents expressed at the fact that external people were asking questions about donkeys. However, it was also expressed consistently that donkeys have an ever increasing importance in rural livelihoods. Environmental and demographic changes now challenge previously appropriate survival strategies, and in response, it appears that donkeys are being recognised as an important asset.

The survey tried especially to understand gender based differences in utilisation and management of donkeys, and results seem to confirm that attitudes, opportunities and constraints to using donkeys are indeed influenced by gender issues. Generally, donkeys appear to be an effective entry point for assisting women not only in domestic responsibilities, but also enabling women to be engaged in income-generating activities which otherwise they may not have had access to. By using the extensive literature available on the

interface of technologies and societies for guidance (for example Sizoo, 1990; Stamp, 1990), further research into donkey ownership and use could identify effective programming strategies for assisting women with increased access to and control over donkeys. As Dessalegn (1991) emphasises, no general rule about household decision making and relations between men and women can be applied throughout Ethiopia. Gender relations vary from one cultural setting to another, and under changed circumstances, the domination/subordination syndrome in male/female relationships breaks down. Therefore, further research would need to be sensitive to the similarities and differences between areas in trying to identify recommendations for programmes and policies.

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