



WALKING THE TALK

Capacity Development for Local Government Creates Exemplary Forces of Women Empowerment

Working for the Women and Children's Affairs Bureau for the West Belesa Woreda Administration, Atala is no stranger to the call of empowering and equipping women. Now in her mid-twenties, Atala Fenta is energetic and focused, and she speaks passionately about the work she and the Bureau have been doing with SWEEP, a project implemented by CARE through the financial support from the Austrian Development Agency, to capacitate local government and empower the community to initiate and lead community development and improve the livelihood of women.

Atala began working with the Bureau soon after graduating from her diploma program. "In my work at the Bureau, I focus on **awareness creation** and **women's empowerment** within the community; I visit the women in the *kebele* and talk to them about their day to day life," she says. "Truth be told, we struggled to get the women to any town hall – either their husbands won't permit them or they're far too inundated with household chores to come to any meetings we call – so the only option was to deploy field employees like myself to go to them." Despite the hands-on work the Bureau does with women in the area, it was not until SWEEP trained employees of the Bureau, Atala included, and introduced the concept of village savings and loans association (VSLA) groups, that the Bureau started fully engaging women in the area. "I thought I was savvy with money, but the training on savings and diversifying income opened my eyes to all sorts of possibilities! I was eager to share what I'd learned with the women in the area, but I was also eager to become an embodiment of what I was preaching."

SWEEP has been in East and West Belesa *woredas*, in Central Gondar zone, with the objective of improving the food security and resilience of chronically food insecure households in the area. Having empowered and equipped women like Atala, rallying the women of the community is what ensures the sustainability of the intervention, and thus why **building the capacity of local government employees** was a **critical** part of the intervention.

Atala did not waste time walking the talk; she started mapping her income and expenses, and started thinking through how she could grow her savings. It was at this juncture, back in late 2017, that she decided to turn her house into a **part-time cafe** as a means to generate more income. She spent her days talking to women in West Belesa, encouraging them and teaching them, while in the evenings she ran her cafe. Her efforts were so successful that by 2019, she'd purchased another piece of land where she is now building a large property. "I had the task of organizing and overseeing VSLA groups within the four kebeles in the woreda, **I was bent on making sure I lived what I preached**. But soon, I saw women who were once

struggling to make ends meet, now saving tens of thousands of Birr, I was inspired to push my own savings and efforts even further!" says Atala who, soon after seeing the radical change in the women's lives, started **selling injera** on the side as well.

"The VSLA groups have lit a fire inside the women of the area! Not only are they beginning to see the possibility of financial resilience, but they're also seeing the appeal and importance of participation in formal decision-making spaces!" adds Atala, visibly thrilled to finally see women occupying spaces of leadership and participation in the VSLA groups. She notices women in her area are far more vocal and active, especially after the launch of the Social Analysis and Action, or SAA, meetings within the community which were introduced by SWEEP to **address harmful practices** rampant in the culture of the area including the marginalization of women and fair division of labor. She says the community is finally understanding what the Bureau has been saying all along: **supporting and empowering women benefits everyone in the community.**

"You would have been hard pressed to find a man who would hold or play with his own child just four or five years ago, they would just leave that or any other household responsibility to their wives. Now it's different! Not only do they actively share in the workload, but they also encourage their wives to participate in social activities like the VSLA meetings or SAA groups."



True to Atala's testimony, SWEEP's methodology of **community engagement through VSLAs and SAA groups** has been so effective that the **Bureau is replicating the framework** in other *kebeles* and has so far launched 55 VSLA groups independent of the project. Part of the measure of effectiveness is the tangible change in the quality of life and civic participation among the women of West Belesa where female-headed households are far too common. Through their VSLAs, the women take out loans (up to three times the amount they have individually saved) and engage in income generating activities. Like Atala, women in the area engage in basket or cotton weaving, cafe service, *tela* brewing, or a combination thereof so that they can grow their income.

"But the greatest change of all is in their perspective," says Atala. **"You can see now that they dream bigger when dreaming at all was foolishness to them before.** You can ask any woman in a VSLA meeting, and she'll tell you down to the cent how much she has saved and what she intends to do with it." And this level of financial resilience and awareness, to Atala and the Bureau, is quite the success.

Along the lines of dreaming bigger, Atala continues to build on her ambition, to lay a significant example for both her daughter and the women she serves through the Bureau. She is saving towards a third piece of land in the heart of Gondar and a car. "In retrospect, we didn't know much about how to organize and rally women, we didn't know how to pique their interest, and we have learned so much from this project. The methods introduced to us are so effective and contextually relevant in equipping and empowering women, I have been asking to volunteer to organize women in other *kebeles* as well," concludes Atala.