

# **The Politics of Gender Identity in Qualitative Research**

**Esayas Geleta (PhD)  
Department of Sociology  
Douglas College**

# Gender Identity in Field Research

- during the last three decades
- qualitative research
- complexity of identity formation
- intersecting social categories
- social identity affects and influences the process of interaction between researchers and the participations research (Moore, 1994; Rosander 1997; Wolf, 1998; Diane, 2003; Larisa, 2013; Hall, 2019)

# Literature Review

- feminist anthropologists and sociologists, who specialize on development studies: influence of gender in development research processes (Bel et.al, 1993; Kabeer, 2005 ; Goertz, 2008; Hines, 2015)
- gender barriers facing feminist researchers in cross-gender fieldwork relationships (Loftsdottir, 1993; Sandoval , 2009)
- problems facing women in negotiating their identity

# Literature Review

- sexual tension, especially in dealing with younger male research participants (Venables , 2009)
- the power order and how their power position influenced the research processes (Wolf, 1993; Hall, 2019)
- while in most cases male development researchers have female research participants, they barely provide a complete explanation of their experience beyond a brief description of the issue in footnotes

# Literature Review

- lack of studies that demonstrate the challenges facing men, in particular black African development researchers experience, in interacting with women development beneficiaries.
- argument for situated knowledge
- to filling the gap through exemplifying how complex gender identity negotiations are played out in field research processes

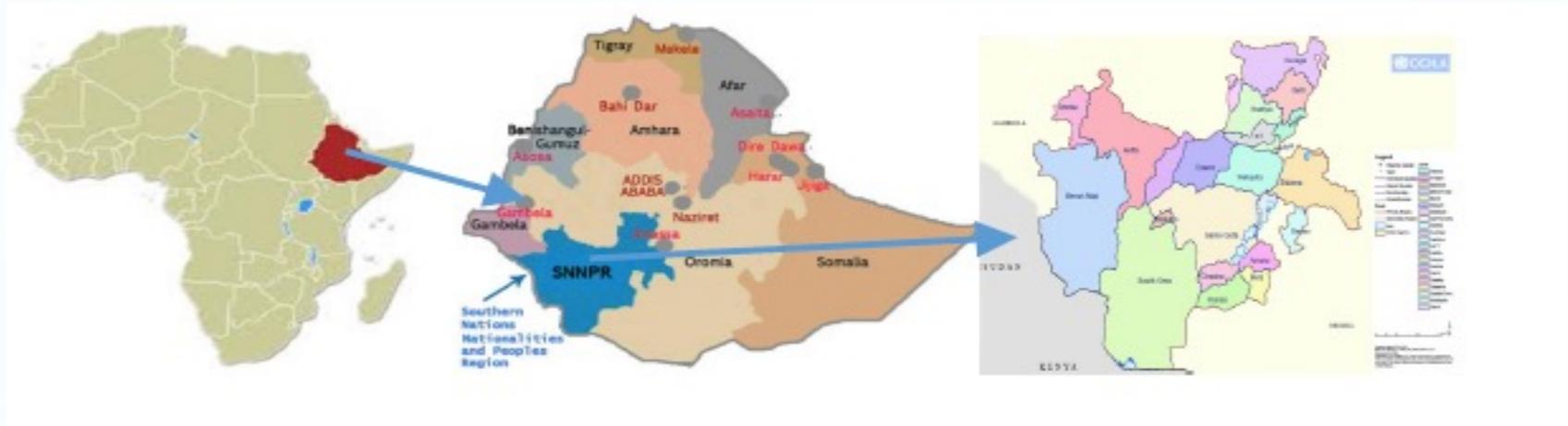
# Research objectives

- the paper draws on the experience of field research that I conducted in Southern Ethiopia
- evaluated the degree of success of a Food and Nutrition Security (pulse crops innovation) project to bring about food and nutrition security; integrate gender and empower women.
- funded by IDRC and Foreign Affairs Canada
- implemented by Saskatchewan University in Cooperation with Hawasa University and local government

# Research objectives

- rather than the findings of the evaluation research:  
the research processes, my interaction with the  
research participants
- three articles published
  - ◆ Development in Practice
  - ◆ Sage Open
  - ◆ Food and Agriculture
- research processes

# Research Method: Qualitative



- three of the fifteen districts of the region (Halaba, Sodo and Meskan)
- methods: Observation and in-depth interviews
- purposive (non-probability) and socio-economic sampling
- one hundred twenty informants (60 male and 60 female)

## Before entering the field: Imagination, expectation and preparation

- interaction between the researcher and research participants is influenced by gender (Skeggs, 2001; Golombisky, 2010)
- exciting and at the same time nerve-racking
- identified a set of gender integration and also empowerment criteria
- fear of the unknown (Bolognani, 2007)
- how will they perceive and react to me?
- More importantly concerned about my gender

## Before entering the field: Imagination, expectation and preparation

- informed by the broader feminist critical perspective
- gender transformative framework (FHI 360, 2012): asking difficult and critical questions
- how can I make sure that the knowledge I produce is unbiased and contaminated by my gender?
- logical, cogent, and appropriate (Wolf, 1993; Hall, 2019)

# Entering the field: Interaction with women research participants

- my gender and the gender of the participants of my research have significantly influenced both the process and the outcome of my fieldwork
- it was comparatively easier for me to negotiate my identity and communicate with men
- as unusual and strange man interested in knowing about what women do and what they do not do

# Entering the field: Interaction with women research participants

- women are expected to refuse conversing with other men, 'outsider' men
- unacceptable behaviour, which transgrace the norms of the society
- were reluctant, confused and shy
- did not see the importance of telling their personal stories to an unknown man.

# Entering the field: Interaction with women research participants

- what I actually experienced was much more pronounced than my expectations
- discontented by my attempt to question their culture and the discriminated position
- it was hard to get women talking
- turned their faces away from me

# Entering the field: Interaction with women research participants

- some suggested I should talk to their husbands
- 'my husband knows better about me and about our life'
- the situational character of my research participants (Golombisky, 2010)
- difficulty in getting physical access to some locations and spaces (Bolognani, 2007; Golombisky, 2010).

# Entering the field: Interaction with women research participants

- finding women to interview alone was very hard
- it was relatively easy, and women felt content when I interview them in public places rather than their home environment
- through observation of their behaviour patterns, I realized women find it easier to converse outdoors : farms and markets rather than in their homes
- they feel at ease when they are gathered together

# Entering the field: Interaction with women research participants

- they kept physical distance, particularly in Halaba, predominantly Muslim inhabited
- did not shake hands with me and when I stretched my hands to greet them they were very much offended and looked insulted
- they were not interested in sitting close to me

# Entering the field: Interaction with women research participants

- substance of what I was saying women were concerned about the gender difference and the manner I approach and question them
- were surprised to see that I was considering them as important as men and was interested in knowing the details of their 'world'
- strange types of questions that challenged their normalized day-to-day life order and routines.

# Entering the field: Interaction with women research participants

- flabbergasted when I asked them whether their husbands help them with cooking or not?
- 'You sound like a white woman in a black man skin'.
- in context of the suspicion of my intention, and in some cases resistance, achieving my research objectives was challenging and time taking
- determination, consistent interaction and reaffirmation

# Entering the field: Interaction with women research participants

- persistent confirmation of my researcher position
- in some occasions going to the field accompanied with female agricultural officers
- my objective was purely academic, they slowly surely trusted me
- particularly, felt relieved and relaxed when they learned that 'I live abroad' in what they consider 'the land of ***Frenge*** (whites)'

# Entering the field: Interaction with women research participants

- flexible approach to the place and time I communicate with them
- appropriate verbal and bodily responses in the course of the conversations
- paying attention to their stories as an active listener

# Entering the field: My interaction with men research participants

- men's opinions were also critical to understand the extent of the success of the project in integrating gender.
- substantially different from women
- relatively relaxed, and to some extent proud
- men were busy trying to convince me that what they say is more important than what women say.

# Entering the field: My interaction with men research participants

- they have superior knowledge regarding agriculture and marketing
- men were not actually happy about seeing me talking to their wives
- 'You come here and tell our women some strange ideas and then they become less obedient. If your strange ideas of equality and all that works for you, you keep it there for you.'

# Entering the field: My interaction with men research participants

- the manner of communication as well as the closeness of interaction
- duration of conversation time and the depth of the data
- in some occasions interviews with men lasted longer, but generally, women tended to narrate complete story

# Entering the field: My interaction with men research participants

- although it was often difficult to get women talking, once they felt comfortable they narrated the story of their lives more comprehensively than did the men
- men tended to focus on the issue in question and often provided short answers
- women highlighted the central role that men play in decision making regarding agricultural decision

# Entering the field: My interaction with men research participants

- men asserted that they and their wives make decisions jointly through negotiation.
- women in general narrated and provided detail analysis of their life world as mothers and agriculturalists and highlight the problems they face.
- men narrated their achievements and accomplishments, understated the manner in which income and resources are distributed in their households and communities