

RESULTS SUMMARY

Seeds of Change: Women Shaping Sustainable Land Use in the Bale Mountains of Ethiopia

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PROJECT	Title:	Seeds of Change: Increasing Women’s Participation in Sustainable Land Use in the Bale Mountains
	Partner:	Farm Africa
	Country:	Ethiopia
	Period:	2022-2025

CHALLENGE	In the Bale Mountains of Ethiopia, women are increasingly shaping how land is managed through agroforestry, savings groups, and cooperative leadership, while strengthening both livelihoods and forest conservation. For many women, this shift has created new opportunities to earn an income, influence local decision-making and invest in more sustainable farming practices. In a region where the role of women has historically been constrained, women’s participation and leadership are increasingly shaping more responsible and resilient approaches to managing natural resources and land use, while strengthening families, communities, and local economies.
	This shift has been supported in recent years through a deliberate, multidimensional approach to strengthening women’s inclusion across sustainable forest management activities. Participation in agroforestry training increased steadily from 14% in 2022 to 36% in 2025, while women-led homestead agroforestry plots expanded from 9 to 65 over the same period. Although progress remains gradual due to deeply rooted cultural norms, the trajectory is clear, positive, and increasingly promising.
	Because agroforestry harvests are managed through local cooperatives, efforts focused on increasing women’s involvement in cooperative decision-making, alongside targeted training in cooperative business development, digitalisation, and biodiversity monitoring initiatives. This has enabled women to take on a more active and influential role in managing natural resources and supporting local livelihoods. Their growing leadership is reflected in increased participation in Community-Based Biodiversity Monitoring (CBM) committees and greater inclusion within Business Development Systems (BDS), signalling a gradual but important shift towards more inclusive and resilient local decision-making.
	Women are increasingly participating in and shaping local land management and agroforestry systems, despite long-standing social and financial barriers. A key driver of this transformation has been the expansion of women-led Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), which grew from around 70 to more than 200 members between 2022 and 2025. Through these groups, women have gained access to revolving loans that allow them to invest in small scale business and sustainable, productive activities, including coffee agroforestry practices. Beyond providing access to savings and loans, the VSLAs have also become important spaces for learning and confidence-building, further strengthening women’s role in local economic and environmental decision-making. One inspiring example is Zemzem, member of a VSLA, who has mastered compost production using vermi worms. Through the project’s training, she has evolved into a key local actor in agroforestry efforts producing and selling high-quality compost while also training other women in vermi-composting techniques across the region. Her work is not only restoring soil fertility, but also spreading knowledge and opportunity, enabling more women to adopt sustainable practices and strengthening the foundations of agroforestry across the region. Together, these changes are improving livelihoods, addressing underlying social inequalities, increasing adoption of agroforestry practices, and reducing pressure on surrounding forests, showing how women’s growing role in land management can contribute to more sustainable forest landscapes.

CONTEXT

In Ethiopia, forest degradation is closely linked to rapid population growth and livelihoods. Low agricultural productivity has increased pressure on households to expand cultivation into surrounding forest areas, contributing to deforestation. Women play a central role in farming and natural resource management, yet have historically had limited access to finance, productive inputs, technical training and decision-making spaces. This combination of environmental degradation and gender inequality has constrained the uptake of sustainable practices such as agroforestry, making gender equality a key entry point for strengthening both livelihoods and forest conservation outcomes.

CONTRIBUTION

Forests of the World's contribution to this transformation has primarily been through long-term partnership support to our local partner, Farm Africa in the areas surrounding Bale Mountains. Guided by our principle that forests are best protected through locally rooted knowledge and ownership, we have supported locally led approaches to gender inclusion in relation to sustainable forest management and livelihood development. Our support has combined financial support, technical training, and knowledge sharing, drawing on experiences from similar programmes in other parts of Ethiopia, including Kafa, as well as Uganda. Through this cross-learning approach, we have supported the exchange of knowledge, methodologies, and best practices across programmes and partners.

A key contribution has been our role as a knowledge partner, providing technical support and training while promoting inclusive governance and women's participation in cooperatives and value chains. In addition, complementary funding streams, including crowdfunding initiatives, have supported women's empowerment and livelihood activities beyond the core programme budget. At the same time, much of the change has been driven by women themselves. Their willingness to organise, save collectively, access finance, and support one another has been central to the success of the Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs). Women have sustained these groups through weekly meetings, savings management, and peer support, demonstrating strong grassroots leadership and ownership of the process.

IMAGES



Caption: Zemzem with her vermi-compost system
Photo Credit: Forests of the World



Caption: Members of a women-only Village Savings & Loan Association during a meeting
Photo Credit: Forests of the World

See next page for more details □

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

ACTIVITIES

Between 2022 and 2025, the project implemented a range of activities aimed at strengthening women's role in forest management, cooperative development, and livelihood improvement, with a gradual shift from general training to more targeted economic and leadership-focused interventions.

In the early phase, women's participation in agroforestry training remained limited, representing 14% of participants in 2022 (9 of 65), increasing to 23% in 2023 (21 of 91), and stabilising at around 20% in 2024–2025. These activities formed the baseline capacity-building component of the project. From 2023 onwards, the project expanded women's engagement in governance and technical roles. In Community-Based Biodiversity Monitoring (CBM), female participation increased from 8% in 2023 to 44% in 2024, with continued inclusion in 2025 training cohorts. In 2025, women were also actively included in Business Development Systems (BDS) training and computer skills training for cooperative members, where they represented 43% of participants.

Targeted livelihood interventions were also introduced. In 2024, 23 of 31 households receiving coffee post-harvest materials were female-headed. Women's groups were established and equipped with grain threshing machines, enabling mechanised service provision and generating over 112,000 ETB in income (approximately DKK 5,400). Market-related activities supported women's access to value chains, with 17% of households selling coffee directly to international markets in 2024 being female-headed. Women also benefited from strengthened access to premium coffee buyers through cooperative linkages.

Finally, the project established eight women-only Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) by 2025, with 215 members, accumulating 338,420 ETB (approximately DKK 16,200) in savings and disbursing 282,500 ETB (approximately DKK 13,500) in loans for small businesses and asset creation.

LESSONS

A key lesson from the project is that achieving a 50:50 gender participation ratio in capacity-building initiatives is challenging in practice, particularly in contexts where deep-rooted cultural norms and unequal access to resources continue to influence participation patterns. Although the project set an ambitious target for equal representation across all training and engagement activities, initial implementation showed that women's participation in general agricultural training remained lower than expected due to these structural and social barriers.

This experience highlighted that numerical targets alone are insufficient to ensure meaningful inclusion. Instead, they must be supported by targeted, context-sensitive approaches that address the underlying social and economic barriers limiting women's participation. In response, the project strengthened its focus on women's economic empowerment as a foundational entry point for broader engagement in forest management and value chain development. A central strategy has been the support and expansion of women-led Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), which provide women with access to savings mechanisms, revolving loans, and opportunities to invest in productive activities.

These VSLAs have proven instrumental in increasing women's confidence, financial independence, and ability to engage in community and business activities. Over time, they are expected to further strengthen women's participation in training, decision-making processes, and natural resource management, demonstrating that economic empowerment structures can be a critical lever for achieving more equitable participation outcomes.

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Evidence of these changes comes from a combination of quantitative data and community-based reporting gathered through close collaboration with local communities and cooperatives. Farm Africa, Forests of the World's local partner, documents progress annually through direct observation, field engagement, and continuous dialogue with community members and cooperative structures. These findings are further reinforced by interviews conducted by Forests of the World in 2025 with women participating in Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and women managing homestead agroforestry plots, whose testimonies provide firsthand insight into the social, economic, and environmental changes taking place. Detailed evidence and supporting data are documented in Farm Africa's narrative reports to Forests of the World.

		<i>Development strategy priorities:</i>	Insert strategy priority
		<i>Changes in the lives of people facing poverty, marginalisation or vulnerability</i>	X
		<i>Changes in laws, policies and practices that affect people's rights</i>	-
		<i>Changes in the capacity of organisations and communities to support rights</i>	X
		<i>Changes in partnerships and collaborations that support people's rights</i>	-
		<i>Changes in participation of groups facing poverty, marginalisation or vulnerability</i>	X
		<i>Changes in local leadership of development and humanitarian work</i>	X

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