USAID/ETHIOPIA
RESILIENCE LEARNING
ACTIVITY

Brief: The Effects of the Northern Conflict on Women and Men in the Amhara Region

This brief summarizes the findings from the Gender and Conflict Analysis conducted to understand the effects of the Tigray conflict on women and men in the Amhara Region.

Overview

The USAID/Ethiopia Resilience Learning Activity (RLA) is a five-year (2022–2027) learning project implemented by LINC. It aims to spearhead learning and facilitate collaboration, communication, and knowledge management for USAID and more than 15 USAID activities working to increase resilience in Ethiopia. RLA conducted a Gender and Conflict Analysis from January to June 2023 (data collection occurred in March 2023),[1] with the primary goal of documenting key gendered outcomes of the conflict for the purpose of learning and supporting adaptive management. RLA undertook the analysis to gain a deeper understanding of how differently the Tigray conflict, which began in 2020 and spilled over to neighboring regions, impacted women, men, and youth, and what coping mechanisms these groups adopted. WI-HER, LLC, in collaboration with LINC and the RLA team in Ethiopia, prepared the Gender and Conflict Analysis.

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Context

Since November 2020, Ethiopia has been embroiled in conflict, which initially started in Tigray and later spread to the surrounding regions in the highlands. Since the start of the conflict, the country has experienced different types of shocks—political, economic, ethnic, and climate-related—that have a disproportionate impact on women, girls, and marginalized groups, (e.g., internally displaced persons, elders, people with disabilities, and children). Despite substantial reductions in poverty over the past few decades, particularly in urban areas, millions of Ethiopians living in the northern and central highlands experience the everyday hardships of poverty, chronic food insecurity, poor governance, and more. These and many other underlying stressors, such as population pressure; gender and social inequities; gender-based violence; inadequate infrastructure and services; and precarious livelihoods, health, and nutrition, collectively impact community resilience.[2] All told, these underlying pressures hamper the absorptive, adaptive, and transformative resilience capacities of nearly 45 million Ethiopians.
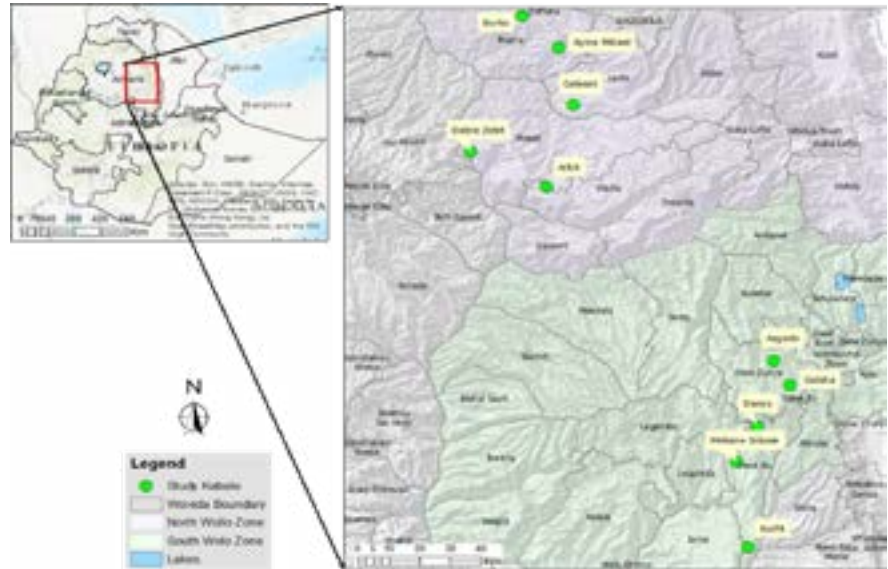

Figure 1. Data Collection Sites

Methodology

The analysis focused on examining the gendered impact of the conflict in Tigray and its spread to surrounding regions, as well as the coping mechanisms the affected women, men, and youth adopted in the Amhara Region. Underpinned by an ethnographic approach, the analysis applied a two-part strategy to study affected communities and individuals in their environment. The first part involved a rapid desk review of existing gender analysis reports and other relevant organizational reports and analyses from implementing partners (IPs) working in the region on resilience programming. This included scoping meetings with IPs to better understand their specific project needs related to gender and conflict. The second part of the strategy consisted of primary ethnographic fieldwork in selected conflict-affected communities. Three questions guided the analysis:

> In what ways, and to what extent, did reported wartime roles and behaviors of men, women, and youth (broadly defined to include older girls/young women and older boys/young men and recently married younger women and men) vary?

> In what ways and to what extent did women, men, and youth (of varying ages, socio-economic status, ability, etc.) suffer differentially?[3]

> ⊙ **What are the customary local institutions and cultural mechanisms that communities use for coping with recurrent climate shocks in addition to violent conflict and political instability?**

Primary ethnographic fieldwork took place in war-affected areas of the Amhara Region's South and North Wollo administrative zones, specifically focusing on 10 communities in five districts, where households were part of the Productive Safety Net Program. Site selection considered commonalities among the communities, such as shared challenges of climate change, market fluctuations, and political strife, while differences in agro-ecology and proximity to markets allowed for a deeper exploration of unique experiences and income-enhancing opportunities. All communities were located within the larger chronically food-insecure area of the Amhara Region.

A data collection team of three ethnographers facilitated 16 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 16 in-depth key informant interviews (KIIs) with community members, including male- and female-headed households and youth, religious and *kire* (community) leaders, *kebele* officials (elected farmers), internally displaced persons, and elders. All FGDs and KIIs were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify key expressions, patterns, and themes relevant to understanding the gendered dimensions of conflict.

To augment the findings from the desk review and field data collection and analysis, RLA used a method called Purposive Text Analysis to conduct a causal mapping analysis. This involved a systematic coding process to extract cause-and-effect relationships from qualitative data and gain insight into each factor's different roles in the system and how their interconnections impact the desired outcomes.

Findings

Below are highlights of the analysis findings based on responses to the three guiding research questions:

> ⊙ To examine the **intersection of gender with armed violence**, the analysis investigated the extent and manner in which wartime roles and behaviors of men, women, and youth differed. It found little to no significant change in the war's intersectionality with traditionally expected gender-based roles and responsibilities. Rather, the analysis established that during wartime, communities reinforced common gender norms that delegate combat roles exclusively to able-bodied men and domestic work and related civilian roles to women. Most women stayed home to care for their children and dependent household members, including elderly parents and sick people. On the other hand, a majority of men and adult boys were targeted to join the war as combatants and/or left home for at least a few days because of public apprehension that combatants would arrest and/or forcefully conscript all able-bodied Amhara men.

> ⊙ To underscore the **gender aspects of conflict impacts**, the analysis examined the varying degrees and ways women, men, and youth suffered. The findings showed that

women and girls were disproportionately affected by acts of sexual violence. Despite this, communities empathized most with the young men (aged 18–35) because they were both emasculated by these acts of sexual violence on their loved ones and spouses and heavily targeted to fight as combatants in defense of their country. The analysis also noted the substantial time commitment women face due to their dueling responsibilities of supporting the war effort and managing their households in the absence of husbands, adult sons, or other male relatives. Young men were heavily involved in war efforts as military trainees and combatants, and those who did not receive training provided support to the war effort in other ways—delivering rations, helping wounded soldiers, burying the dead, etc.

The analysis found that the extent of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) resulted in a sense of **collective victimization, and healing**, among ethnic Amhara. While SGBV disproportionately affected women and girls, the extent of SGBV during the conflict took on a collective dimension when it came to healing, which in turn often led community members to minimize individual suffering among survivors of SGBV. Acts of SGBV against one were seen as acts against all, and as a result, healing needed to take place as a group, collectively. Furthermore, in some instances, both men and women understood and interpreted SGBV during periods of conflict as primarily directed at humiliating men. In such cases Tigray Defense Force combatants and embedded Tigrayan civilians committed deliberate acts of rape and sexual assault on wives (sometimes sisters and mothers, too) of "wanted, high-profile men," including incumbent local officials, armed militiamen, wealthy pro-government farmers, or influential kire leaders who were publicly supportive of Ethiopian defense forces.

Figure 2. Systems Map of Gender's Intersection with Armed Violence

To highlight the **relationship between conflict and women's involvement in local institutions**, the analysis investigated the customary institutions and cultural mechanisms communities engage to cope with recurring climate shocks, violent conflict, and political instability. The study found that rural people frequently drew on customary community mechanisms and social institutions to mitigate impacts in response to and to recover from conflict and compounding shocks. This included reliance upon religious and cultural institutions, which provided members physical and emotional support as a result of recurrent climate-related shocks, economic impacts from political instability, and the death of loved ones because of violent conflict. Many community and religious groups decided to actively resist the impact of the conflict in their own ways, including protecting essential infrastructure such as water sources and encouraging their members not to collaborate with combatants. Kire groups[4] were identified as one of the main social groups the community relied on during times of struggle. However, most of these institutions remain deeply male-dominated at their core. In addition, women and youth tend to be marginalized in the inner workings of both faith-based associations, whether church-based or Islamic, and kinship groups. In both cases, influential men dominate leadership to the near total exclusion of women.

Recommended Actions

Conclusions of the Gender and Conflict Analysis outlined program enhancement opportunities for USAID and its resilience IPs, while also highlighting knowledge gaps and research opportunities that RLA can support through its collective action platform.

To address the prevalence of violence allegedly committed by Tigray Defense Force combatants and some civilians when the war expanded from North and South Wollo, the analysis recommends **incorporating trauma-informed program approaches into ongoing and upcoming interventions**. For example, IPs should consider awareness- and capacity building for their staff on SGBV and trauma-informed programming. IPs can also investigate the viability of using existing structures, such as neighborhood kire groups, to rebuild community cohesion and implement group-based psycho-social therapy.

The analysis suggests **reassessing economic empowerment programs in the context of conflict**, for example, considering the greater impact of conflict on off-farm activities and businesses and social enterprises run by women and youth. This could involve adjusting interventions to better meet the needs of communities recovering from conflict or conducting further research to customize financial savings models and products for survivors of conflict and violence. Further, to better serve the financial pursuits of ambitious women and youth, IPs might need to consider new and innovative approaches that depart from conventional group guarantee schemes.

This analysis incorporates a systems map demonstrating how IPs can use assessments and reports to analyze information through a systems approach. IPs can manipulate the map

to identify leverage points for change and consider adaptations to their activities. IPs should **consider incorporating systems mapping and analysis to inform and adapt programs**. Other IPs can build their capacity to use system maps for adaptive management through working sessions with RLA systems mapping experts.

Further Research

In addition to the findings, the analysis yielded key learning priorities for more effective resilience programs across Ethiopia. One is to **leverage existing community structures to transform gender norms.** Understanding the role of existing community structures, such as kire groups, in transforming gender norms can be a learning priority for RLA to explore further. For example, while these groups have demonstrated their adaptive nature in responding to shocks, they may also reinforce existing gender norms, thus requiring further exploration for how best to engage and leverage these groups during program implementation.

The second learning priority is to **strengthen coordination among IPs to integrate more robust gender-responsive programming in post-conflict settings**. Information sharing among IPs is often fragmented, and partners do not always benefit from the rich programmatic insights of one another. Since the primary aim of RLA is to promote learning and collaboration among IPs, USAID and RLA can consider creating space for increased learning and information sharing regarding program approaches and interventions. Additionally, IPs should explore the evolution of women's roles after the war as part of primary data collection under routine gender assessments, acknowledging that despite women assuming more male-dominated responsibilities during the conflict, traditional gender norms persist.

Endnotes

1. The Government of Ethiopia and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) signed a cessation of hostilities agreement on November 2, 2022, in Pretoria, South Africa. This agreement was followed by negotiations in Nairobi to disarm TPLF troops and return the control of the Tigray Region to the Ethiopian Government. The data collection for this analysis was conducted during March 2023; shortly after the data collection period, between May and June of 2023, fighting broke out again between the federal government and the Fano militia group in the neighboring region of Amhara. Center for Preventive Action. 2023. "Conflict in Ethiopia." Global Conflict Tracker website. Accessed August 2023: https://cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ethiopia.

2. S. Dercon, J. Hoddinott, and T. Woldehanna. "Growth and Chronic Poverty: Evidence from Rural Communities in Ethiopia." *Journal of Development Studies* 48, no. 2 (2012): 238–253. And K. Sharp, S. Devereux, and Y. Amare. "Destitution in Ethiopia's Northeastern Highlands (Amhara National Regional State)." Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. 2003.

3. The 2004 Ethiopian National Youth Policy defines youth as those aged "between 15–29" (p. 5). The analysis finds a vernacular perception of youth that broadly encompasses "all who were either too young or yet unborn to receive a government-allotted share when land was last redivided in 1990/91." Building on this local perception, which emphasizes both biological growth and a culturally expected household development cycle, the team defines youth in this report to include part of the society who are between 18 to 35 years old.

4. Kire groups also known as "*Iddir*" in other parts of Ethiopia are voluntary associations established to provide members with labor, material, and emotional support in times of death and address any community concerns. Households become members of these associations and pay fixed monthly fees. See A. Pankhurst and H.M. Damen. "The 'Iddir' in Ethiopia: Historical Development, Social Function, and Potential Role in HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control." *Northeast African Studies* 7 (2): 35–57. 2002.