ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Socio-cultural Construction of Masculinity and Femininity in Blood-Feuding Practices: an Anthropological Inquiry in the Amhara Region, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study investigates the socio-cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity in relation to blood-feuding practices in Tach Armachiho, Central Gondar Zone, Amhara Region. It examines how the local community instills gendered behaviors through oral traditions such as chants, proverbs, poems, and naming practice to safeguarding personal and familial honor and prestige. To this end, the study employs a qualitative ethnographic research design, using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data and oral tradition. The major findings show that masculinity and femininity are valued according to the community's perceptions of the capacity to protect family members; hence, masculinity is strongly associated with, strength, resilience, endurance, , while femininity is connected to powerlessness and subordination, with their roles narrowly defined as wives, housemaids, and service providers. The study also reveals that masculinity is embedded within a cultural system that valorizes honor, courage, protection while femininity is defined with expectations concerning care, respectability, obedience, and family responsibility. Proverbs, chants, poems, and stories, function as cultural scripts through which communities transmit ideas, about appropriate masculine and feminine behavior across generations.

Keywords: masculinity, femininity, sociocultural construction, blood-feuding, Amhara Region

Introduction

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, anthropologists began to conceptualize gender as a distinct analytical concept, separate from the biological notion of sex (Rubin, 1975). Scholars increasingly viewed gender as a product of social and cultural processes through which societies establish and reproduce particular expectation, roles and power relations associated with masculinity and femininity (Zimmerman, 1987). Contemporary anthropological perspectives further highlight that masculinity and femininity are produced through culturally and socially constructed phenomena rather than direct expressions of

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biological difference (Nadal, 2017). Since the 1970s, scholars have increasingly examined how gender roles are socially constructed, maintained, and reproduced through everyday practice, social interaction, and cultural expression (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974; Gutmann, 1997), mostly associated with masculinity with traits such as bravery, assertiveness, and heroism, while associating femininity with caregiving, emotional expression, and, in some contexts, perceived weakness (Kachel et al., 2016; Geleta, 2018). These gender roles are not fixed; rather, they continuously evolve in response to broader political, economic, and cultural transformations (Blackstone, 2003; Butler, 1990).

However, despite the extensive theoretical literature on gender, an important research gap remains, as previous studies have largely focused on gender roles in areas such as marriage, education, family planning, and employment (Birhan & Zewdie, 2018; Chala & Haro, 2023; Gebregeogis, 2016; Geleta, 2018; Kapadia-Kundu et al., 2022; Datiko, 2025; Gupta & Keno, 2025), yet they have largely overlooked the role of gendered socialization in contexts of conflict and social regulation, particularly blood-feuding. Although earlier researchers such as Levine (1965) and Gutmann (1997) provided important foundational insight into Amhara masculinity and the notion of honor, their studies were shaped by the theoretical perspectives of their respective period and did not systematically explore how contemporary processes of gendered socialization, reinforced through oral literature, proverbs, and everyday social interactions, contribute to the continuation of participation in blood-feuding. The gap is particularly evident in understanding how masculinity and femininity are expressed, challenged, and negotiated within context of blood-feuding, beyond the boundary of biological sex. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how gendered identities and expectations are shaped and reproduced within feuding context.

The study of masculinity and femininity in the Ethiopian context is of particular importance because gender roles are also a key determinant in social organization and social interactions. These roles are redefined and recreated socially and culturally and are often associated with notions of courage, honour, rationality and sexual assertiveness (Seyoum, 2018). As Levine (1965) observed in Amhara society, ideals of masculinity are strongly associated with courage and honor, whereas femininity is often defined in relation to and in contrast with these masculinity attributes. Such gendered distinctions are reproduced through socialization within the family, school, communities, and wider cultural institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 1996; Birhan & Zewdie, 2018). These processes of gender socialization may become particularly pronounced during periods of social crisis and within traditional mechanisms of conflict regulation, including blood feud.

For the purposes of this study, key concepts are understood as follows: Blood feuding is a long-term cycle of retaliatory killing between kinship groups that is passed down through the patrilineage, and which is initiated by a variety of circumstances including homicide, land disputes, or insults to family honor. Gender is conceptualized not as biological sex

but as a socially constructed system of roles, behaviors, and power relations. Gendered socialization refers to the process through which individuals acquire and internalize culturally defined norms of masculinity and femininity. In the context of blood-feuding, boys may be socialized to associate honor with courage, retaliation, and the defense of family reputation, while girls may be encouraged to embody silence, restraint, and compliance. Consequently, participation in blood feuds is commonly constructed as a masculine responsibility, whereas avoidance or non-participation may be associated with femininity, regardless of biological sex. These gendered expectations are further reproduced through forms of oral traditions, including proverbs, chants, narratives, and insults. Masculinity may therefore, become associated with aggression, the defense of honor, and participation in blood-feuding (Levine, 1965; Gutmann, 1997), whereas femininity may be constructed through notions of passivity, weakness and cowardice (Zimmerman, 1987). Through this everyday cultural expression, gender expectations are communicated, reinforced, and reproduced, contributing to the regulation of social behaviors and the continuation of established social norms.

Reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that masculinity and femininity in Ethiopia are shaped by deep-rooted cultural, social, and institutional factors. Traditional gender norms continue to influence various aspects of social life including marriage and family relations (Birhan & Zewdie, 2018; Chala & Haro, 2023), access to educational opportunities (Gebregeorgis, 2016; Abraha, 2025), family planning decision-making (Geleta, 2018; Kapadia-Kundu et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022; Coast et al., 2019), paternal roles and responsibilities (Gebresilase et al., 2025), and gendered participation in employment and leadership (Datiko, 2025; Gupta & Keno, 2025; Ayanaw & Alewond, 2024). Collectively, these studies suggested that the social constructions of femininity and masculinity continues to shape social behavior and gender relations, often positioning men in dominant roles while placing women in subordinate position.

Although existing studies have contributed significantly to understand gender relations in Ethiopia, limited attention has been given to the way gendered socialization is produced and reproduced in the context of blood-feuding. Within these setting, expectations of masculinity may be closely tied to courage, retaliation, and the protection of family honor, while femininity may be associated with restraint, silence and vulnerability. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how oral traditions, symbolic meaning, and everyday social practice shapes, reinforce, and sometimes challenges constructions of masculinity and femininity in communities affected by blood-feuding.

Based on this, the present study used an ethnographic approach to explore the social construction of masculinity and femininity in Tach Armachiho *Woreda* of the Central Gondar Administrative Zone, Amhara Region. It examines how oral literature and symbolic expressions contribute to socialization of genders in relation to participation in practices like blood-feuding. The study also brings the local gender dynamics to the

general anthropological discourse by engaging with the contemporary theoretical debates. In doing so, it emphasizes the interaction among cultural practice, mechanisms of social regulation, and individual agency. The simultaneous emphasis the empirical and theoretical dimension of gendered practices highlights the importance of the ethnographic research within localized contexts for global understanding of gender in other societies.

Literature Review

Anthropological Conception of Masculinity and Femininity

As early anthropology, masculinity and femininity were only seen as natural givens rather than social constructions. These biological differences determined roles in the community. However, in more recent times anthropologists are starting to shift their paradigm and realize that gender, such as masculinity and femininity are socially constructed categories influenced by culture, history, and power dynamics (Hristova, 2024).

According to Ortner (1974), masculinity and femininity are cultural classifications through which a community organizes different roles and hierarchies. She further argues that the community assigned what is to be considered masculine and feminine. Furthermore, Zimmerman (1987) explained masculinity and femininity as result of social interaction, arguing the communities assign men to be brave and women to be mothers. From this perspective, masculinity refers to socially approved behaviors and identities associated with men, while femininity refers to those associated with women; both of which are continuously produced in everyday life.

For Gutmann (1997), masculinity is viewed as a culturally specific institution that refers to ideals and practices associated with manhood. He stresses that there is not a universal "masculinity", multiple masculinities exist, shaped by local cultural norms, economic conditions, and social relations. In the same vein, Nadal (2017) provides a similar definition of femininity as a set of social norms and behaviors that are socially constructed values around women and their symbolic meanings differ across cultures or historical context. Femininity refers to the association of care, morality and emotional labor; an idea that is socially constructed rather than biologically mediated. These anthropological descriptions make it clear that masculinity and femininity are socially and culturally negotiated, learned, performed, and deeply rooted in the cultural context of meanings.

Theoretical Framework

1. Social Constructionism

Social constructivism is defined as the view that the development and content of scientific knowledge are determined by social forces, and emphasizes the socially produced nature of gender categories, particularly masculinity and femininity. It underscores that the role of women and men is not biological; it, rather, is determined by culture and social process (Berger & Luckmann, 1996; Strong, 2010).

This approach emphasizes that gender is continually constructed and deconstructed in particular historical and cultural contexts, thereby making it important to look at the mechanisms whereby societies regulate and naturalize the differences between masculinity and femininity. Social constructivists also argue that social reality is constituted through shared knowledge and language, both of which emerge from the everyday practices and interaction of ordinary people (Berger and Luckmann, 1996; Galbin, 2014). As a form of oral literature, proverbs, chants and sayings are very important tools to form the ideas about masculinity and femininity. These literature forms represent the knowledge acquired and conveyed in the day-to-day social activities. For participants in the study community, this type of expression is important or serves as a cultural artifact that shapes and confirms gendered expectations of conduct – what is considered appropriate and valid for men and women.

In this regard, the study was preoccupied with the embedment of proverbs, chants, naming and sayings in everyday life, which has the effect of defining, reproducing, and sustaining a process of socialization that is passed down intergenerationally and structured around concepts of masculinity and femininity.

2. Social Learning Theory

Based on the social learning theory which is developed by Bandura (2001), people learn behaviors by observing, imitating, and reinforcing. Learning is not only through direct experience, but also from the observation of others and from hearing their words, and the outcomes of their experiences are absorbed. The key elements of this theory are those of modelling which highlight the influential and meaningful nature of exemplars in influencing behaviour. This framework can be especially useful for understanding how norms (such as gender norms) are transmitted and sustained. Social learning theory therefore emphasizes the interaction between people and the environment in the re-creation of cultural norms about masculinity and femininity.

In the Gondar region, boys and girls acquire gender identity by imitating, listening and communicating with parents, neighbors and friends as well. These oral traditions are

a way of transferring gender behaviors to the next generation. In this cultural setting, children are exposed to assertiveness, passivity, and aggression as well as being exposed to a regular socialization process that is a blend of direct teaching and indirect modelling. Social learning is particularly relevant in the construction and perpetuation of gendered identities in these ways. Thus, the Gondar community illustrates the ways in which oral culture and everyday interactions work together to perpetuate and naturalize masculine and feminine roles across generations.

Conceptual Link between Social Constructionism and Social Learning Theories

In this study context, these two theories are connected rather than treated as separate explanations. Social constructionism focuses on the construction of gendered meanings, while social learning theory focuses on the processes by which these meanings are learned and translated into behavior. Social constructionism, therefore, provides insight about the social origin and social meaning of gender norms, and the social learning theory provides some insight into their transmission, acquisition, and their reproduction in the realm of everyday interaction.

The two theories relationship can be conceptualized as a process. The community cultural and social interactions generate shared meanings within the community related with masculinity and femininity. These meanings are expressed and circulated through language and oral traditions. These meanings are experienced by individuals, especially children and young people, in their daily interactions with parents, relatives, peers and others in the community. They learn behaviors which are linked to these culturally created expectations through observation, imitation, direct instruction, and social reinforcement. They can then produce and repeat the same gendered meanings in subsequent interactions.

In order to connect these two theories, the study promotes oral traditions, occupying an important position in the study. First, from a social constructionist viewpoint, proverbs, chants, sayings, naming, insults and idiomatic expressions are culturally-created resources used to create and convey meanings relating to masculinity and femininity. In a social learning context, such oral forms are part of the social environment that people are surrounded by and experience, through which they learn, observe, discuss, practice and are fed back on gendered behaviors. Their repeated use in everyday interaction can consequently contribute to the intergenerational transmission and reproduction of gender norms.

The combined framework is especially helpful in explaining the empirical results of this study, as it enables the analysis to go beyond the narrow assessment of the oral literature as a reflection of the prevailing gender norms. Instead, oral expressions are analyzed as a

continuous social process in which the meanings of gender are negotiated, represented, acquired, performed, sustained and generated. At the same time, people do interpret and react to social expectations; the framework does not mean that everyone in the community is going to necessarily reproduce gender norms in the same way. It affords focus on continuity and variation of the understanding and practice of masculinity and femininity.

Based on this fact, the study considers the reproduction of gendered roles in the Gondar community as the results of the interaction between socially constructed meanings and social learning processes. Oral traditions offer culturally significant representations of genders, and every day socialization offers mechanisms for learning and engaging in social behavior with these representations. These processes can help to account for the transmission and transfer of specific discourses of gender difference over time and in daily life.

Materials and Methods

Description of the study area

Tach Armachiho is one of woredas in the Central Gondar Zone, Amhara Region; it is located in the Northwestern part of Ethiopia. This woreda has more than 25 kebeles and it is bordered on the north by Tegede woreda, on the south by Lay Armachiho woreda, and Chilga woreda. Geographically, the Tach Armachiho woreda is located between 12˚ 59'N latitudes and 37˚ 17'E longitude.

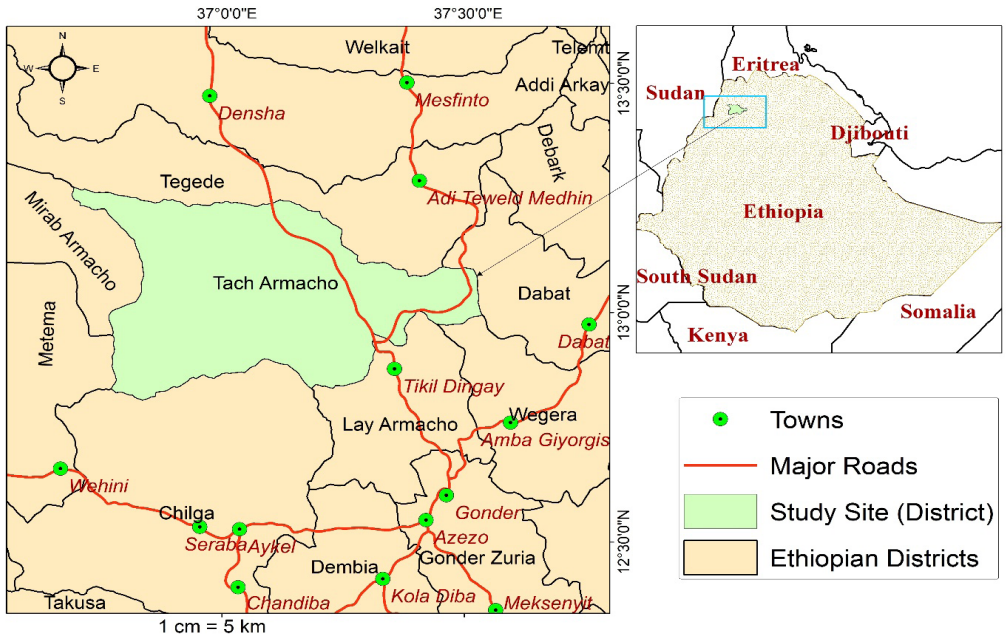

Figure 1: Map of the study area

Furthermore, according to the 2007 national census, the total population is around 89,115, and among them 45,874 (52%) are male and 43,241 (48%) are female. Similarly, majority of this population lives in rural area and approximately 12,258 or (13.8%) are urban dwellers. Most of the residents are Amhara ethic and there are also other ethnic groups. Majority of the people were Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, with 97.8% declaring it as their religion, the remaining 1.4% Muslim.

The strongest presence of Amhara cultural traditions plays a significance role in shaping the region's social organization and everyday practices. These cultural and linguistic characteristics make the area very relevant for studying and examining sociocultural practice, particularly blood-feuding. The geographical, religious and economic diversity of the district makes the area highly significant for this scholarly inquiry. Its varied topography, ranging from highland plateaus to lowland plains, shapes both the livelihood strategy of local communities and the accessibility of resources.

Tach Armachiho was purposefully selected for this research because blood-feuding represents one of the most salient form interpersonal and inter-family conflicts in the region (Anteneh et al., 2021). A previous study has revealed that blood-feuding, retaliatory killing and blood-feuding related conflict still exist among the people of Central Gondar zone and especially in Tach Armachiho, where traditional custom and norms of honor, kinship obligation, traditional justice, continue to shape the mode of conflict resolution (Alamineh et al., 2023). In light of this, the district offers a suitable context for exploring the dynamics of blood-feuding (Anteneh et al., 2021). The continuity of blood-feudings in Tach Armachiho provides an important backdrop to exploring the nature and effects of blood-feuding in the Central Gondar Zone.

Research Approach

The researchers adopted a qualitative research approach as it helped to gain a deep understanding of phenomena or social issues through exploring participants' experiences, behaviors, and perspectives in a specific context (Yin, 2011). In qualitative research, knowledge is understood not as objective or experimentally verified, but as subjective and socially constructed by human actors (Creswell, 2003; Bryman, 2016). This approach has provided rich descriptions and explanations of processes within identifiable local contexts, enabling to understand the constructions of masculinity and femininity.

Research Design

Ethnographic research design was adopted to explore how societal norms, including gender roles, are transmitted and sustained, as individuals continuously observe, imitate, and adapt behaviors that are socially rewarded or sanctioned. Ethnography typically

requires the researcher to participate in people's everyday lives either overtly or covertly over an extended period of time (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Within this tradition, anthropologists employ ethnographic method to observe behaviors, listens to what people say, conduct informal and formal interviews, and collects relevant documents, thereby assembling diverse forms of data that can shed light on the emerging focus of inquiry (Reilly, 2012).

Participants and Sampling Techniques

Participants were selected using non-probability purposive sampling to represent individuals with knowledge and experience gained from contact with the phenomenon and topographic factors including, age, gender, social status such as caste or religion (if applicable), willingness to participate in the study and accessibility of each participant (Patton 2002). To complement this, snowball sampling was employed to access individuals with sensitive and less visible gender related and blood feuding experiences through trusted local networks. We decided to stop recruitment at the point of saturation (Charmaz, 2006), when no new themes or insights emerged, ensuring the richness and depth of the collected data.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interview constituted one of the primary data collection techniques employed in this study to elicit pertinent information regarding perspectives, attitudes, perceptions, and insights into the social construction of femininity and masculinity. A total of nine individuals were interviewed, including four female community members, who were identified as possessing expert knowledge and experience on the subject, as well as holding significant social positions within the community.

Focus group discussions were conducted with twenty-four carefully selected community members, organized into three groups of eight participants each. The sessions were particularly valuable for examining group dynamics and capturing collective perspectives, challenge assumptions and articulate shared views that could not have been generated through other data collection methods (Denscombe, 2003).

Participant observation was employed throughout the fieldwork time to develop a holistic understanding of the tradition and everyday practices of the study community in relation to the construction of masculinity and femininity. The researchers participated in community activities such as congregations, conflict resolution sessions, and closely observed the differential treatment of girls and boys, as well as the way in which gender perspectives were inculcated through their child-rearing practices, chants, stories, and even insults. Furthermore, this method of data collection was valuable in revealing the implicit or hidden and embodied dimensions of gender socialization, which often remain

inaccessible through interviews alone. In this study, participant observation enabled the researchers to identify discrepancies between what interviewees claimed and their actual everyday practices, as well as to uncover aspects of social life that people were unable or unwilling to articulate explicitly (Kawulich, 2005).

To sum up, this method supports to gain a deep, insider perspective of the communities, culture, behavior, and value by actively living or engaged within their natural environment.

Data Analysis

In this study, the researchers used local vernacular to collect data and transcribe informants' verbal accounts and oral literature such as proverbs, chants, sayings, naming and insults, which were subsequently translated into English. To maintain cultural nuance, oral literature are analyzed and presented through phonetic transcription. The data were then analyzed using Seven-Steps Approach within the thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These are transcription of the interview materials, thorough and recurrent reading of the transcription, identifying significant statements, coding, categorizing codes into themes, interpretation, and develop an overall description.

Themes and concepts of each interview and FGD were manually extracted. To ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings, a control and monitoring procedures was employed whereby the results were presented to selected participants for verification, and their feedback was used to confirm and approve the interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

For the sake of confidentiality and privacy, researchers excluded name and other identifying information when presenting informants' perspectives. Participants were guaranteed that the data would be used solely for the purpose of this study, thereby safeguarding them from potential physical and psychological harms. Since most of the participants were illiterate, verbal informed consent was obtained, and they were explicitly informed from the outset of their right to withdraw from the study at any time should they feel mistreated or uncomfortable. The measures align with internationally recognized codes of ethics like the Helsinki Declaration and the American Anthropological Association's Code of Ethics.

Result and Discussion

Local Perceptions of Masculinity

Anthropologists study local perspectives and community perception to explore and uncover the insider view of the subjects of the study (Shiya, 2023). In this study, the research informant's perceived masculinity as manifestation of courage, heroism and bravery. In

support of this, an interviewee from Tach Armachiho shared his perspective: “For us, masculinity means not fearing anything, especially when war comes. We believe that death is already written, so we must face it without fear.” This kind of perspective shows how the community associates masculinity with facing challenges, and participating in risky activities. Furthermore, men are believed to have the strength to withstand pain and challenges in times of conflict or war as compared to their women counterparts. FGD participants also acknowledged that death is inevitable; therefore, men should not fear anything, including death. This attitude rooted in a pre-deterministic view of death.

Likewise, an interview data below revealed that men are often expected to confront adversity decisively and without hesitation.

> *To be a man, you must face life’s challenges. Men should not fear war, death, migration and hunger; men expected to endure through all these challenges. If you persist or withstand them, the community gives your place as a man. In our community, masculinity is associated with being a leader, a fighter, and a protector of his family, wife, community in testing times. To become men and maintain masculinity, boys and young men must endure and persist with life challenges.*

The quote reflects that how masculinity is maintained during times of challenge and it should be enduring hardship, physical tests, withstanding pain, and confronting danger to meet the expected attributes of manhood. Similarly, the men try to illustrate what the community perceptions about masculinity and how they associate it with strength, resilience, and the ability to prevail, and protector of the family. A proverb “A man is made by the scars he bears” highlights the belief that enduring hardship proves manhood (Mieder, 1994).

The underlying message of this proverb lies in the community’s articulation of masculinity and its deliberate efforts to transmit this definition to the succeeding generations, thereby safeguarding both collective identity and the notion of ‘true’ manhood. Such proverbs function as key instruments of socialization, shaping children’s understanding of masculine character and exemplifying the intergenerational transmission of values.

In doing so, proverbs also illustrate how it reinforces communal norms and ensures the continuity of cultural ideals across time. In addition to the above, the following shows how proverbs and poems serving as instruments for socializing children into masculine character. These cultural expressions summarize local perceptions of masculinity in the Gondar area, highlighting both the transmission of values across generations and the preservation of community identity.

wənd lɨdʒ təblo kaladərə dədʒɨ mɨnun wənd ɨnbəl:əw set ɨnbəl:əw ɨndʒɨ	If a man does not spend nights out, how can he be regarded as a man but a woman!
ˎwənd lɨdʒ gəddaj nəw lɨk ɨndəajjatotʃtʃu bəs'əbaj kalhonə lət'əb ajmətʃtʃu	A man is a slayer, just like his forefathers, They should be shunned away for their quarrels, but treated respectfully!
ɨrə mɨnu dʒɨl nəw ɨrə mɨnu dʒɨl nəw sɨsədbut zɨm jalə bɨmətutɨm jaw nəw	Oh, surely he is a simpleton, Oh, surely he is a fool. When insulted, if he remains silent, Surely when beaten, he would react the same.

The construction of masculinity represents a fundamental aspect of male identity, demonstrating how men understand themselves, perceives their social roles and engaged in behavior within their cultural and social context. Within the community, masculinity is regarded as a vital tool for safeguarding and upholding family dignity and honor, serving as one of the principal means of male survival. In the local constructions of masculinity, dignity and honor are equated with the assurance of secure living with one's social environment. If someone feels their dignity and honor has been hurt, they react quickly and make big efforts to restore it. Likewise, when a man is considered "disgraced" – that is, lost his honor and dignity in the eyes of his culture – he must seek vindication from the aggressor to restore his manhood and social position.

In the study community, dignity and honor are conferred upon men in accordance with the social roles and responsibilities they are expected to fulfill, while those who fail to meet these expectations are often regarded as weak and feminized. Oral literature, such as proverbs, poem, sayings and chants function as a cultural tool for affirming and rewarding 'true' manhood, thereby maintaining honor and dignity (Connell, 1995). The following proverbs illustrate how masculinity is perceived in relation to honor and dignity, underscoring the central importance attached to their preservation.

bəsəwotʃtʃˀkɨbɨr laj ɨntʃˀət bɨsədubbət	If you trample upon the honor of others,
bəraswo raswo motɨn fərədubbət	You have decreed death upon yourself.

Local Perceptions of Femininity

In the local community's process of childhood socialization, children are assigned sex-typed roles that shape their identities from an early age. Females are constructed as inherently weak, with deliberate efforts made to mold them into culturally defined feminine identities. Daughters, for instance, are socialized to embody 'femininity', characterized by weakness, dependency, shyness, and obedience, in preparation for their expected adult roles. This finding is consistent

with Emirie (2005), who argues that the cultural construction of feminism is closely associated with weakness and passivity. The community's perceptions of women are fundamentally linked to notion of both mental and physical weaknesses. The socialization process reinforces these constructions by encouraging females to embody roles such as the nurturing mother, the caring daughter, and the obedient wife, thereby shaping their identities in accordance with culturally sanctioned expectations.

Participants in the focus group discussions explained that femininity is often associated with softness, reinforcing the perception that women are inherently weaker than men. At the broader community level, females are often characterized as overly emotional or passive. To substantiate these views, participants shared locally dominant sayings that portray women as prone to crying and submissiveness rather than strength or resilience.

ɨndəset taləksalləh ɨnde	So you weep like a woman!?
ɨndəset təmətəh tɨgəballəh ɨnde	How do you return home like a woman beaten without retaliating?
set jɨməsɨl tɨfəralləh	How could you be scared as a woman?

Conversely, the community's perceptions of women position them as weak, with their opinions and perspectives frequently marginalized and undervalued. Men are expected to have the final say in household and community matters, reinforcing traditional gender roles and sustaining power imbalances (Tebeje, 2004). In this regard, an interviewee from the gender office of the woreda shared his view as:

> *The community knows how women are supposed to engage in household chores such as cooking for family members, cleaning the house, gathering firewood, making coffee, and caring for children and husbands. On the other hand, although men are primarily involved in field or farming works including plowing, harvesting, and selling produce, women also actively participate in the same agricultural activities. However, unlike the men who receive the respect, honor, dignity, despite sharing responsibilities, women are deprived of these rights. Moreover, women are confined more to indoor works than outdoor tasks because they are supposed to be submissive and remain under their husband's authority. The head of the household is always supposed to be a man.*

Similarly, proverbs, chants, sayings and poems are important ideological tools in shaping women as the weakest and most undervalued members of the community, echoing the perception that women cannot engage in both domestic and public decision making. The notion of femaleness is frequently linked to the lack of ability to reach goals or to accept collective duties in the community. This attitude is reflected in the local saying that

"females and hens shouldn't be outside at night". The proverb hints hens are prone to danger of wild cats, as women to bad men, and the way women are seen in the community, and that their weakness means that they should be protected and controlled by men.
Focus group discussants affirmed that community perceptions often undermine and devalue women, portraying them as powerless and subordinate. Women's primary roles are narrowly defined as those of wife, housemaid, and service provider, reducing their worth to these functions alone. The following Amharic proverbs reflect these community attitudes, reflecting how woman's responsibilities are closely tied to domestic labor and their subservient position within the household.

kəbɨt wədə bərət set wədə madʒət	Cattle belong in the stable and women to the kitchen.

On the other hand, the community also recognizes women as wise advisors and sources of support for their children and husbands in times of difficulty. Women are often described as possessing emotional strength and wisdom, qualities that enable them to guide their husbands and seek solutions, thereby affirming their role within the household. This view is cemented by a local blessing: "May you be granted the strength of an ant, and the wisdom of a woman!"

Moreover, women are even involved in practices of blood-feuding, particularly when they have lost their loved ones. As an elderly woman explained:

> *Women not only possess the talent to inspire and encourage their husbands, siblings, relatives* [including cousins and other male close relatives] *to avenge, but they may also directly participate in acts of revenge, such as killing the murderer of a deceased family member when no male relative is present. Similarly, they may attack their enemies with the assistance of a concubine or secret partner and even assume the role of seducer, using attraction as a strategy to draw foe. Women are regarded as wise and resourceful, employing multiple tactics to exact revenge.*

The following proverbs depict how women are perceived as provoking men to retaliate against the murderer of a family member, thereby framing women as instigators of vengeance within the community's cultural imagination.

jəgobəz ɨnnat tastawɨkallətʃtʃ	Distinguished is the mother of the brave;
afaf laj huna bələw tɨlalətʃtʃ	From the ridge she stands, urge him on to strike the enemy.
set jəlakəw dʒɨb ajfəram	A man sent forth by a woman fears nothing, not even the hyena!
ajzoh ajzoh bɨla fətɨfta bɨtɨsət'əw	She stirred his courage and fed him with strength;
bət'əlat'u k'ut'ɨr t'ɨjitun awat'əw	He poured bullets into the month of his foe.

kəawdɨmaw məhal jətəŋŋawɨn bərɛ	Alas, she nudged the ox, sleeping upon the threshing floor
gosgusa gosgusa arəgətʃtʃɨw awrɛ	awoke, and transformed him into a beast of fury.

On the one hand, there are negative perceptions of women as part of the community; women are stripped of their humanity and turned into objects that serve men; their worth is limited to their domestic and subservient functions. Women are stereotyped as weak, dependent and powerless to exercise authority or make decisions. They, on the other hand, are recognized as wise advisors, instigators and motivators as noted above. Such differences in perceptions speak to the complicated and mixed messages about femininity.

Oral Traditions as Cultural Scripts of Manhood

In the study area, honor and dignity dominantly emerge as defining attributes of masculinity. Evidence from interviews and FGDs indicates that masculine identity is closely associated with **bravery and courage, particularly in the defense of personal and familial honor.** The community places immense value on esteem, interpreting insults, physical assaults, or public boasting as direct threats to a man's dignity. Within this cultural framework, the loss of honor is regarded as intolerable and often prompts acts of **revenge**, which are understood as essential mechanisms for restoring reputation and reaffirming social standing.

In a similar vein, an elderly informant emphasized the preservation of dignity and honor constitutes an indispensible attribute of masculinity. He further remarked:

> *Within the community of Armachiho, dignity and honor are deeply cherished values, vividly articulated through our language and idioms such as kɨbɨr (honor), t'ɨk'at mət'ɨlat (abhorrence of defeat), and ələməddəfər (untouchability). To be regarded as dishonored is considered one of the worst misfortunate that can befall an individual. The paramount importance of honor is reflected in the belief that, under certain circumstances, even acts of killing may be deemed both acceptable and necessary to restore family status and personal pride. Protecting one's family, particularly women including one's wife, and safeguarding property are closely bound to the notion of honor. A man who fails to defend his family and possessions is stripped of respect, with the prevailing view that 'anyone is free to take what he wants, his belongings and his land.' Therefore, the loss of dignity and honor is the key motivation for blood-feuding. In Armachiho, loss of honor might lead people to not only claim life, but give it as well, in order to restore their honor and social status.*

The above account highlights that the people of Armachiho are prepared to undertake any measure, including acts of killing, to restore and preserve honor and dignity. From an early age, children are socialized through chants, sayings, proverbs, and poems that instill

a sense of responsibility and transmit these values to the succeeding generations. Within this cultural framework, men are perceived as fulfilling a "watchdog" role, entrusted with protecting the family such as wives, children, siblings and mothers alike. In addition, men are expected to protect both material and nonmaterial possessions from potential threats within the community. This perception of men as guardians of honor establishes strong societal expectations, compelling them to defend not only their loved ones but also their reputation and social standing.

According to FGD participants, every male – once he reached the age of twelve – is expected to protect his family from any harm. Should his family be exposed to trouble, he is culturally obliged to seek revenge against the enemy. Men prepare themselves through various preconditions to fulfill this role of the protector. One criterion described by the discussants is that men, together with their companions, are expected to carry firearms and spend nights outdoors to ensure the security of their family and property.

In this context, the following proverbs are used by the community to articulate the relationship between masculinity and the idea of heroism and superman strengths.

wənd lidʒ təmatito indʒ təmətito ajmət'am	A boy must return threshing his adversary, not threshed!
aj dʒəgina gədlo mət't'a	What a hero! He returned slaying his foe!
dʒəgina	Valiant!
gəddaj t'əlat indəbəlaj	Slayer of foes; defeater of enemies!

The second method employed by the community in socializing their children into masculinity and femininity is through naming. The socialization process underlines the role and responsibilities of family members to shape gendered identities (Agyekum, 2006). Naming helps to socialize children to internalize the community culture. In particular, the names chosen by the parents often shows the different cultural element and traits such as strength, resilience, and endurance (Aldrin, 2025), thereby reinforcing the community's ideals of masculinity and femininity.

For instance, in the study area, several names reflect bravery, heroisms and warriorship, which are associated with honor and dignity. Therefore, naming functions as a powerful tools and mechanisms of early socialization, guiding and direct the children in how they are expected to behave, think, and fulfill their roles, especially those related to protecting the family and upholding its honor. Young people are expected to act in conformity with the meanings of their names; otherwise, they risk ridicule from peers, traditional musicians (*azmaris*), and the wider community. The following list illustrates some names commonly given to men in the community; each of which reflects and reinforces the cultural ideals of masculinity.

dəm məllaʃ	Avenger
manjazəwal	Under nobody's command
mandəfiroh	Untouchable – no one dares you
hajlu	His power
ʃifərraw	Feared by thousands
wəndjifiraw	Let men submit to him
dʒəgine	Brave one
wəndiwəsən	The ultimate boundary of man
tat'ək'	Arm yourself
atʃtʃam jəlləh	Unmatched by anyone/without equal
təfəri	Feared
bəlatʃtʃəw	Strike them down
məkkit	Defend
dəmsatʃtʃəw	Annihilate them

In general, names, as proverbs, chants and other cultural expressions, cumulatively elucidate the complex processes of masculine socialization and the ways in which young men are prepared to safeguard the honor and dignity of their families. These cultural mechanisms are established in advance, partly as a response to the pervasive fear of attack and defeat, and partly as a means of instilling bravery and courage to ensure future readiness. Within this framework, the community frequently articulates the belief that "an angel bestows the name", a sentiment echoed repeatedly by participants in the focus group discussions, which signifies that the person is destined to shoulder the burdens and confront the challenges facing his family particularly in the context of blood-feuding. This conviction underscores the sacred and symbolic weight attached to naming, situating it not merely as a personal identifier but as a cultural mandate that binds individuals to ideals of protection, valor, and honor.

Discussion

This study examined how masculinity is predominantly constructed through the ideals of bravery, vengeance, courage, honor, the protection of family members, and a readiness to participate in blood-feuding in the context of the study area. In particular, informants consistently described men as guardians of family dignity and honor, and are expected to defend own kin group, possessions, and reputation against any form of attack and threat. Contrarily, failure to fulfill these responsibilities often results in social exclusion, loss of respect, and questioning of one's manhood.

The finding of this study reveals that blood-feuding is culturally acceptable and available as a way to restore honor and reaffirm masculinity aligns with the finding of Belay (2015). Belay (2015) frames masculinity as a rigid archetype of invincibility, wherein manhood is

perpetually proven through non-negotiable acts: the categorical rejection of submission, the compulsory pursuit of retribution for perceived slight, and the silent, unflinching absorption of pain as a public testament to inner fortitude. Similarly, he argued that masculinity is a socially earned status, proven through courage, aggression and family honor defense – failure to retaliate invites public humiliation, physical assault, and the damning label of coward, given that honor it at apex of cultural value.

The present study is also similar to Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity, which argues that societies construct culturally dominant ideals of manhood that legitimize male authority and prescribe particular forms of behavior. Similarly, in the present study, masculinity is more closely associated to bravery, fearlessness, and a willingness to defend family honor. Men who want to get social recognition and respect, he should be courageous, fearless and not cowardly, whereas those who fail to do so risk marginalization. Masculinity, therefore, functions not merely as a gender identity but as a socially recognized status that must be continually enacted, demonstrated, and defended.

Furthermore, the findings align with Levine's (1965) analysis of Ethiopian cultural values, which identified honor, reputation, and personal dignity as central components of social life and one characteristic of masculinity. In many Ethiopian communities, public respect and social recognition are highly valued, and individuals are expected to defend their reputation against any challenge. The present study extends this understanding by showing that in the blood-feuding communities of Central Gondar, particularly Tach Armachiho, masculine honor is deeply intertwined with the practice of blood-feuding. Acts of retaliation and revenge are culturally interpreted as necessary responses to restore compromised dignity, safeguard family prestige, and reaffirm social standing.

From a social constructionist theoretical perspective, the findings suggest that masculinity is neither natural nor immutable but is instead continually produced and reproduced through social interaction and culturally embedded meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1996). Members of the study community continuously construct masculine identity through everyday discourse, proverbs, songs, and social sanctions that valorize bravery while condemning perceived weakness. Overall, the findings reveal that masculinity in Central Gondar is deeply embedded within a cultural system that values honor, courage, and protection. While these ideals provide men with social recognition and status, they also create strong pressures to participate in vengeance and violent conflict when family dignity is perceived to be compromised. As such, gender constructions play a pivotal role in perpetuating blood-feuding practices, ensuring their continuation across generations.

On the other hand, the present study reveals that femininity in the study area is predominantly constructed through notions of weakness, dependence, obedience, emotionality, and domestic responsibility. Women are generally expected to focus on household activities, childcare, and family well-being, while authority, leadership, and protection are primarily assigned to men. The oral literature and everyday discourse

frequently portray women as less capable of decision making and public leadership, reinforcing their subordinate social position. Similarly, Belay's (2015) study aligns with the present one, noting that Amhara girls are socialized to embody submissiveness and family-oriented, whereas boys are encouraged to cultivate bravery and assertiveness.

Furthermore, Ortner (1974), Rosaldo (1974) and Rubin (1975) support these findings, noting that in many societies women are symbolically associated with nature, reproduction, and domestic life, while men are linked to culture, authority, and public activities. The perceptions documented in the present study reflect parallel processes whereby femininity is constructed in ways that curtail women's authority and reinforce male dominance.

Another important finding of the study is that oral literature, such as proverbs, chants, songs, stories, and insults serves as a powerful medium for transmitting gender norms and roles across generations. Oral traditions like praise expressions and naming practices collectively function as cultural instruments through which children internalize and learn the socially expected behaviors of men and women. Through repeated exposure to these oral traditions, boys are encouraged to become brave, strong, and protective, while girls are taught to be obedient, respectful, and domestically oriented. As a result, oral traditions play a central role in reproducing culturally valued forms of masculinity and femininity. This finding is strongly aligns with Belay's (2015) argument that the same verbal arts, are vital instruments through which Amhara communities construct and maintain gender identities. The striking similarities between the proverbs and names documented in Belay's study and those found in the present research suggest the continuity of these gendered cultural values throughout Amhara society.

The findings also align with Bandura's (2001) social learning theory and Berger and Luckmann's (1996) social constructionist framework, both of which emphasizes that individuals acquire behaviors through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Children exposed to proverbs, chants, and stories repeatedly observe culturally approved gender roles and internalize these expectations over time. Praise for bravery and ridicule of weakness encourage boys to adopt masculine behaviors, while similar mechanisms guide girls toward culturally accepted feminine roles.

To sum up, the findings highlight the intricate dynamics of gender relations within these blood-feuding communities. They reveal how oral traditions and narratives socialize women as weak and dependent, while men are valorized as courageous actors who actively engage in blood-feuds to safeguard family honor. Yet, women are not merely passive subjects of these constraints; rather, they simultaneously navigate gendered limitations while exercising agency within the cultural framework of blood-feuding.

Conclusion

The study tries to show that gender is not a natural or biologically determined characteristic; rather, it is socially and culturally constructed phenomenon that is continuously produced and reproduced through everyday practices, social interactions and oral traditions. These oral traditions such as proverbs, chants, songs, stories, insults, praise expressions, and naming practices serve as powerful cultural instruments through which communities define appropriate masculine and feminine identities and transmit these expectations across generations.

The study found that masculinity is mostly framed in terms of bravery, courage, vengeance, protection of the family members and willingness to engage in blood-feud to restore the dignity of the family. Men who conform to these cultural expectations receive social recognition and respect, whereas those who fail to defend family honor are often subjected to ridicule, social exclusion, and challenges to their manhood. Femininity, on the other hand, is strongly connected to the qualities of obedience, domestic responsibility, dependence and emotionality, which indicate gender norms that assign subordinated roles to women in the household and at large in society. However, the results also show that women are not simply victims of such cultural expectations. Instead, they are active agents in the existing culture, promoting and discouraging revenge, keeping family history alive, and engaging in social practices that shape and uphold gender identities.

On the broad level, this study helps the anthropological comprehension of gender by showing the role of oral literature as a potent cultural tool in the shaping, stabilizing and validation of gender identities in the context of blood-feudings. It also offers empirical data concerning the close connection between gender construction, oral traditions and the continuation of blood-feuding practices in the Amhara region. The study also promotes alternate stories of honor, courage and social responsibility that do not condone violence and honor the cultural tradition of the community.

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