

Breaking Barriers: How Female Farmers in Sidama and Amhara Are Transforming Agriculture Through the WEGO Program

Turning Communities into Thriving Agricultural Hubs

Through the **Women’s Empowerment through Gender-Transformative Market Opportunities (WEGO)** program, rural women and their communities are experiencing meaningful economic, social, and cultural change. The stories below reflect just a few of the many lives transformed by WEGO’s approach, which integrates agribusiness training, gender dialogue, nutrition education, financial inclusion, and market access through CARE’s Farmer Field and Business School (FFBS) approach. In the four WEGO intervention woredas, (two in Amhara and two in Sidama), the project has established Producer and Market groups (PMGs) that are turning farming into a lucrative business. The PMGs have been critical, helping members access extension services, inputs, and real-time market data to sidestep middlemen and sell directly to profitable markets.

“With the profits from my initial farming activities, I started a vermicompost business. I later rented land from the church to expand my horticulture farm. Today, my capital has grown to ETB 900,000 (approximately \$7,258 USD). The training I received from WEGO played a major role in my success.”
Wumitu, from Sidama Region, Wondogenet Woreda, Aruma kebele.

“Prior to the introduction of the WEGO program, deeply rooted social norms strongly divided roles and responsibilities based on gender. Tasks such as cooking, washing, cleaning, fetching water, and childcare were considered exclusively “women’s work.” Men who attempted to support these duties were often ridiculed or stigmatized. This not only limited women’s time and mobility but also reinforced inequality within households. Domestic work was seen as easy, unpaid, and undeserving of recognition—contributing to women’s overburden and underappreciation before the arrival of WEGO.”
Baye Wasse, From Amhara Region, Fogera Woreda, Kokit Kebele

“There should be lots of gender-based initiatives like this to help empower women more.”
— **Tiringo Burka from Sidama Region, Wondogenet Woreda, Aruma kebele**

From Housewives to Agripreneurs

In rural Ethiopia, farming has long been considered a men’s domain. But women like **Wumitu Bushira, Baye Wasse, Tiringo Burka, Betselot Taddese** and **Tseganesh Dangamo** are turning that tradition on its head. With the support of the *WEGO* program, they are not only growing horticultural crops — they’re growing businesses, confidence, and social influence. These women have moved beyond the household, stepping confidently into fields, markets, and leadership spaces, using their voices and successes to challenge gender norms and inspire other women to do the same.

Challenging Norms: A Hard but Hopeful Beginning

In Aruma Kebele, Wondo Genet Woreda, **Wumitu Boshura**, a 40-year-old woman from Sidama once believed that earning an income was solely her husband’s responsibility. Her life revolved around unpaid household labor, and financial independence seemed beyond reach.

In late 2022, when the WEGO program arrived in her community, everything changed. Wumitu joined a Producer and Marketing Group (PMG) and attended intensive biweekly hands-on discussion sessions where she learned about the FFBS approach. The training equipped her with agricultural skills, marketing strategies, business planning, gender equity principles, and nutritional knowledge—opening doors to a future she had never imagined.

With newfound confidence, embraced farming as a business. barren plot of land from a local revived it with tomatoes and **began selling her produce in** WEGO supported her transition irrigated farming, enabling her to multiple times a year and **increase her earnings.** the importance of diversified streams, Wumitu took a bold



Wumitu She rented a church, onions, and **local markets.** to modern harvest **significantly** Recognizing income financial step

with WEGO’s assistance. She accessed a **500,000 ETB (\$4,032 USD) loan from Awash bank** in February 2025 and purchased two healthy cows with young calves. Understanding that quality feed directly impacts livestock productivity, she allocated part of her funds to nutritional feed, starting a thriving dairy business. “We’re not just farming — we’re making informed business decisions,” explains Wumitu.

This strategic approach is already transforming her livelihood. Her cows are healthy, her **farming operations are expanding**, and her **family now enjoys a steady income**, breaking free from financial insecurity. Wumitu’s journey embodies the power of rural women’s empowerment, proving that with opportunity, knowledge, access to finance, and determination, sustainable development is within reach. **Her success is inspiring other women** to pursue financial independence through agriculture.

Challenging Norms: Exemplary Norm shift

In Kokit Kebele, Fogera Woreda, **Baye Wasse**, a 43-year-old woman from Amhara, **once believed that earning an income was solely her husband's responsibility**, while her daily life revolved around unpaid domestic labor. The notion of shared responsibilities and finances seemed unattainable. The prevailing social norms of her community dictated that women belonged in the kitchen and men in the fields or marketplace. Any deviation from this norm—such as a man cooking or caring for children—was met with ridicule and shame.

Before the WEGO program, Baye and many other women were burdened by household responsibilities that were physically demanding but seen as "easy" and undervalued. Through WEGO’s FFBS sessions and Social Analysis and Action (SAA) dialogues, Baye began to question these norms. With support from facilitators and regular home visits, she and her husband were encouraged to reflect on how gendered roles were socially constructed, not natural or fixed.

Gradually, her **husband began to support her with household responsibilities**—preparing injera, fetching water, sharing childcare, and participating in tasks previously seen as “women-only.” Baye also gained confidence to voice her needs, ask for help, and make joint decisions. Together, they began to see housework as a shared family responsibility. This **shift not only reduced Baye’s workload but also brought emotional closeness, improved communication, and a sense of partnership in their marriage.** Their children, too, are learning that chores are not gendered, signaling a positive generational shift in attitudes.

Tiringo Burka: A Story of Empowerment and Transformation

In Wondo Genet Woreda, Aruma Kebele, **Tiringo Burka**, a 43-year-old mother of 10 children from Sidama, had dedicated her life to household responsibilities and assisting her husband with farming. Her family worked across 1.5 hectares of land, cultivating chili, tomato, avocado, banana, and mango, while also tending to a small herd of cows, sheep, and goats. Despite her contributions, farming was traditionally seen as her husband’s domain.

Everything changed when the WEGO program introduced Producer and Market Groups (PMG) and gender dialogues. Initially, finding time for the program was challenging. But as Tiringo made the effort to participate, an unexpected shift occurred. **Her husband Girma began sharing responsibilities**, helping with childcare and household tasks. This newfound support allowed her to engage more deeply in farming activities.



With training in horticultural practices, climate-resistant seeds, irrigation, and market strategies, Tiringo transformed her farm into an agribusiness. With support from WEGO in linking her to Awash Bank, **she secured a loan of 100,000 ETB (approximately \$806 USD).** This funding enabled her to scale up her horticultural production, invest in **borehole furrow irrigation**, and achieve multiple harvests annually. Through the project’s business and financial literacy training, she strengthened her ability to connect with buyers and negotiate more favorable market prices, enhancing both her productivity and profitability.

Tiringo’s family has **improved their financial stability, enabling them to send three of their children to university.** The project is challenging societal restrictive norms, demonstrating that women can be equal counterparts in agribusiness. Today, Tiringo is a wife, mother, and confident entrepreneur shaping a better future for herself, her family, and her community.

Betselot Tadesse: Another Story of Empowerment and Transformation

In Qolela Kebele, North Mecha Woreda of the Amhara region, **Bestelot Tadesse**, a married woman, lived in a household where her role was largely confined to unpaid domestic labor and farming support. Although she contributed significantly to agricultural production, she **had no financial knowledge of the farm’s crop sales** or how household income was managed. Her husband handled all financial matters alone, without her input.

Everything began to shift when Betslot joined the WEGO program, participating in SAA sessions and household-level dialogues facilitated through the FFBS sessions. She was encouraged to question traditional gender roles and reflect on her rights and responsibilities within the household. Through continuous engagement, she began to understand the importance of financial transparency and shared decision-making. With guidance from WEGO community facilitator, she gradually built the confidence and skills to monitor household income, ask informed questions, and participate meaningfully in financial planning.

As a result of this empowerment process, **Betslot now actively engages in household decisions, tracks income from farm sales, and shares budgeting responsibilities** with her husband. The changes also reshaped family dynamics. Her husband now respects her contributions and includes her in key decisions. This transformation reflects a **deep behavioral shift** toward gender equality, greater trust, and mutual respect in their home.

Powered by Knowledge and Technology

For **Tseganesh Dangamo**, a 38-year old mother of seven children, and her husband **Petros Worrano**, life in Shebedino Woreda, Sidama Region, was once marked by **traditional, labor-intensive farming methods**. With limited resources and poor-quality seeds, their agricultural yields were inconsistent, and securing water for irrigation meant carrying plastic cans uphill from the river. The turning point in their lives came when they became members of the WEGO PMG.

Recognized as **model farmers**, the couple participated in an early WEGO tomato demonstration plot, where the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) granted them a generator pump and agricultural inputs. They received irrigation equipment enabling them to grow high value crops multiple times annually on their small plot. The support enabled them to transition into irrigated horticulture, cultivating tomatoes on their small plot up to three times a year.



Tseganesh and Petros now **generate 200,000 ETB (approximately \$1,612 USD) from a single harvest** on just half a hectare, a remarkable transformation compared to much lower earnings from the same plot of land before WEGO. With the increased income, they invested in **better nutrition, school fees for their children, and essential home improvements**.

However, the journey was far from easy. Like many rural women, Tseganesh faced restrictive cultural barriers when she first engaged in farming as a business. Initially, she attended **FFBS sessions in secret**, fearing backlash from her community. Many criticized her for stepping beyond traditional roles. Over time, attitudes began to shift, especially after gender dialogues introduced through WEGO. Through these sessions, Petros came to understand the value of Tseganesh's contributions. "Now, **we run our farming activities jointly**, and decisions are made equally," Tseganesh shares. Petros echoes this transformation, stating, "**I never make any decision without consulting my wife.**" Their partnership is now built on

mutual respect and shared responsibility, breaking traditional barriers and setting an example for others in their community.

Amplifying Voices: Advocacy and Leadership

Beyond farming, these women are now emerging as advocates for broader social change. In March 2025, Wumitu traveled to Addis Ababa to speak at an International Women’s Day event organized by the Ministry of Agriculture, sharing her inspiring journey with policymakers, agricultural leaders, and development partners. In April 2025, a group of eight female farmers represented their PMGs at the international Hortiflora Expo in Addis Ababa. They showcased their products, networked with agribusiness leaders, and forged new business connections.



The female farmers (seated in front row) and WEGO staff at the CARE booth in the 2025 Hortiflora Expo

"It was a great exposure for us," says Mulu Alemu, another project participant and exhibitor from Wondo Genet. "Although we are small startups, our success stories impressed many visitors who were eager to connect with us," explains Mulu.

Through public events, field visits, and advocacy activities, the female farmers supported by WEGO have become visible **proof of the transformative potential of investing in women’s agricultural entrepreneurship**. "My farm is visited many times a year by government officials and donors," says Wumitu. "Their appreciation encourages me to dream bigger." Today, these women are not just successful farmers, they are **pioneers breaking systemic barriers**, challenging outdated norms, and paving the way for a more inclusive agricultural future.

Challenging Gender Norms: Gashaw’s Story of Male Engagement in Rural Amhara

In the quiet village of St. Hanna Kebele, Amhara region, men were expected to provide income, while women bore the full weight of unpaid domestic labor, cooking, cleaning, fetching water, and caring for children. For 42-year-old **Gashaw Mulualem**, a father of five, this was simply the way things had always been. “I used to think helping with household chores was shameful,” Gashaw admits. “Even when I started helping my wife at home, I only did it in private. I was afraid of being judged by the community.”



Everything began to change when Gashaw started attending the WEGO program’s FFBS sessions. Through participatory learning sessions and powerful gender dialogue discussions, he was exposed to new ideas about shared responsibilities and equality within the household. Slowly, his perspective began to shift. Supported by the program’s **SAA** approach and **male engagement strategies**, Gashaw began speaking out during FFBS meetings about the small but meaningful changes he was making at home. What once embarrassed him now became a point of pride. He started sharing his experiences with other men in his PMG, challenging long-held beliefs about masculinity and domestic roles.

“I realized I wasn’t alone. The training helped and encouraged me to speak in public about what I was once ashamed of,” he reflects.

Gashaw was selected as a male champion for a male engagement group. These groups promote men’s involvement as supportive partners and champions for the women in their family, providing support with on domestic chores, encouraging women to be entrepreneurs, and promoting gender equality in the broader community. Gashaw was selected due to his **demonstrated commitment to challenging traditional gender norms** and **promoting gender equality** within his household and in the wider community. To enhance his impact, he received additional training in facilitation and leadership. Together with his wife, **Keleb Shiferaw**—also an active PMG member—Gashaw began using PMG meetings and community events to initiate open discussions on topics that we previously considered taboo.

One tangible change that the couple made was in their homestead: **Keleb** began cultivating a vibrant vegetable garden, providing their family with fresh, nutritious food. Their example inspired others in the community to do the same, creating a ripple effect of small shifts leading to big impacts. Gashaw knows there’s still work to be done. He points out persistent norms that need to be challenged, like the deeply rooted “male first” mindset, where men eat before women or women are discouraged from walking in front of men during public rituals.

“Through continuous discussions in FFBS and other community forums, these beliefs are starting to change,” Gashaw says. “People are beginning to see the value in equality, not just for women, but for everyone.”

Gashaw’s story is a powerful reminder that **social transformation begins at home**, and that men, too, can be champions for change when given the space, support, and encouragement to reflect, question, and lead.

A Taste of Change: How Nutrition Learning Transformed Addise’s Household

In the rural village of **Enamrit Kebele** in North Mecha Woreda, Amhara Region, W/ro Addise Berihun and her husband Asemahegn are raising five children. Like many farming families in their community, daily life revolved around tending fields, managing livestock, and preparing staple meals like injera and shiro. Nutritional diversity, however, was never part of the conversation, until they joined a Producer and Marketing Group (PMG) as part of the WEGO program's FFBS approach.



Addise recalls how her understanding of nutrition changed dramatically during one of the PMG's bi-monthly group discussions. For Addise, nutrition learning sessions were eye-opening. She learned how a mix of vegetables, legumes, and dairy could improve her children's health—and how to grow much of it herself in a small backyard garden. With support from WEGO, she planted carrots, kale, tomatoes, and beans and began including them in family meals. Her husband, initially skeptical, joined her after seeing the children's energy and improved health. Today, she has noticed what started as a small garden became a source of nutrition, income, and confidence—for her household and others around her.

“I never imagined what we eat has such a deep impact on our health,” she reflects. “We were used to eating the same food over and over, mostly injera and shiro, with very few vegetables or fruits. And as a woman, because I'm always busy with housework and farming, I didn't even eat properly. Usually, I'd eat whatever was left after serving the family.”



The couple also fell into a common pattern in the area: prioritizing market sales over household nutrition. Despite owning a cow, they never kept milk for their children, choosing instead to sell it all at the local market. But things began to change when the FFBS curriculum introduced nutrition education. Group members engaged in hands-on discussions about the importance of diverse diets, food groups, and practical ways to improve household nutrition with locally available resources.

Motivated by the session, Addise and her husband took action. They decided to establish a backyard garden, planting accessible and nutritious vegetables like beetroot and collard greens. For the first time, they also made the conscious decision to keep a portion of their cow's milk at home, especially for their children's consumption. “It wasn't a big thing, just small changes, growing a few vegetables, keeping some milk, but it's already making a real difference in our lives,” Addise notes.

Today, their home is not just a place of productivity but also of nutrition-conscious living, where food grown is not only for sale, but also for sustaining the family. Their story inspires others in the group to reflect on their own practices and reimagine farming not just as a source of income, but as a foundation for better health. Addise and Asemahegn's journey shows how a simple shift in awareness, combined with supportive group learning, can redefine family wellbeing and spark lasting change in rural food systems.

Story of Savings, Livelihoods, and Transformation: How Women and Communities in Sidama Are Building a Better Future Together

In the green highlands of Ethiopia's Sidama region, a quiet revolution in rural finance is underway, one that's being led by determined women and thriving communities. Through the WEGO program's Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA), 87 Producer and Marketing Groups (PMGs) have begun saving together, creating a lifeline of opportunity and resilience.

With 2,506 members across the two woredas of Wondogenet and Shebedino, of whom 1,333 are women, these groups have collectively **saved 2,626,749 ETB** (approximately 21,182 USD). Even more impressive, they've **already loaned out 2,032,860 ETB** (approximately 16,394 USD), directly benefiting 741 individuals, proving that saving, when done together, can transform lives.

In WEGO, **Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs)**, repayment plans are clearly outlined in the group's bylaws to ensure responsible and transparent financial management. These bylaws typically include **agreed-upon repayment periods (e.g., 1–3 months)**, **fixed repayment rates**, and **penalties for late repayment** to encourage discipline. Members mitigate risks through **peer accountability**, regular **biweekly savings meetings**, and a social fund that can be used to support members during emergencies, reducing the likelihood of default. By setting these rules collectively, VSLAs promote trust, financial responsibility, and sustainable savings culture within the community.

So, what are these savings and loans used for?

From buying livestock to starting microenterprises, members are investing in their futures. They purchase **agricultural inputs** like seeds, fertilizers, and chemicals. They raise **chickens, sheep, and goats**. Others start **petty trade ventures**, such as vegetable stalls, home shops, or cooked food sales. Loan sizes range from **1,000 ETB (8 USD) to 20,000ETB (160 USD)**, making them accessible yet impactful.

In Howoloso Kebele, Shebedino woreda, **Tsehaynesh Fanos** took a **10,000 ETB (approximately 70 USD) loan from VSLA** and bought **150 chickens** that were just 45 days old. Now, her poultry business is thriving, with some days bringing in up to **80 eggs**. Her group has saved a total of **87,000 ETB (approximately 700 USD)**, and of the 23 members, **13 are women**, showing the strong leadership of women in agribusiness.

Elisabet's Story: A Leap of Faith with 15 Goats

In **Chikogeter Kebele** of Wondogenet Woreda, Elisabet Dawit, a motivated and resourceful farmer, saw an opportunity to grow her livestock business when the **WEGO program, in partnership with Awash Bank**, introduced more inclusive financial services tailored for women. Through WEGO's facilitation, Elisabet gained access to a **loan of 150,000 ETB (approximately 1,209 USD)**, which she used to purchase **15 goats and adequate feed** to sustain them. Her success reflects a broader transformation taking place across the

program: **women farmers are increasingly accessing formal banking services** with flexible terms, thanks to a risk-sharing guarantee fund allocated by WEGO.

The program negotiated **reduced interest rates, flexible collateral requirements, and waived loan processing and insurance fees**—all designed to lower financial barriers for women like Elisabet. These initiatives have not only expanded financial inclusion but also enabled women to invest confidently in both crop and livestock production. Elisabet exemplifies this shift, stating: *“I will not wait until the loan period ends—I will save and repay it early.”* She demonstrates her financial responsibility by successfully repaying her first loan installment of **40,595 ETB** (approximately **USD 327.4**).



Her commitment reflects a growing sense of **financial responsibility and empowerment** among women farmers supported by WEGO. These efforts have led to the emergence of more **resilient, female-led farming enterprises**, demonstrating the power of targeted financial facilitation in transforming women’s livelihoods.

“FFBS Helped Us Rediscover Our Potential” — A Story of Empowerment from Sidama, Ethiopia

Zerfe Seifu and Nigist Nigussie, neighbors and mothers of three and six children respectively, live in Wetera Kechemba Kebele, Wondogenet Woreda of Ethiopia’s Sidama Region. Until recently, neither had access to agricultural extension services or had ever participated in a farmer’s group. That changed when the WEGO program introduced the FFBS approach in their community.



Motivated by the opportunity, both women joined the Kayo Producer and Market Group. For the first time, they became actively involved in public discussions, decision-making, and learning sessions alongside men — an experience they describe as transformative. "We are so grateful to sit next to men and discuss issues that concern us and our community. This was unthinkable before," says Zerfe, now a member of Kayo’s

Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) leadership team. Nigist, meanwhile, serves on the group's Market Research Committee.

Through FFBS, they participated in a practical, hands-on demonstration on climate-resilient onion



production hosted at a model farmer's plot. There, they learned improved techniques including land and seedbed preparation, transplanting, soil and water management, fertilizer application, and post-harvest handling. "We had never been part of such an engaging, participatory learning process," they shared.

Armed with new knowledge and a deeper understanding of market demand, Zerfe and Nigist decided to grow onions — one of the region's high-value crops — on their own plots. Today, Nigist cultivates onions on 800 square meters of land, while Zerfe farms nearly 1,000 square meters.

Reflecting on the impact of FFBS, Nigist notes, "We and other women in our group are rediscovering our potential. What we've learned has encouraged us to aspire for even more."

Their story is a testament to how inclusive, gender-transformative approaches like FFBS can empower rural women to step into leadership roles, access markets, and improve their livelihoods — not just as farmers, but as changemakers in their communities.

