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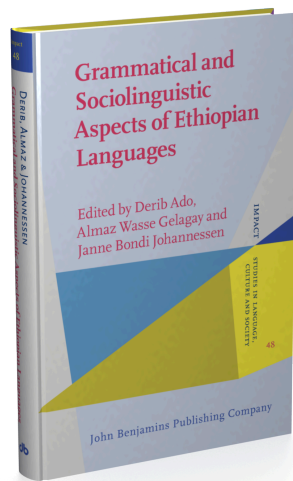
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# Gender and women representation in Gurage culture of Ethiopia

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The aim of this chapter is to describe the social, cultural and political representation of women in the Gumer district of the Gurage Zone of the SNNPRS of Ethiopia. We conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) with men and women in the district, and analysed the text using critical discourse analysis (CDA). We had 19 interviewees and five FGD participants. We also made observation of events in *wik'ar* 'evening gathering' and shopping in the big and small markets where men and women shop categorically, buying different items in different sections of the market. We also consulted documents dealing with gender and women's roles in Gurage. The findings showed that there are noticeable differences between men and women in role categories, social positions, expected behaviours, and in the responses to different gender discourses. The differences were observed in the discourses of blessing, name bestowing, mourning ceremonies and proverbs, in addition to those found during interviews. Different factors, such as financial resources, societal views about men and women, and long-established cultural belief in the society contributed to the lower representation of women in social and political positions.

**Keywords:** discourse, gender, Gurage, representation, women

## 1. Introduction

*jifta mot bək'ak'ət*  
'Women's death is in the dining room'<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Background

Gurage refers to the people who live in the Gurage Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional State. The people are mainly farmers, and are renowned traders who have scattered across Ethiopia (Henry 2006). According to the 2007 national census statistics, the total population of Gurage is 1,867, 377. Though people differ in the dialects they speak and religions they follow, their culture and economic and social organisations are basically the same (Shack 1966; Fekede 2014b).

The administrative capital of the Gurage Zone is Wolkite. It is located to the south-west of Addis Ababa at a distance of 150 km. The Zone is divided into 12 districts, which roughly correspond to the dialect variations, and has two city administrations, Wolkite and Butajira.

The language of Gurage has thirteen varieties, which together are called Guragina (Gabreyesus, 1991; Fekede, 2015). They are grouped into North Guragina: Kistane and Dobi; West Guragina: Mesqan; Central West Guragina: Muher, Ezha, Cheha, Gumer and Gura; Peripheral West Guragina: Geto, Inor, Indegegn and Ener; and East Guragina: Welene, Silte and Zay.

This study is based on the Gumer district and the Gumer variety of Guragina. The district bordered with Silt'e Zone in the southeast, Geto in the southwest, Cheha in the northwest, and Ezha in the north. The administrative seat of the district is a town called Arekit. Based on 2007 statistics, the district has a total population of 80,178, of which 37,495 are men and 42,683 women and 2,923 or 3.65% of the population is urban dweller. The district has 18 Kebeles often called farmer's associations, a term introduced during Dergue regime (1974–1991). The names of the Kebeles are: Arekit town, Armuwa, Badina-yegor,<sup>2</sup> Bercherna-mocheya, Fetazer, Amdo, Dirbona-senen, Aselecha, Wusho, Injefo, Burdana-denber, Wulbaragna-tirtiro, Yesherebna-tatera, Zizenchona-teredo, Isenina-adangazo, Abesuja, Arektsheleko and Abeke.

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1. See Example (6) for the pragmatic meaning.

2. The suffix {-ina} is borrowed from Amharic and has the meaning 'and'. Hence, words joined by {-ina} indicate Kebeles joined together for administrative purpose.

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

In many cultures, interactions between males and females tend to be male dominated; hence, there is social inequality between the two gender groups (Tannen 1990; Zimmerman & West 1975). Social distinction between men and women is reflected in the language used both in the language structure and actual communication (Lakoff 1975). Gender inequality and lesser representation of women is reflected in curricula designed, textbooks written, the language of media, everyday communication, languages of the court, greetings, languages of cursing, proverbs and all other forms of spoken and written utterances.

Discourses represent and construct reality, and hence have great powers to form the world view in which people live and act. Many oral and written discourses of gender in many parts of Ethiopia, as in many other cultures, reflect the lower social, economic, political and academic positions of women, and the dominance of men. They also orient members of society to behave and live in the framework established through those discourses. The way gendered language is used in different discourses in Gumer Gurage and promotes or lowers the social and political positions of females in the society has not been studied so far. This study attempts to uncover whether women are represented in social, political and economic aspects of life by examining different language discourses used in the communication practices of the Gumer community to fill the gap. Thus, our focus is not to study discourse as a language structure, though this has not been totally ignored, but rather to uncover women's representation in socio-cultural practices as displayed in language use or spoken and written discourses.

## 1.3 Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to examine women's representation in various socio-cultural and political affairs with gender-oriented discourses in the Gumer community of Gurage. It specifically has the following specific aims:

1. Uncover how gender discourses construct roles and social positions for males and females in the general power structure;
2. Find out how the different members of the community respond to the gender discourses;
3. Find out as to how females' self- and group identities are reflected in the discourses.

## 1.4 Review of related literature

### 1.4.1 *Language, gender and discourse*

Before we consider the relationship between language and gender, it is worth explaining the difference between sex and gender. There is no clear demarcation between sex and gender, the main difference being that the former is a biological difference, while the latter is a social categorisation. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003: 10) explain: 'Sex is a biological categorisation based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex'.

Gender is reflected in language in several ways. To begin with, 'gender is... a system of meaning – a way of construing notions of male and female – and language is the primary means through which we maintain or contest old meanings, and construct or resist new ones', and '...language itself is a tool of oppression – it is learned as part of learning to be a woman, imposed on women by societal norms, and in turn it keeps women in their place' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 6). Gender itself is constructed with language, as stated by Wodak (2015: 699): '...gender not only being constructed and performed through language, but also accomplished, achieved, enacted, and effected by language'. Weatherall (2002: 5) also confirms this: 'language not only reflects and perpetuates gender but language constitutes gender and produces sexism as a social reality'.

Gender is also inherently reflected in the grammar of language; all entities named are either masculine or feminine in most languages, though some languages also have a neuter gender. In fact, In Gurage, all nouns except those with features [+Human, +Feminine] are considered masculine. This partly demonstrates the default male dominance, even in the grammar of languages.

Gender is implied in our everyday communication and is used in attributing social and behavioural differences. This has been expounded by Edwards (2009: 127) with two statements: 'Do you not know I am a woman? and When I think, I must speak'. 'Men were deceivers ever'. The first statement confirms that women are talkative and the second one informs that men are untrustworthy. It can be imagined that such discourses influence how men and women perceive themselves and others, as well as how they position others during interaction. Fekede (2014a: 39) also asserts this when he says, '...what has been communicated through proverbs in particular and a language in general shapes our perception of reality and thereby our ways of life'.

Gender is not only reflected in our speech but is also socially 'embedded so thoroughly in our institutions, our actions, our beliefs, and our desires, that it appears to us to be completely natural' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 9).

Research on gender has considered a number of interfaces. Wodak (2015) lists the three most common concerns of post-structuralism characteristics:

- (1) Gender diversity (e.g., class, ethnicity, and how these both interact with gender; multiple masculinities/femininities; differences between 'women' and 'men');
- (2) Gender being 'performed' (see below) in an ongoing way, allowing for agency; performance being achieved partly through language (which is therefore constitutive); similarly, power being 'done' rather than something speakers 'have'.
- (3) 'Local' or 'contingent' explanations for gendered language patterns and the importance of specific contexts (Wodak 2015: 699).

Discourse is the use of texts for representing social practices (van Leeuwen 2008: 6). A society represents itself and others to the external world through different forms of narratives, songs, pictures or arts. Ideologies of individuals and the community are embedded in discourse, and institutions are the agents through which dominant ideologies are imposed and inculcated. Institutions can include media agents and workplaces. Literature is also considered both as a discourse and an institution, 'because institutional practices and social representations are imparted with it (Shaikh & Khan 2012: 155)'.

Discourse is used in two different contexts in literature: it can be speech or writing, which normally is longer than sentences dealing with a certain subject (Foucault 2008), or 'a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events'.

Discourse analysis is based on the understanding that there is much more going on when people communicate than that they simply transfer information. It is not an effort to capture literal meanings; rather it is an investigation of what language does or what individuals or cultures accomplish through language. This area of study raises questions, such as how meaning is constructed, and how power functions in a society. To conduct discourse analysis, a researcher generally selects texts.

Our study is about the ways in which social roles and identity are enacted and reflected through communication in the Gurage community. It attempts to reveal how discourses mirror the higher and lower social position of males and females, respectively, and how discourses shape the attitude and behaviour of male and female members of the community.

#### 1.4.2 *Previous studies on gender discourses in Gurage*

There is no particular research that deals with gender and language in Gurage. However, there are a few studies that touch on gender while studying other general social and development issues.

Fekede (2014a) in his article *Discourses of Development in Gurage Proverbs* stated that proverbs in Gurage conceptualise women as devoid of ownership and less able to visualize the future, as in the following two examples:

(1) *'b-e-nə bad inf'im tabat'*

In-NEG land only male

'In the absence of plots of land, only males were born'

In the pre-existing culture of Gurage, it was only males that inherited their parents' land. Females were not allowed to inherit land, as they leave their parents' home when they married. Thus, bearing many males without having enough land to offer to them was considered unwise (Fekede 2014a: 33).

(2) *'məhəna e-tʃən barə-tʃi-m watar-əhja məkjərə-tʃi-m'*

Winter NEG-come say-3SGF-PST pole-3SGF.POSS burn-3SGF-PST

'Assuming that autumn will not come back, she burnt her scraping pole'

In Gurage, the ensete plant is not scraped during rainy season (summer) because at that period a good harvest of the ensete plant product is not expected. Rather, it is scraped in the autumn and later, when it is sunny. A lazy woman burns her scraping pole, which was made by a carpenter, during the summer season. As a result, she may not find one during autumn, hence, she has to repay the carpenter for a new one or borrow one from her neighbours. In fact, the proverb is used in a broader context to express something unwisely spent or used while there was an option (Fekede 2014a: 34).

'The proverbs in Gurage clearly show that men's and women's roles are demarcated. In terms of power, males are more powerful and have the upper hand in economic and social affairs. The haves have more social power over the have-nots' (Fekede 2014a: 39).

Gurage Zone Culture Tourism and Government Communication Department (GZCTGC) Yegurage Wemaka provides several proverbs on gender issues, though they are not analysed from a gender perspective. An example from GZCTGC (2012: 13) states:

(3) *'mift jəkʷəmʷətʃin tə-tən jibəh'*

wife defeat.3SGM with-smoke cry.3SGM

'A husband who was defeated by his wife cries with smoke'

In Gurage culture, a husband is physically strong, a winner, dominant socially and has power over his wife. If this is not the case – which is uncommon – the man is not accepted socially. The proverb here tells that the man is feeling desperate for losing his correct position by living with a wife who dominates him. As it is not expected socially for him to express his grief by crying overtly or publicly, he cries when there is smoke in the house in order to pretend the smoke caused the tears, and not the internal emotion of being defeated by a woman.

Haile (2009) and Endalegeta (2014) are worth mentioning with regard to descriptions of Gurage culture and communication practices. Guragena Yebahil Essetochu (2012) also provides several descriptions of Gurage cultural values. Tenkir (1991) compares proverbs among East, West and North Gurage languages.

## 1.5 Research design and methodology

We used cross-sectional descriptive research design and qualitative methodology. Language data were obtained from key consultant interviews (KII), focus group discussions (FGD) and participant observations. We used purposive sampling to select participants for the KII and FGD. We included four participants from culture experts of the Gurage Zone and from the Gumer district Government Communication, Culture and Tourism offices. Six elderly men and women, who are the most conversant in gender discourses in their day-to-day communication practice, were selected from six sampled villages of Gumer district, namely, Wusho, Abeke, Arekit-Sheleko, Dirbona-Senen, Burdana-Denber and Jemboro. We also selected eight students and two teachers from Arekit high school, two participants from traditional court, and two others from a women's league. There were a total of 24 participants, all of whom were native speakers of Gumer Gurage language.

We observed an event called *wik'ar* 'evening gathering of elders', in which the people had a coffee drinking ceremony and discussed different social issues. We also visited the biggest local market named *wiri*, also called *jewə-gəbja* 'market of animals' salt. We took pictures that displayed gender role categorisation. We also visited two small markets to check whether what was happening in the big market was similar or different. FGD guide, semi-structured interview guide, and field notes of participant observation were used as tools. The FGD and interview guides were used to collect information regarding power relations, women's rights and social roles. Linguistic elicitations, such as the collection of proverbs were made possible with these tools as well. Participant observation was used to practically observe gender roles and power relations in actual communication situations.

Regarding ethical issues, we obtained informed consent from the participants, who were told about the objectives and procedures of the study. They were all informed that participation in the study was voluntary, and that they could withdraw whenever they wished. Participants' permission was requested in advance before recording interviews and taking their pictures. A few participants who were Muslim, for instance, did not want their pictures to be taken. Hence, their rights were respected. As we researchers were from the same culture and spoke the same language, our cultural awareness made site entry and communication easier. We used conversation beginning gambits, such as *ʃəh-ahu e-t'rak'un* [spirit-2SGM-POL NEG-panic 'let your spirit does not get panicked'] when we mentioned gender issues.



It is customary in the culture to ask forgiveness for talking about gender and sex related issues, and in some cases for talking first when elders are expected to speak before all other participants.

The spoken and written discourses obtained using different methods and tools were analysed with critical discourse analysis (CDA), which according to van Dijk (1993: 252) is a discipline that ‘studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted in text and talk in the social and political context’. Our focus was not to study discourse showing linguistic structure, but to make social analysis of gender with language data based on the views of Foucault (2008) and Fairclough (2003: 4) who states that ‘...language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account of language’.

## 1.6 Organisation of the chapter

The study has three sections: the introduction, data analysis and presentation, followed by the summary, discussion and conclusion. The introduction describes the research setting, the problem statement, the objective, the research methodology and provides a brief review of the literature. Section two provides the analysis and presentation of the findings. This part has two subsections, 2.1 and 2.2. Subsection 2.1 presents gender roles and social positions, and Subsection 2.2 deals with the participants’ responses to gender discourses and identity construction. Section 3 provides the summary of the study discusses the results and offers concluding remarks.

## 2. Data analysis and presentation

### 2.1 Gender roles and social positions

Gender roles in Gurage are evident nearly in all places, institutions and at home in terms of what men and women should do. For our purposes, we have limited our discussion to gender discourses with regard to representations and role differences of women and men in the markets, wedding ceremonies, mourning ceremonies, the traditional court system, and bestowing title names.

#### 2.1.1 *Grammatical gender as reflection of social practice*

Before discussing of discourses of social gender in Gurage, it is worth mentioning how grammatical gender works in the language. In Gumer Gurage language, only animate nouns that are [+HUMAN] make gender distinctions. All inanimate objects, animals and plants actually have the default masculine gender, as in (4):

- (4) a. *kasətf ləmtfə tʃən-ətf-m*  
Kasech twins give.birth-3SGF-PST  
'Kasch gave birth to twin babies'
- b. *əram-əna tʃən-ə-m*  
cow-1SG.POSS give.birth-3SGM-PST  
'My cow gave birth to a calf'
- c. *əsət-hut nək'wər-i-m*  
Ensete-DEF uproot-3SGM-IPASS-PST  
'The ensete plant is uprooted'
- d. *hi imir nisa-n*  
that stone pick-3SGM.O  
'you, pick that stone'

As can be seen from these examples, only Kasech in (4a) has a feminine marker that is expressed as an agreement to the subject in the verb. All the other nouns functioning as subject in (4b–d) are considered masculine. The noun in (4b) refers to a cow that is feminine, but is considered masculine grammatically because it is [–HUMAN]. The noun in (4c) is a plant, and all plants are masculine; the noun in (4d) is inanimate and all such nouns are masculine. The grammatical gender, thus, informs us that the dominant gender in Gumer Gurage is masculine.

### 2.1.2 Gender roles in markets

We visited a market called *wiro* in Gumer district, and we made snapshots in different areas of the market. It was quite obvious that what one could sell and buy was separated spatially, based on gender roles. Figure 1 illustrates the section where sheep and cows were sold:



Figure 1. Sheep and cattle market in wiriro (left to right)

As can be seen in Figure 1, there were neither female sellers nor buyers in the sheep and cattle markets. The only woman we see standing to the right in the photo of the cattle market is Yigeremu, one of the researchers. We did, however, see a few exceptions in the cattle's market where the seller of a cow was a woman with her son, and the interview we conducted with her is discussed below. The opposite, where only women were buying and selling, is shown in Figure 2:



**Figure 2.** Food items and utensils market at wiriro

In Figure 2, we found only women selling and buying food items, such as cabbage and baskets of different sizes. We observed that women were largely shopping for food items, such as *wusa* 'product of ensete', coffee, mats, salt and ovens. We did not find men in the area where such items were sold. In fact, the market as a whole was spatially grouped as *jifta gabja* 'women's market' and *jagam'ia gabja* 'men's market', an instance of differentiation.

We interviewed four female and four male participants in the market to learn about the usual practice, and to find out whether the categories based on gender were permanent or temporary. All the interviewees confirmed that women usually do not go to the men's areas except in some difficult situations, such as when their husband is deceased or lives far away from the family. They also explained that it is taboo for the men to go to the women's areas.

We also observed small markets at *arək'it'*, *ḏəmboro*, *dəmbər*, *adangəzo* and *indəəfo*. In all of these marketplaces, the time allotted to buying and selling was limited to 2–3 hours, as compared to the big markets for which the whole day was allocated. We saw that in the mini-markets men were absent or rare. We asked people in the market about the trend, and they reported that such small markets are meant for women, as there are no cows, horses or mules sold in such small markets, and only food items and locally made furniture are available. We asked the participants as to why there is such categorisation. All the participants reported that it is simply a part of the culture they have followed since childhood. Two male participants reasoned that women are not physically strong enough to handle cattle,

and they do not have negotiating power. All the male participants added that the buying and selling of food items is assigned to women because they are responsible for preparing and processing food at home. They added that women can easily identify the quality of food items. Another response from three women participants was that men are naturally neat and respected; hence, they do not deserve to touch unprocessed *wusa* and *at'met* (products of ensete). Such unprocessed food items cause the men to come into contact with *t'at'ara* 'watery left over of the products'. According to the participants, it is taboo for men to touch other food items, such as cheese, butter or kale, in addition to the *wusa* and *at'met*. If men touch such items, they are attributively called *miftot* 'womanish'.

We met a woman in the cattle market with her thirteen-year-old son selling a cow. We asked her why she was there in the men's market. She explained that her husband was living in Addis Ababa, and she said that it was her husband who ordered her to sell the animal. We further asked her why she came to the market with her son, and she told us that she has three children: a seventeen-year-old daughter, a six-year-old son and the son with her in the market. Although she has a daughter who is older than the other children, she preferred to come to the market with her thirteen year-old son. She said that her daughter is responsible, and is more capable of managing other house chores than selling a cow.

One of the male interviewees had a different explanation as to why men do not go to the small markets. He said that men are busy and responsible for farming and controlling farm land. If a man wants to perform farming labour for others, he is usually paid very well for a few hours' work. Spending his precious time by buying and selling small items, therefore, is considered an unwise decision. He added that women usually spend the whole day at home doing tasks that do not bring them and the family much money, so it is better to assign women shopping in such small markets and leave men to do productive tasks, such as farming and selling their labour for money.

The general assumption is, thus, that men will earn money, and women will spend the money the men have earned. This further implies an economic dependency of women on men.

### 2.1.3 Gender roles in traditional courts

In Gurage, most disputes and high-level crimes are solved by traditional court system. There are five levels within the court system: a village level (*jasera gənə* 'village association') cultural court, sets of villages level (*jəm<sup>w</sup>ira gənə* 'of the whole villages') cultural court, tribal level (*jət'ib* 'of the tribe's') cultural court, district level (*jəg<sup>w</sup>əmarə* 'of the Gumer district') cultural court and Sebatbet Gurage level (*jəḏzoka* 'the whole seven houses' cultural court (cf. GZSCCT 2012).

The first level of the court system is used to solve cases at the village level, and the issues considered include lower level disputes; violation of commonly agreed norms and regulations, such as participation in communal labour; preparing food and drink for villagers who are in mourning; participation in burial; communal cattle rearing and group protection of common resources, such as green areas and grazing lands.

In the second level courts, *jam<sup>w</sup>ira gənə*, two or more villagers gather together to resolve cases that are not resolved by *jäsera gənə* ‘first level court system’. This level of the cultural court is accountable to the cultural judges of the clan or clans. In the village level cultural court, participants can be from different clans residing in a certain village or villages. The cases considered at this level are more complicated and controversial than the ones at the *jäsera gənə* ‘the village level court’.

At the third level, *jat’ib sera*, members of a single tribe from different villages come together to resolve disputes among themselves and with other tribes. The cultural judges, *jat’ib danə*, are selected from the tribe members by elderly people as being respectful, reasonable, ethical and orators. This level of cultural court has the power to solve cases, such as disputes within and between tribes, the burning of houses and other materials and disputes of farmlands. The rules and regulations to solve tribal level issues are called *jat’ib q’it’a* ‘of the tribe’s regulation’.

The fourth level court, *jag<sup>w</sup>əmarə sera*, includes not only the usual cultural judges but also other representatives and additional cultural judges newly elected by the assembly of the clan. These additional cultural judges are *jak’it’a danə* ‘regulation judges or rulers’, *jəgurda danə* ‘judge of promise’, *jəsamir danə* ‘judge of fertility’, *jan’k’it danə* ‘judge of justice’, *jəzir danə* literally judge of stick, actually referring to ‘judges that measure plots of land’, *jəgondər nig<sup>w</sup>is* ‘king of clans’ who often wear bracelet called *gondər*, and *abək<sup>w</sup>at* ‘the matured’. This all-inclusive broader court level is responsible for solving various problems related to social, political and economic issues. Cases such as murder, burning of someone’s house, causing disability to someone, robbery, disputes over farm land and other security issues are resolved at this level. In addition, cases that have already been heard in the other lower level cultural courts, but which have not yet been resolved are heard in this cultural court.

The fifth and the highest level of the cultural court system in the Sebatbet Gurage is called *jəḏgoka k’it’a* ‘of the regulation of Yejoka’. At this level, the most complicated and critical cases from all villages, clans and tribes of the Sebatbet Gurage are heard. Cases that could not be resolved in the clan level cultural court are also heard and re-investigated at this level. The cultural judges at this level are those selected from among those considered to be the best cultural judges of each clan by the general assembly of the council of the whole Sebatbet Gurage. They are selected based on the positive contributions they or their parents have made to the community. The cultural judges stay on as members at least until the presented

cases are resolved. In most cases, however, the judges serve for a long period of time, if the council proposes and has found their skills and expertise important.

The Gurage people have great respect for and obedience to the cultural court. Unless a case goes beyond the cultural court, it is not usually taken to the modern court. Individuals are not usually encouraged to take any of their cases directly to the modern court before they have been heard in either of the cultural courts.

Our KIs reported that women have no direct participation in any of the five levels of the traditional courts. All cultural judges, attorneys and, in most cases, witnesses at each level are men. As the consultants reported, there has never been a woman judge in any of the cultural court systems. In addition, cases are usually presented to the court by men. If women have cases to present to the cultural court, they are usually represented by a man who is *māro* 'a cultural attorney'. The consultants also said that there have never been female *māro* 'attorney' at any of the court levels. This implies an instance of exclusion of women from the court system, in fact, which is a reflection of the trend in other socio-political participation.

In the cultural court system, the role of women is preparing and serving food and coffee for the attendants of the cultural court. Of the KIs, four of the elderly men said that, in the remote past, women were not allowed to listen to the court cases at all. But recently, they have won the right to listen to court cases.

We asked six women consultants what they feel about the cultural court system in relation to male and female participation. Three of them said that the absence of women's participation in the cultural court system is not a problem. They added that men have greater experience and skill in analysing situations, explaining cases in the court, reasoning and making judgments than women, and that these things are better done by men.

The remaining three women participants responded that all cultural judges, cultural attorneys and witnesses are men, and they are sometimes biased to protect one another above women. Women could have better opportunities to clearly express their problems to the cultural court and to get justice if they were allowed to explain their own cases by themselves. They also mentioned that there is a traditional belief that a woman will become infertile if she speaks in public about her own or other's cases, as in (5):

- (5) *ifta dʒafʷərə b-otʰa dən ji-tʰark*  
 women village.yard CON-goes belly 3SG-gets.dry  
 'If a woman goes to a village court, she becomes infertile'

Here socially, women are encouraged to stay at home by creating the fear that they may not be fertile if they go to the court (the village yard refers to place where traditional court decisions are made). The fact that women are meant for household chores but not for court is further witnessed in a proverb, as in (6):



- (6) *j-ifta        mot    bə-k'akət*  
 of-women death on-livingroom  
 'Women's death is in the living room'

Unlike men who may die in war, abroad or elsewhere, a woman often dies in her house, since she goes nowhere but is kept at home for household chores.

In (5), the feminine gender is expressed with default masculine gender in both the con-verb and the main verb. The subject *ifta* 'women' is lexically feminine, but *bot't'a* 'if one goes out' and *jit'ərək* 'it gets dry' can be either masculine or neuter like 'it' in English. Actually, it was possible to state them as *bot't'atf* and *tit'ərək*, respectively in the feminine gender. But this is acceptable only when referring to a particular woman, rather than to all women.

Six elderly men participants responded that there is no prescribed rule and regulation that prohibits the participation of women in the cultural court system. However, the system has only been practiced by elders, and is simply adhered to. Four of the participants also explained that women are usually shy and cannot give explanations to the cultural court, as they do not have experience in speaking in public. Hence, it was better for them to be represented by men. The remaining two elderly men, however, responded that these days, there are some brilliant and confident women who could explain their cases at public if they were given the chance, although it is not the actual cultural practice. They contradictorily added that they do not think that women can be cultural judges at the cultural court, as they lack prior knowledge and experience of it. One of them said that there has never been a woman who has claimed the right to participate in the cultural court system. He also said that they would not be prohibited if they publicly claimed the right of participation.

Actually, and contrary to what has been reported above, there were two exceptional cases mentioned regarding women's participation in traditional courts of Gurage. A woman who was a pioneer in appearing in court and fighting for women's rights 200 years ago in Gurage, probably from Ezha district, was *Yekake Werdwet*. She fought against men's right to marry more than one wife at a time. She brought the case to the cultural court and claimed that if men can marry more than one wife, women should also have the same right of marrying more than one husband at a time. The case caused a number of problems for Gurage cultural judges, since she was logically correct. At last, she received permission to marry any number of husbands she wanted to, but was warned not to fight for any other women's rights, and not to spread the case to the other Gurage women. In fact, all husbands were secretly ordered to whip their wives if they cooperated with the *Werdwet* in the agenda she raised.

Another woman called *Mengistet* in Gumer district worked as attorney some 45 years ago. She used to ride her mule to every court in the district, and was a very articulate and wise woman. Currently, we find several women judges in civil courts, but not yet in the Gurage traditional court system.

#### 2.1.4 *Gender roles and representation in bih'ə 'mourning'*

One of the main cultural events in the Gumer community is the mourning ceremony. In the community, when a person dies, villagers gather and share the sorrow with the family. The villagers identify the items required for the mourning ceremony, and there is division of labour based on gender. Men prepare the coffin and burial clothes, dig the grave and send information about the death to relatives who live far away from the family. Young men collect fire wood for the ceremony and help in serving coffee, which is made by the women, and carry the dead body to the burial place. Women prepare the meals required for the participants of the mourning. They also make coffee and prepare cereals in large amounts to serve all the guests who come from near and far for the ceremony.

Participants' keen cry and performance in the mourning varies by gender. Men often take the front positions, and women follow them. This is clearly related to the power hierarchy. Usually, men hold *alənga* 'a cultural whip', with which they hit their own backs to express their sorrow. Women often fall down on the ground repeatedly to express their sadness.

When an adult man dies who has participated in war, community leadership and in the cultural court system, who was wealthy, and/or generous in *wək'ə* 'giving cattle for the poor, a special mourning ceremony called *jak<sup>w</sup>im bih'ə* 'of standing and crying' – which actually is a mourning song and performance – is practiced. *Jək<sup>w</sup>im bih'ə* is also performed when a *t'uri* 'dexterous', obedient, generous, economical and polite woman dies.

*Jək<sup>w</sup>im bih'ə* is an essential cultural performance with which the society commemorates and acknowledges the contributions and good conduct of the dead. By doing so, the society teaches the young generation what is expected of them. This cultural performance is coordinated and performed by elderly men. They discuss and decide in groups whether the deceased deserves *jak<sup>w</sup>im bih'ə* or not by enumerating what extraordinary things that person did for the community. This cultural mourning performance is accompanied by a poem that describe the things the deceased did in his or her life time. The poem is prepared based on the dead person's contribution and is graded if its content is true, not exaggerated or downgraded.

The poems of *jak<sup>w</sup>im bih'ə* for men and women are quite different, though the performance is similar. Recently, it was decided by *jəḏzoka* court to avoid *jak<sup>w</sup>im bih'ə* due to religious orientation. We have provided sample poems recited during



*jək<sup>w</sup>im bih<sup>i</sup>ə* for men and women. Because the poems recited for men are numerous, and our focus is on women's representation, we have provided only couple of mourning poems for men, the rest appearing in an appendix at the end of the article. We have, however, presented all the women's mourning poems we have here.

(a) Songs of *jək<sup>w</sup>im bih<sup>i</sup>ə* for men:

- (7) *wərko tə-banərə*  
 shelter 3SG-demolished  
 'A shelter (fort) is demolished'  
*jifte t-e-gəwarə*  
 front3SG-NEG entered for  
 'With no support in the front'  
*jañk'e t-e-gəwarə*  
 behind 3SG-NEG entered for  
 'With no support from the behind'  
*tfotə-m šənən wərə*  
 plough-PST shenen went  
 'He ploughed and became rich'  
*Abo mis*  
 What man  
 'what a man'

The poem can be summarised as, we the alive have lost a shelter or fort as the dead was our shelter. Without support from the front or from the behind, with his own effort, he worked hard and became a rich person; what a great man!

- (8) *awi sima awi*  
 wild.animal listen wild.animal  
 'You wild animal listen'  
*j-adəbabaj g<sup>w</sup>əntfo zobe*  
 of court hyena zobe  
 'The avenue (court) hyena, zobe'

The poem metaphorically and figuratively presents the deceased as a wild animal, and as if he was like hyena that was never defeated in court cases.

We could not find the actual meaning of the word, *zobe*. It is often associated with wild animals, which metaphorically shows bravery and strength. It is worth mentioning that the word *wərko* has a broader context than just a shelter or a fort, possibly referring to the village, an entrance or even a country.

We have summarised from the mourning songs (Appendix 1) the best qualities, behaviours and roles a man should have so that he may deserve *jək<sup>w</sup>im bih<sup>i</sup>ə*. These are:

- protector expressed by the term shelter
- courageous (not fearful)
- warrior
- guard
- provider of food during holidays
- hard worker/successful
- owner of cattle and horses which signifies being warrior & judge
- rescuer
- wise man who knows cultural rules and procedures
- judge or prosecutor
- brave/strong

Generally, a man is expected to be generous, a protector, rescuer and hard worker, steady, wise, a warrior, an orator, knowledgeable of the culture, rules and court procedures, and strong enough to perform all his tasks.

(b) Songs of *jək<sup>w</sup>im bih<sup>ə</sup>* for women

The mourning songs meant for deceased women also reflect the socio-culturally expected roles of women approved by society. These are, of course, mainly determined by men who shape the world of the community, as in the following examples:

- (9) *zobe-m banə-nah<sup>i</sup>*  
 zobe-and existed- for you(SGF)  
 ‘You(SGF) could have zobe’  
*wərko banə-nah<sup>i</sup>*  
 shelter existed-for you(SGF)  
 ‘You(SGF) could have wərko’  
*mift-nət hənə-nah<sup>i</sup>*  
 woman-hood forbade-you(SGF)  
 ‘Being a woman forbade you(SGF)’  
*abo mift*  
*what woman*  
 ‘What a woman’

The mourning song in (9) expresses regret that the woman could not have the mourning song that she actually deserved because she was a woman and it was therefore denied to her. The implication is that some mourning songs are reserved for men, despite women have similar qualities or having played similar roles in the community.

The mourning song in (10) was chanted to honour a deceased woman for her good behaviour:

- (10) *ti-gəba-m ifi'*  
 when-enter-PST ok  
 'she says ok (welcome) when someone comes in'  
*ti-wət'a-m ifi'*  
 when-go.out-PST ok  
 'she says ok (goodbye) when someone goes'  
*zih aɖʒjət e-rəhwi-ja bəfi*  
 this ayyet NEG-find-3SGO thousands  
 'This *aɖʒjət* cannot be found for thousands birr'.  
*ahera-h'ita bəɖʒennət j-əʒi*  
 soul-3SG.POSS heaven 3SG-see  
 'Let your soul be in the heaven'  
*abo miʃt'*  
 what woman  
 'What a woman!'

The song reads: she used to say welcome to anybody who comes into her home, and she used to say goodbye to anybody who goes out of her home. This woman with the title name of *ayyet* cannot be found with the price of thousands. Let her soul be in the heaven; what a good woman!

- (11) *amər-ahi g'əra*  
 conduct-3SG.POSS cool  
 'Your behaviour is cool'  
*jə-bʃa dannəra*  
 of-red tanned. hide  
 'It is like a red cow's tanned hide'  
*j-orwər dabəra*  
 of -spring cloud  
 'The cloud of spring time'  
*wəhe miʃt*  
 good woman  
 'A good woman!'

The song in (11) describes the deceased woman as having had good conduct, which is metaphorically described as a smooth, furry tanned skin that is used for sleeping, and by a spring cloud that protects from the blazing sunlight.

The song in (12) expresses the quality of the deceased woman in terms of dexterity:

- (12) *jə-t'uri bit'ir*  
 of-dexterous bowl  
 'The bowl of a dexterous woman'  
*e-rəwin fintr'*  
 NEG-exist hunger  
 'It does not have a hanger (it is always in use)'  
*j-awər-e tərɬ'ir*  
 3SG-put-LOC with-filtered. butter  
 'It is kept with filtered butter'  
*abo mift'*  
 what woman  
 'What a woman!'

This song describes a dexterous woman's bowls do not have hangers to be hanged on since they are always in use to feed the family and guests, and that the bowls are always kept with spiced and filtered butter meant for feeding people, then closing the chant with surprise phrase 'what a good woman!'

The songs in (13a–c) are all about the woman's good qualities in welcoming guests and providing them with food and drink:

- (13) a. *bazəra- h' humu*  
 guest-3SGF.POSS thousand  
 'Your guests are in thousands'  
*jə-fat dən nibu'*  
 of-granary inside bee  
 'It is like the bees inside the hive (granary)'  
*j-irsi-m tər-k'i-m-u*  
 to-younger-and with-elder-FOC-COP  
 'It is to the younger and elders'  
*wəhe mift'*  
 good woman  
 'A good woman!'
- b. *b-ah'a wəradʒə*  
 LOC-your (SGF) gate  
 'At the gate of your home'  
*jə-bazəra wəɖʒə*  
 of-guest herd  
 'A herd of guests'  
*wəhe mift*  
 good woman  
 'A good woman!'

- c. *bazəra ti-rəmd*  
 guest 3SGF – love  
 ‘She loves guests’  
*ti-kəram ti-wərd*  
 in-go.up in-go.down  
 ‘when one travels up and down’  
*jə-rtfi-m tə-gərad*  
 for-boy-and to-girl  
 ‘To males and to females’  
*wəhe mift*  
 good woman  
 ‘A good woman!’

The song in (13a) says your guests are as numerous as bees in their hives and that you serve them equally irrespective of their ages; what a woman you are! In a similar vein, the song in (13b) reveals that there are several guests in the woman’s place, described as ‘your village yard’, and the number of people is metaphorically expressed as ‘herds’. The song in (13c) also states that the woman loves everyone in the village, irrespective of their gender.

To summarise, the major of attributes or qualities that Gumer society expects of women based on mourning songs are:

- dexterity and provision of service
- obedience
- having good conduct
- having a welcoming personality
- impartiality

#### 2.1.5 *Gender roles and representation in azəməna ‘wedding ceremony’*

The wedding ceremony is one of the main cultural events in Gumer society. After the mate selection and marriage has been proposed, couples prepare for marriage, often with a wedding ceremony. In this cultural event, men are responsible for preparing firewood, renewing the compound’s fence and preparing an ox to be slaughtered for the ceremony. Women are responsible for preparing butter, *wusa* ‘bread of ensete’, *afində* ‘pepper’ *səhər* ‘non-alcoholic homemade beer’, *t’əla* ‘alcoholic homemade beer’, and decorating the house. All these preparations are facilitated and financed by the bridegroom, the bride’s family and other relatives.

One of the cultural rituals in the wedding ceremony is *misag’ə*, a promise of a gift from parents and close relatives to the bridegroom and bride as an encouragement and support for their newly established married life. As elderly people explain, in earlier times, family members – especially the father and the mother of the bridegroom – actually gave what they had promised. But recently, the promise

is made as a cultural practice, and what has been promised is not practically given to the bridegroom and bride. Procedurally, the *misagʷə* is started by the father of the bridegroom, then followed by his mother and then by his other relatives. The *misagʷə* below is an excerpt:

(14) *Misagʷə*

- a. *j-ahə bikʷirə tə-kʷərəta*  
GEN-you(SGM) mule with-saddle  
'For you(SGM) a mule with its saddle'
- b. *j-ahʷ jeb-əram tə-mʷəsata*  
GEN -you(SGF) milking-cow with-calf  
'For you(SGF) a milking cow with its calf'

The promised gift for the bridegroom is a mule, but can also be a horse or an ox. The promised gift for the bride is almost always a milking cow. We asked the implications of these promised gifts, and the consultants explained that the bridegroom is expected to travel for different social affairs, like dispute resolving, and this is why he is promised a mule or a horse. The ox is promised to him so that he may use it for farming, as farming is basically the role of the man. The wife is expected to process and serve food to the family. Hence, a milking cow is promised to her in order to help her with her new responsibilities in life. It was realised from the consultants that *misagʷə* 'gift promise' is not currently being fully practiced as it was in the past; hence, the practice is endangered.

The other event in a wedding ceremony is *dərət* 'blessing' of the newly married couple. A few examples of blessings for the bride groom and the bride are as follows:

(15) *Dərət* 'blessing' for both mates

- a. *nimadʷə j-ab-hu*  
Love 3SG-give-2PL  
'Let God give you(PL) love'
- b. *bərəkə j-ab-hu*  
blessing 3SG-give-2PL  
'Let you(PL) be blessed' or 'God bless you'
- c. *abba-na adot-əna bəro*  
father-my mother-my say  
'Let you be able to support your parents'
- d. *tʷən-o*  
bear-2PL  
'you(PL) bear children'
- e. *ahə bə-dunja ahʷ bə-tkə kʷəm-i*  
You(SGM) with-wealth you(SGF) with-child win-2SGM  
'You(SGM) win her with wealth you(SGF) win him by giving birth to children'

As can be seen from the examples in (15), the best wishes for both the bridegroom and the bride are about love, being blessed, supporting their parents in the future and being able to bear children. There are also blessings made specifically to the bride, as shown in (16):

(16) **Dərət ‘blessing’ for the bride**

- a. *t-adota-hi* *fizəz*  
From-mother-your(SGF) better(SGF)  
‘Be better than your(SGF) mother’
- b. *ta-mat-ah* *fizəz*  
From-mother-in-law-your(SGF) better(SGF)  
‘Be better than your(SGF) mother-in-law’
- c. *tə-mʷərəfa-hi* *ifta fizəz*  
From-husband’s. brothers-your(SGF) wives better  
‘Be better than the wives of your husband’s brothers’
- d. *dʒəndʒir tikə bə-dəna-hi jə-t-fət’ər*  
Thick child in-belly-your(SGF) 3SG-PASS-created  
‘Let a strong child be created in your(SGF) womb’
- e. *ba-jər jar tikə bə-dəna-hi jə-t-fət’ər*  
on-air travel in-belly-2PLF 3SG-PASS-create  
‘Let a son who may travel by plane be created in your(SGF) womb’

The best wishes and blessings for the bride as shown in (16) are to give birth to sons who may be great people, and who may be rich enough to travel by plane and that the bride will surpass the bridegroom’s brothers’ wives, the groom’s mother and her own mother in cooking and house-keeping.

The highest wedding best wish, however, is most typically ‘You (the bridegroom) win her by wealth you (the bride) win him by bearing a number of children’, which implies that the bride’s role in the newly established family is giving birth to children, while the bridegroom’s role is to amass as much wealth as possible. It encourages a competition between the new husband and wife in wealth making and child bearing, respectively.

#### 2.1.6 *Gender roles and representation in title name bestowing*

Titles names are given by the Gurage community to individuals for doing and being extraordinary things, for bravery, charity, negotiating power, having wealth, being hard-working, for community representation, etc. The name-giving process usually entails a feast, which includes slaughtering a sheep or an ox, depending on the social and economic status of the person named. Though such naming is mainly practiced for men, women are also given honour names (cf. Fekede, 2014b). The most common title names for men are *abəgaz*, *damo/ daməs*, *eshi arib*, *bərdəfərə*,

*bərkəfətə, fəŋk'ir, jəgən ab, bədət/ abazinab, m<sup>w</sup>ira bənəsə, fakatf, wəma, arwase, azmatf and wənzət arib* (see Appendix 2).

The tile names given to men are based on culturally and socially required roles that men in the community are expected to fulfil. The major roles are thematically summarised as follow:

- be a participant in, and successful in war
- have resources and share them with the needy
- mediate between people and resolve disputes
- play a leadership role
- be a good public speaker
- rescue people in danger or difficulty

Women's roles, as we have seen, are largely limited to household chores and feeding family and guests. Thus, the community does not expect them to have the qualities men should have, such as bravery, being mediators, leaders, rescuers or warriors. Therefore, there are no such several title names given to women. In fact, we could find only two title names assigned to women:

- *adɣjət* 'handy'/'dexterous' – given to a woman who is the best cook, feeding family and guests, manages food items and household utensils properly, keeps the home neat and decorated and who is active.
- *jət'uri dərma* 'daughter of a dexterous' – given to a woman whose mother is the best cook, but who is herself dexterous, as well. It is also given to women whose personality is beyond what is expected of their age, and to women who are advanced in discipline and knowledge. Actually, *dərma* is a young mare or horse (pony) that usually runs very fast, used here metaphorically to express the good quality of a young woman.

The two titles given to women are mainly related to roles in serving family and guests, cooking, housekeeping and food management as well as personality traits like extreme patience, calmness and silence.

One of our consultants explained the reasons for the differences in title bestowing, saying, 'Since long years ago, women had not been directly involved in wars, public speaking, judgment providing, community representation and dispute resolving, hence, they do not deserve the titles related to such tasks. All the titles given for men and women are based on what they do, and how they behaved in the community. So, all the titles of men and women are related to their socio-cultural roles in their families and society at large'.



### 2.1.7 *Gender roles and political representation*

It was confirmed by the Gumer district Women, Children and Youths Affairs experts that there were no female leaders in any of the kebeles in the district. Additionally, although there are 21 sector offices in the district, only four of them – namely, women's affairs, health office, state's communication and animal husbandry sectors – are led by women. In the kebele, which may refer to village or district, women are leaders only in women's associations, such as women development groups, women's league and women's edir 'association meant for helping a deceased family'. All cultural institutions and associations, such as the cultural courts at all levels, are led by men. In cultural institutions, women do not even elect their representatives.

We attended a community level meeting organised by the district agriculture office in one of the kebeles. Among the issues under discussion was monitoring the performance of a farmland management committee formed in the previous meeting. It was decided that the committee was not efficient, and discussions were held with the participants about the perceived reasons for the weaknesses of the committee. Most of the men claimed that there were very few men in the previous meeting, so that the members of the committee were proposed by women with the result that the committee was weak. They also suggested that a new selection be made when there were sufficient men in attendance. Based on this observation, some women were asked how they felt about the situation. They explained that majority of the men in the community are not usually interested in being represented by women, believing that women are not even capable of electing appropriate men representatives. The women also explained that they themselves do not believe that they can represent the men. Although government officials requested that the women be represented and coordinate the community in different developmental affairs, the women suggested that men represented them.

Although the political representation of women in Ethiopia is in the process of improving, it is still limited, not only in the Gumer community but also in other parts of the country. This has been reported in different sources: 'There are no known **quotas** to encourage women's participation in politics in Ethiopia; women have the same rights as men to vote and to be elected to political positions. As of 2009, only 13% of the mid-level executive and judicial positions were held by women. Of high-level positions, such as ministers and high court judges, women held only 26.6% <[www.genderindex.org](http://www.genderindex.org)>. This trend has somehow changed positively towards women holding high level positions (50% women ministers have been brought to power) since 2018 (2011 E.C.) due to social movements across the country seeking equal representation in economy, social systems and power.'

### 2.1.8 *Gender roles and social participation*

In many social affairs and joint sessions, women's participation is very limited. As both the experts and an elderly person whom we interviewed explained, women do not participate actively. They said that, compared to what they had observed in other areas, women's participation in meetings in the Gumer district is very limited. Usually, the women wait for the men to forward ideas and opinions.

Women do not participate in any level of the cultural court system in the community. As the consultants said, although women are members of *idir*, they usually send their monthly fee rather than attending the *idir* meetings and participating in decision making during the meetings. Additionally, women do not usually participate in varying community representation and leadership, such as public speaking and coordination. The situation seems to be the general trend for women in Ethiopia, in that they feel restricted although the existing situation permits them to participate. This has been seen in the literature as follow: 'Freedom of movement is restricted in certain parts of Ethiopia on account of national security concerns. There do not appear to be any legal restrictions specifically on women's freedom of *access to public space*; however, some women may face restrictions on a day-to-day basis' <<http://www.genderindex.org>>.

## 2.2 Responses to gender discourses and construction of identity

### 2.2.1 *Responses of participants to various gender discourses*

Throughout the interviews and the FGDs, it was realised that different groups of the Gumer community have different attitudes towards the different gender discourses in the community. Most of the youth, especially secondary school students, argued that the lack of women's participation in different social affairs, especially in the cultural court system, is unfair and needs to be improved. They also claimed that different expressions and cultural practices, like job classification, among men and women also need to be improved. However, some of the female students who participated in the FGD explained that they still believe that some household chores, like cleaning house, preparing cultural food, making and serving coffee, are better done by women, reasoning that although it is fine for them (girls) if their brothers assist them in such household chores, the community considers it taboo for the men to be involved in such kitchen tasks. Hence, they said, it is better to save face for their men, brothers and husbands.

Most of the elderly women believe that cultural gender differences have been practiced for so long and have become so natural that they cannot be changed easily. Some of them believe that in the cultural court system, it is better to be represented by men, as men are more experienced, knowledgeable and skillful in

public speaking and judgment than women. They also believe that some food items that culturally are considered to be taboo for men to do them need to be managed by women. They think that men do not deserve such work as they are naturally blessed and neat.

Both the men and women consultants believed that women are incapable of public speaking and decision making. Hence, they need much prior change and improvement in their knowledge and experience before they participate in community representation and leadership roles (cf. Wodak 2015: 698). This indicates that there is a misconception by members of the community about men's and women's nature and personalities.

### 2.2.2 *Gender discourses and identity construction*

People's behaviour and personality are the results of the socio-cultural environment in which they grow up. People usually behave and act differently in their work place, village, schools, playing fields, etc. Hence, secondary schools and offices were taken as examples where the men's and women's different personalities and performances would be reflected.

Some secondary school teachers from Arekit Secondary and Preparatory School were interviewed about the reflections of the gender differences in the curricular and co-curricular activities in the school. They explained that girls do not usually express their ideas freely in the presence of boys in the classroom, in clubs and in students' meetings. Due to these problems, there was a unique club called *ina lana*<sup>3</sup> 'we for us' in the school. This club was organised particularly for girls in addition to the other clubs in which males and females may take part. The aim was to encourage girls to discuss issues concerning them freely.

The teachers said that the differences in cultural practices have resulted in different attitudes towards boys and girls. The boys do not usually want girls to represent them. The boys usually say *k'əmis inilbəs inde?* 'Shall we wear a dress?' This is to mean that to be represented by girls is equivalent to being a girl, and implies that girls are not capable of representing boys. Additionally, girls are not usually interested in being representatives of their classmates. Sometimes, when teachers and even students elect girls for different coordination tasks, they usually propose that the boys represent them, and they suggest that they act as assistants to the boys.

The experts also explained that most of the women in many offices are usually too shy to speak in public, not daring to take administrative or leadership roles and usually proposing men for such positions, unless it is mandatory for the women.

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3. This phrase is actually Amharic, and can be translated in Guragina as *jinam tina* 'we for us'.

Recently, there have been new developments, and most cultural practices and events are being changed. In past times, women never attended the cultural court system. But nowadays, they have at least started to listen to the court while serving coffee. In addition, during *wik'ar* 'evening social gatherings', women were not listening to the talks and discussions. But these days, they have at least started to listen to them and forward some ideas and suggestions, although they do not set the agenda for discussion.

In the past, women rarely participated in farming, but these days they assist their husbands in small farming. Women are also organised in groups by the government, and they participate in group farming and cereal production in order to become financially independent.

As the elderly people and experts confirmed, women had never participated in public meetings and discussions in the past. Currently, they have started attending joint community meetings, although they still do not usually express their ideas freely in the presence of men.

### 3. Summary, discussion and conclusion

#### 3.1 Summary

The objective of this article was to investigate women's representation in socio-cultural and political affairs with gender-oriented discourses in the Gumer community of Gurage. We used cross-sectional design and qualitative research methodology to obtain and analyse data. Key consultant interview, focus group discussions and participant observation with corresponding tools interview guide, FGD guide and side-notes, respectively, were used.

The study showed that gender and power in Gumer Gurage are highly integrated, as discovered through various discourses. Power was expressed through representations in various social, cultural and political affairs, and these were practically demonstrated by role assignments, expected socio-cultural behaviours and daily routines. Figure 3 below demonstrates power differences in the role assignments and expected behaviours of men and women.

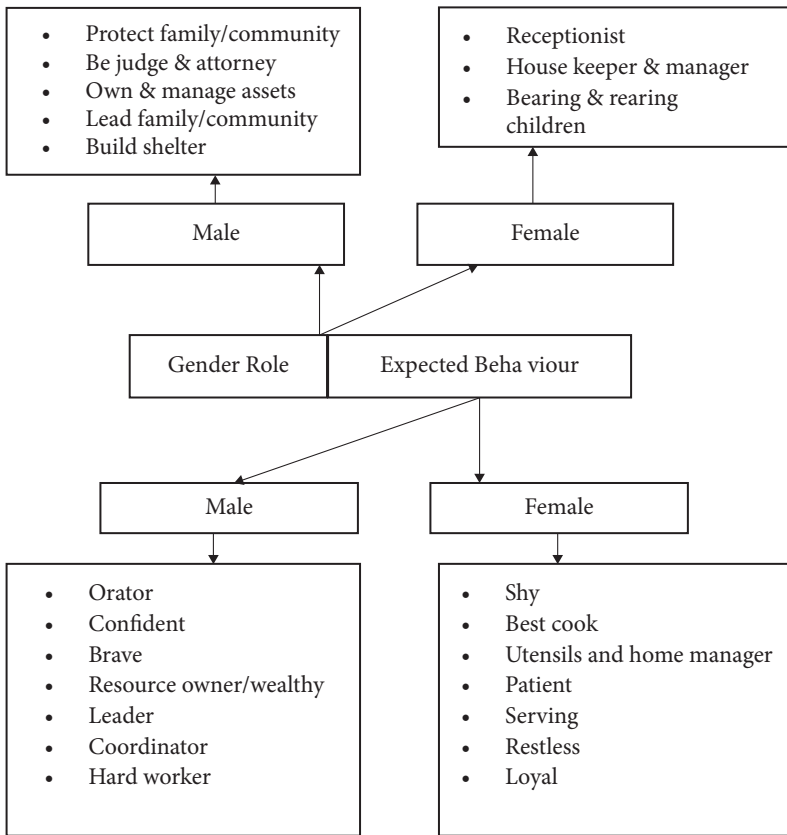


Figure 3. Gender roles and expected behaviours

### 3.2 Discussion

In this article, we tried to find out how gender discourses construct the roles and social positions of men and women in general power structures (Weatherall 2002: 42), how different members of the community respond to gender discourses and how female's self- and group identities are reflected in the discourses. We found that different genres, such as the language used in mourning, weddings, title name bestowing, blessing and proverbs position men's and women's roles and representations quite differently.

Different linguistic strategies are used to make such distinctions, including differentiation in role assignments in which women are portrayed as obedient, servers, feeders of guests and the family, who should not go to courts and who are powerless (Weatherall 2002: 65–67). Differentiations have also been made spatially,

as demonstrated in markets, where we find *jifta gəbja* ‘women’s market’ and *jəgəmvia gəbja* ‘men’s market’, in which things to be bought and sold and even areas for buying and selling are gender bound. This is similar to what Weatherall (2002: 68) says: ‘the street could be considered alongside the family and schools as an institution where gender relations are ordered’.

Some proverbs were found to be downgrading women roles and some utterances that instil fear in women not to assume certain male roles. For instance, it was said in folklore that if women go to the courts, they will not bear children, which is the main role of a woman in the society in which a woman may be divorced if she does not bear children.

All linguistic means are used to make differentiation. For instance, morphologically the default gender is masculine, and even women in some cases are expressed by the male gender. In fact, all objects and animals are grammatically masculine in Gumer and in Gurage, in general. Lexically, women’s title names were limited to just two, but men’s titles numbered in the tens. At semantic and pragmatic levels, all the genres we have discussed demonstrated gender-role differences and low representation of women.

We found that the people responded to many of the gender discourses by saying that women are less capable of performing certain tasks, such as public speaking, being judges and attorneys, even of leading certain groups in schools (Weatherall 2002: 65). Women themselves refrain from claiming participation in the cultural court system, thinking that this is natural to the system (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 9).

The gifts promised during ‘*misagjə*’, such as a horse for a man as an encouragement to travel and participate actively in various socio-cultural affairs, and a milking cow for a woman to show that she is responsible for household chores, especially food preparation, pragmatically limit roles in the community. This is consistent with Edwards (2009: 127), who claims that language is used in communication to attribute behavioural and social differences.

Women’s self- and group identities were not generally different from those imposed on them by men in the society. With a few exceptions, our women consultants and female students accepted the differentiations and low representation as a normal. Some even accepted that they lack some of the skills and wisdom that men have. This is consistent with Fekede (2014a: 39) who says, ‘...what has been communicated through ... language ... shapes our perception of reality and thereby our ways of life’.

### 3.3 Conclusion

Based on our analysis of the findings from interview and discourses from different genres, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. In all socio-cultural and political practices, women and men have significantly different power, being less for women than for men.
2. Participants' responses to various gender discourses revealed that women are less capable than men in different social roles, such as decision making.
3. Women's self- and group identification showed that women, to a large extent, accepted the lesser power given to them by society, and in some cases considered it appropriate.

The main causes for gender differences in the varying gender discourses for men and women were:

- Economic incompetence: women were not able to own and manage fixed assets, such as farmland. As a result, they had to go to their husband with no financial or resource contribution. The house, farmland, cattle, etc., are already resources the husband brought from his family. Due to that, the women could not make decisions about those resources.
- Lack of knowledge and awareness: the misperception about men and women is another main cause for gender differences. Neither men nor women members of the community believe that women are capable of fixed assets management, negotiation, public speaking, election or doing big business.
- Lack of exposure: the participants explained that women in Gumer were not directly involved in public speaking and other responsibilities that men face. Hence, they lack experience in leadership, public speaking, and dispute resolution.
- Cultural transmission: almost all participants agreed that the main cause for all of the gender differences is due to the preexisting cultural system, which has long been in place. Hence, the practice and the status quo have continued through the generations without anyone's trying to improve or change them. Most of the elderly people said *zam fit'rətmətaaw* 'it is just its nature'.

Current efforts by the government to improve women's representation in all social and political affairs and the increase in the girls' formal education may improve the traditional long-standing low status and position of women in Gumer district and the Gurage zone in general in years to come.

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## Appendix 1. Males mourning songs

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| 1. | <i>wərko təbanəra</i><br><i>agaz kersima egəwalə</i><br><i>tisəh<sup>w</sup>i jañk<sup>j</sup>e nər</i><br><i>abo mis</i>                                  | 'A shelter is demolished'<br>'Agaz (title) Kersima who does not care'<br>'When retreated he is at behind'<br>'What a man!'                |
| 2. | <i>wərko təbanəra</i><br><i>bəhatf bəmək<sup>j</sup>əle</i><br><i>irsas təhatəra</i><br><i>abo mis</i>   | 'A shelter is demolished'<br>'There in Mekelle'<br>'Dressed with bullets around his waist'<br>'What a man!'                               |
| 3. | <i>wərko təbanəra</i><br><i>tik<sup>w</sup>ijən jərəpərə</i><br><i>jəm<sup>w</sup>an ategh<sup>w</sup>ərə</i><br><i>zega bet gəfərə</i><br><i>abo mis</i>  | 'A shelter is demolished'<br>'What you had been protecting'<br>'Whom you delegate to'<br>'The poor are going to migrate'<br>'What a man!' |
| 4. | <i>wərko təbanəra</i><br><i>nip<sup>w</sup>ar təmasik<sup>j</sup>ərə</i><br><i>jəm<sup>w</sup>an ategh<sup>w</sup>ərə</i><br><i>abo mis</i>                | 'A shelter is demolished'<br>'Feast of thunderbolt and feast of the cross'<br>'Whom you delegated'<br>'What a man!'                       |
| 5. | <i>wərko təbanəra</i><br><i>bərən bətət m<sup>w</sup>ərə</i><br><i>fəotəm fənən wərə</i><br><i>wəhe mis</i>  | 'A shelter is demolished'<br>'At up and down sides'<br>'He worked hard and excelled'<br>'A good man!'                                     |
| 6. | <i>wərko təbanəra</i><br><i>jahə k<sup>j</sup>ərə k<sup>j</sup>ərə</i><br><i>t<sup>j</sup>uri angəfərə</i><br><i>wəhe mis</i>                              | 'A shelter is demolished'<br>'Around you'<br>'Always surrounded by best horse'<br>'A good man!'   |
| 7. | <i>wərko təbanəra</i><br><i>tiṭfən k'irawikəm</i><br><i>tatjadig te b<sup>w</sup>arikəm</i><br><i>abo mis</i>  | 'A shelter is demolished'<br>'The public awaited you when you come'<br>'You are not found to rescue'<br>'What a man!'                     |
| 8. | <i>wərko təbanəra</i><br><i>jogət gamba zara</i><br><i>jasrat k<sup>j</sup>ərə k<sup>j</sup>ərə</i><br><i>ək<sup>w</sup>a təsəppərə</i><br><i>wəhe mis</i> | 'A shelter is demolished'<br>'The venue of pot's spirit'<br>'The frame of the procedure'<br>'It is broken today'<br>'A good man!'         |

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9.	<i>awi sima awi</i>	‘The wild animal listen you wild’
	<i>jadəbabaj g<sup>w</sup>əntfo zobe</i>	‘The avenue (court) hyena, zobe’
10.	<i>awi sima awi</i>	‘The wild animal listen you wild’
	<i>jambəssa m<sup>w</sup>əsa zobe</i>	‘The cub of a lion, zobe’
11.	<i>awi sima awi</i>	‘The wild animal listen you wild’
	<i>gəgmata ambəssa zobe</i>	‘He himself a lion, zobe’
12.	<i>awi sima awi</i>	‘The wild animal listens you wild’
	<i>gəmam ambəssa zobe</i>	‘Brave and a lion, zobe’

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## Appendix 2. Males’ title names

1. *abəgaz/agaz* ‘war leader’ – Given to a man who participated in different wars, and is usually a leader during war.
2. *Damo/daməs* ‘wealthy’ – Bestowed on a man who owns large number of cattle and other fixed assets.
3. *eshi arib* ‘confronter’ – Given to a man who usually dares to confront enemies during war.
4. *bərdəfərə* ‘brave’ – Given to a man who dares to step into the enemies’ territory during war; to a person who is usually brave enough to knock on closed doors; to a man who confronts and challenges very difficult problems that others avoid.
5. *bərkəfətə* ‘courageous’ – Given to a man who directs people in war and other life struggles; to a man who begins war and other societal changes to enable others follow the same direction and change.
6. *fəŋk’ir* ‘uplift’/‘winner’ – Given to a man who is able to cross enemy borders during war; to a man who challenges existing systems in a society; to a man who challenges administrators and their mismanagement of society.
7. *jəgən ab* ‘father of community’/‘leader’ – Given to a man who protects community members; to a man who shares his resources with the poor; to a man who coordinates and leads the community; and to a man who mediates disputes between people.
8. *bədət/abazinab* ‘donator’ – Both are given to a man who is generous; who shares his resources with the poor.
9. *m<sup>w</sup>ira bənəsə* ‘winner’/‘persuasive’/‘victorious’ – Given to a man who is a gifted public speaker, whose words, ideas and expressions are convincing or persuasive, who has winning ideas.
10. *jakatf* ‘mediator’ – Given to a man who is a good mediator; who usually resolves conflicts between people.
11. *wəma* ‘wealthy/donor’ – Given to a rich man who shares his resources with the poor.
12. *arwase* ‘life saver’ – Given to a very decisive man in the community; to a man who usually helps people in trouble.
13. *azmatf* ‘war leader’ – Given to a war leader; and by extension for temporary use to a bridegroom who leads his attendants.
14. *wənzət arib* ‘fast attacker’/‘frontier’ – Given to a man who is a fast attacker during war.

### Appendix 3. Proverbs about Females

1. *mis tijazna k'ak'ra* 'when a husband sees her appetit less'
2. *zəngir tijazna bura* 'when a wall sees her voracious'
3. *miſt jək'jəm<sup>w</sup>ətfɪn tətən jibəh'* 'A man defeated with a woman cries with smoke'
4. *tik'am biwri jəmftəna* 'whom do you win; my wife'
5. *bazəa bangəpa inim miſt* 'if guests did not come, all women are wives'
6. *banzənəbə inim bet* 'if it did not rain, all huts are houses'
7. *tisəm<sup>w</sup>ja tʃətfɪm, tizəf<sup>w</sup>ja* 'while she declined when kissed, she accepted while forced'
8. *tantf'anətf miſt wəbada* 'consultation with woman who did not bear child is like'
9. *təfərəz mis marəda* 'travel on foot with a horseman on a horse'
10. *abana jəg<sup>w</sup>adəne, adotəna jəbəkərətʃe tərakəsom jark'o*  
'my parents quarrel because my father is hungry and my mother could not feed him'
11. *irsijə gərəd jəmis atars,* 'a small girl is not small for a man'
12. *irsijə tinkijə jambir əjars* 'a small pot is not small to cook cabbages'
13. *gərəd midʒatʃa basatʃətf gam<sup>w</sup>ə jəmis sənətfɪm*  
'If a girl could cross a hearth, she is ready for marriage'
14. *jəzəjə-gurz bejawədʒənme bəh'nəna jitsrasəri barətfɪm*  
'An aged spinster said, people make fun of me though I won't be get married'
15. *jifta h<sup>w</sup>et jat'əfa bet*  
'couple of women destroy a house'
16. *jifta gurz etezəz*  
'old women never obey'