

Gender Bias in the Academia: Experiences of Female Faculty in Public Universities in Ethiopia

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Abstract

The education sector policy of Ethiopia, recognizing the very low proportion of females in faculty positions in the academia (12% in 2015), advocates for increasing access for females to join faculty positions in Higher Educational institutions (HEIs). However, there is little analysis and documentation on the opportunities and challenges that female faculty face once they join the academia and less is known about the dimensions of gender equality concerns of female faculty members in HEIs in the country. With the objective of analyzing the experiences of female faculty in the academia, thereby exposing their challenges and experiences in selected public universities of Ethiopia, the paper employs qualitative methods to understand how female faculty construct meanings out of their experiences of being a female faculty in Ethiopia's HEIs. A total of sixteen in-depth interviews were held with female faculty from selected six universities complemented with one focus group discussion. The findings reveal that the challenges of female faculties emanate from complex gender relations that shape societal views and expectations about the proper role and place of women and men in society. Such widely held societal views and practices are, by and large, woven into the fabric of HEIs pretty much unaltered and unmodified. Governing policies in the education sector, particularly on higher education, the institutional culture as well as practices and even personal dispositions of people in leadership deeply reflect this skewed nature of gender relations which often disadvantage women. While the policy framework advocates increasing access to females, there is an urgent need to focus not only on access but also on creating conditions for female faculty to thrive once within the system of HEIs.

Key terms: gender bias, academia, experiences of female faculty, public universities, Ethiopia

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1. Introduction

In Ethiopia, the proportion of female faculty in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), particularly in public universities, is very low. It stood at a dismal 12% of the total faculty positions in the country in 2015/16 (MoE 2016). The policies in the sector recognize the extremely low proportion of females in faculty positions as a major challenge.

Currently, there is a big effort to recruit more and more female faculty into the higher education sector. The statistics through the years in absolute number of female faculty in the academia confirms this trend (MoE 2016). This move is positive in so many ways. It opens up opportunities for female graduates to become faculty at higher education level, which has proved difficult over the years. It expands the potential employment base or opportunity for female graduates. It opens up the avenue for women to pursue higher levels of education and specialization in their respective fields and this, in turn, increases the earning potential of women. It increases the role and contribution of women in different sectors of the economy. It also creates the space for the creation of role models for female students to pursue different fields of studies and succeed in life. All of these benefits contribute tremendously to the economic development of the country by unleashing the potential of one half of the population, women.

Although the recruitment of female faculty is an important first step, the multitude of advantages, such as diversity, in knowledge sources and equitable representation that accrue from the large presence of female faculty in HEIs cannot be ensured through merely facilitating access or entry. The necessary conditions for female faculty to thrive in academic environment should also be catered for. Female faculties face quite a number of challenges to succeed in their academic career. Many of these challenges are rooted in the institutional set up or structure and history of the higher education system in the country, which, in turn, is a reflection of the broader gender relations in society.

What are the experiences of female faculty in the academia? How are the different dimensions of gender equality concerns of female faculty members in HEIs of the country, particularly in public universities,

manifested? To what extent do the policy instruments articulate these dimensions and provide strategies to address the challenges of female faculty to ensure their career advancement in the academia?

The objective of the paper was to analyze the experiences of female faculty in the academia, thereby exposing the different dimensions of gender equality concerns, particularly during the earlier stages of their career in selected public universities of Ethiopia. Specifically, the study aims at examining the different facets of academic life with a bearing on career advancement within the academia. Challenges considered in this study consist of personal, career-related, social, and economic as well as institutional (structural or systems related).

The research, as well as the writing of this paper, used feminist theories as the guiding lens. Despite their differences, feminist theories share in studying and describing as well as critiquing patriarchy which adversely affects women's lives through the unequal gender relations in society. Feminist theories also share in highlighting how mainstream theories and knowledge on human relations tend to ignore the lived experiences of women from the mainstream narrative. These points – the adverse impact of unequal gender relations on the lives of women and the exclusion of the lived experiences of women from mainstream theories that inform knowledge – constitute the feminist theoretical frameworks that serve as anchors for this paper (Monro 2010).

That there are by far fewer female faculty members in HEIs compared to men appears to be a shared problem in both developed and developing countries, though the problem is much more acute in the latter. In a study of universities in Seven African countries, women constitute a small fraction of academic staff in higher academic ranks and the rate of growth in the proportion of female faculty stays at single digits while that of men is in double digits (Tettety 2010).

Female faculty members face various challenges to get into and thrive in the academia. The challenges consist of stereotypical societal views and attitudes on women, the work-life balance, socialization and gender roles

and manifest forms of gender-based discrimination (Morely 2005; Rathgeber 2003; Adusah-Karikari 2008).

The work-life balance dilemma emanates from an academia built on a male model and on men's normative paths (Samble 2008). Academic systems fail to recognize the additional domestic responsibilities of women at home, the tension between the tenure clock and the biological clock, which, sometimes, forces women to abandon one for the other, and the lack of supportive home environment that enables women to thrive in the academia (Beddoes et al. 2012).

Long held stereotypical views and attitudes often lead to women's capabilities to be under-recognized (Idahosa 2014). Female faculty, despite their qualifications, are not appointed to higher positions but rather are often assigned to routine responsibilities without authority such as committee work (UCSW 2014). They are denied collaborative opportunities with men and their research proposals and ideas are often not taken seriously (Edwards et al. 2011).

Women faculty are often excluded from informal networks of faculty, which are usually the sources of collaborative engagement, valuable information and scarce resources (Beddoes et al. 2012). Expectations around gender roles often are seen punishing assertive women who refuse to conform to their traditional roles while women thought to be passive are left behind in the ever demanding and competitive academic environment (UCSW 2014).

The division among women in the academia based on age, qualification, position, social activities and even philosophical orientation is another source of barrier for women faculty particularly junior women in the academia (Idahosa 2014). Women faculties are seen silencing other women faculty members instead of providing supportive environment such as mentoring. Women in senior positions use their power to ensure the development of their own careers while marginalizing other women (Idahosa 2014).

The literature on the situation of Ethiopian women in the academia is scant. According to a recent assessment focusing on 13 new public universities in Ethiopia, there is little analysis and documentation on the opportunities and challenges faced by female faculty in Ethiopia (Eerdewijk 2014). This study documents that in these universities 11% of academic staff holding first degree are female, and, of both PhD and masters degree holders, 7% are female. In terms of female representation across colleges and faculties, of the 13 universities, the highest level of female representation was in Health and Medicine (about 90 female Master's degree holders) while the lowest level of representation was observed in Engineering and Technology.¹ The study shows that similar proportions of female faculty are on study leave as those that are currently on duty, and concludes that, taking staff training as an indicator of future trend in composition of female and male faculty, it is likely that the proportion of female faculty will not increase from its current level. (Eerdewijk 2014).

The study by Eerdewijk (2014) provides important insights into the day to day challenges of female faculty members. The negative misconceptions on women's capacity which adversely affect their opportunities; misconceptions and faulty implementation of affirmative measures which create antagonism among male colleagues; the pressure on time use and work burden arising from the work-family (life) balance; lack of or limited number of women in leadership positions and, associated with this, the lack of role models; as well as harassment and insecurity both within campus and surrounding communities, including during commuting, were identified as major challenges faced by female faculty members (Eerdewijk 2014).

Further, female faculty also identified challenges in writing, research and publishing due to various factors like inadequate access to resources, the internet, time constraint and weak logistic support, such as transport services for research purposes (Eerdewijk 2014). This problem is further compounded by the limited networking opportunities, as most networks are informal and dominated by men, leading to limited access to information (Eerdewijk 2014).

Regarding female faculty retention in Haromaya University, in 2013/14, Hundera (2014) concluded that the intention to leave their teaching position was higher among female staff due, in part, to role conflict and low levels of job satisfaction.

The Annual Educational Abstract from the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2014a) (the data from the time that the bulk of the research for this paper was conducted) provides a comprehensive picture of the statistics on female and male faculty in Ethiopian higher educational institutions. The data provides the picture for both government and non-governmental higher educational institutions for the five years' period, 2009/10–2013/14) (Table 1).

Table 1. Ethiopian female faculty (%) in government and non-government HEIs

Year	Government		Non-government		Total (%)	
	Total	(%)Female	Total	(%)Female	Total	Female
2002 EC (2009/10)	13,176	11.12	1553	12.04	14,729	11.22
2003 EC (2010/11)	15,255	8.43	1493	13.06	16,748	8.25
2004 EC (2011/12)	17,990	9.07	2082	10.76	20,072	9.24
2005 EC (2012/13)	20,051	9.53	1970	18.93	22,021	10.37
2006 EC (2013/14)	20,389	10.88	2015	19.30	22,404	11.64
Five-year average	17,372	9.81	1,822	14.8	19,195	10.14
SD	2779	1.04	247.8	3.59	3000	125.3
CV	16%	10.6%	13.6%	24.26%	15.6%	12.4%

Source: Based on Annual Educational Abstract 2013/14, Ministry of Education.

SD, Standard deviation; CV, Coefficient of variation.

In the five-year period between 2002 EC and 2006 EC, statistical data from MoE (2014a) showed that female faculty constituted only an average of 9.8% of faculty in government HEIs, and there was no significant variation (CV, 10.6%) in percentage of female faculty through the years. Female faculty members in non-government HEIs were represented at a relatively higher percentage (14.8%) with no significant variation within the years (CV, 3.6). The total average percentage for female faculty in both types of HEIs was around 10% with some variation through the years (CV, 12%). This clearly indicated that there was no significant increase in number of female faculty in HEI during that duration.

One can observe that in both ESDPs (Education Sector Development Programs) III and IV, where a target of increasing the proportion of female faculty has been set at 26% and 20%, respectively, the results at the end of the programs show dismal performance. This raises a serious question on the merit of the strategies adopted in the programs towards achieving the set targets of increasing the proportion of female academics. It is worthwhile to note to what extent existing policy frameworks articulate the challenges of female faculty in HEIs in the country and whether there are targeted strategies that respond to the different challenges.

The Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (MoE 1994) emphasises the need for women's equal participation in the teaching profession. This is reiterated in subsequent policy documents such as the Education Sector Development Program (ESDPs) (MoE 2010) and the Gender Strategy for the Education and Training Sector (MoE 2014b), among others. The very low level of representation of female academics in HEIs is recognized as one of the challenges of the education sector within ESDP III, IV and V. The policy is indeed loud in pointing out the deficiency in numbers, but not so much strong in terms of articulating the reasons behind and providing targeted strategies for addressing the challenge.

Two reasons forwarded in ESDP IV for the low level of representation of female academics were the low level of female participation at undergraduate and postgraduate study, consequently undermining the potential pool, and low postgraduate admission constraining availability of local staff for recruitment. Limitation in the available pool hinders increased recruitment of female faculty into higher education teaching posts.

Although expanding the available pool is a commendable and necessary step, it is, by no means, sufficient. Increase in absolute numbers may be achieved, but this, by itself, does not guarantee increase in the proportion of female faculty in HEIs (UCSW 2014).

Attempts to expand the pool in the existing environment in HEIs in Ethiopia may have their difficulties as the few female faculty are holding lower

ranks, mainly concentrated at the position of lecturers and graduate assistants. This may jeopardize the upward mobility of women, making the academia a not so attractive option for the current postgraduate students constituting the potential pool.

Another targeted measure was the continued implementation of affirmative action measures. The measures envisaged are preferential access, academic support programs, establishment of gender friendly environment and climate at HEIs, as well as establishment of a system that can develop gender awareness in university communities (MoE 2014b). However, the specifics on manners of implementation, as well as indicators for measurement were not set.

In general, the policy documents clearly accept the severely low level of representation of female faculty in HEIs and have further established, in strong terms, the commitment to increase the share of female academics in HEIs. The identified challenges of female faculties and proposed strategies are, however, limited. In terms of articulating the challenges, the policies are either deficient in depth or appear to conflate the problems of female teachers at all levels of education, while problems of female faculty in HEIs have their own distinctive features. With limitations in articulating the problems, the suggested strategies fall short of addressing the various challenges of female faculty in HEIs.

2. Methodology and Data Sources

Challenges faced by female faculty were identified and qualitatively analyzed by creating the space for them to narrate or tell their experiences of being female faculty in today's higher education setting in the country. Their narratives would help offer insights into how they constructed meanings out of their experiences of being a female faculty in Ethiopia's HEIs. As such, qualitative methodology that enables one to get deeper understanding of the personal, socio-cultural and other factors at play that shape gender relations within the academia was employed. In-depth interview and focus group discussion were employed to gather the required data from the female faculties for the study.

The study was conducted in 2014/15 targeting five Ethiopian universities, namely Jimma University (JU), Arbaminch University (AMU), MizanTapei University (MTU), Hawassa University (HU) and Addis Ababa University (AAU). The list of universities represented both established ones as well those newly set up such as MTU.²

All female faculty in Natural Resource Managements programs from five public universities, except those who were on study leave and unavailable during the data collection, took part in the study. The study participants had been faculty at their respective departments from one to four years. They came from diverse backgrounds with some born and raised in urban areas while others in rural areas. Pseudonyms are used here to protect the privacy of participants of the study.

A total of sixteen in-depth interviews were held with female faculty from the selected universities. One focus group discussion consisting of thirteen participants (five gender experts and eight female faculty) was also held at a workshop gathering that brought together female faculty and gender experts from the respective universities. While some of the female faculty who participated in the in-depth interviews were also part of the focus group, new faces of female faculty from the same universities, that were not part of interviews, joined the workshop thereby enriching the focus groups discussions.

Review of secondary documents including the national Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPI-V) (MoE 2010; 2015), Annual Educational Abstracts (MoE 2014a), studies on the performance of female faculty in Ethiopia (MoE 2014b) as well as literature on the subject and other relevant materials were consulted.

The paper has attempted to document and present the lived experiences of the participants of the study as narrated and articulated by the respondents. It has further attempted to locate these experiences in the literature and linked them with feminist theoretical frameworks that provide broader picture on gender relations and their impacts on society.

4 Findings and Discussion

The profile of the study participants is shown in Table 2. Seven of the participants were MA holders while three were enrolled in MA programs at the time of the study. The remaining six were first degree holders.

Table 2. Profile of study participants

		HU	AMU	MTU	JU	AAU
Qualification	B.Sc. Degree	1	2	1	2	-
	Studying for M.Sc.	2	-	-	1	-
	M.Sc. degree	1	1	2	2	1
Academic Rank	Graduate Assistant	3	2	1	3	-
	Lecturer	1	1	2	2	1

The discussion with the female faculty members brought out various challenges that female faculty, particularly the junior ones, faced. Although many of the challenges raised can be considered global, some were either more pronounced or, at times, peculiar to female faculty in HEIs of Ethiopia. Interview results showed that these challenges manifested themselves in the academic lives of female faculty in HEIs of the country in the following ways.

i) The view that regards female faculty as incapable

The female faculty members identified stereotypical attitudes which led to women's capabilities to be under-recognized. Such attitudes were major challenges towards getting opportunities and succeeding at different tasks within the academia. One of the participants shared her experience as follows:

As women faculty members are not regarded to be capable of leading and accomplishing tasks, when benefits such as opportunities to participate in research projects arise, they are not recruited or invited to take part in such opportunities. As such, women faculty lose out from getting opportunities that may advance their career. (Betty, lecturer)

According to the participants, male colleagues held the view that female faculty were not as capable. These male colleagues were, often times, in position of authority, for example, as department heads or deans and

determine on what female faculty could and could not engage in as part of their duty. A participant recounted her experience of the doubt that male colleagues openly expressed about her ability to teach:

Fellow male colleagues think that female faculty cannot even teach or manage class properly, sometimes they even go to the extent of [openly] saying ‘please try and teach well’. (Tirsit, lecturer).

The bias of this view is seen when it comes to allocation of course to teach. As the participants put it, basic/foundational courses were given to male colleagues while female faculty were often given what were thought to be easy-to-handle courses.

It is interesting to note that this stereotypical view among male colleagues and those in leadership positions are seen deeply affecting women’s perceptions of themselves. As one participant put it,

As women faculty members are often seen as incapable, they [the women themselves] think that they are not capable. (Mena, lecturer)

Another participant also reiterated, “when women are told they cannot make it, they end up doubting themselves. (Ayelech, graduate assistant)

Participants pointed out that there was virtually no support system when female faculty members were faced with difficulties. In fact, there was a tendency to rationalize their difficulties in light of their incapacity and, therefore, their unfitness to the academic career from the outset. One of the participants shared her story of how she was given very discouraging comments from her Master’s thesis supervisor while she was finalizing her MSc thesis work. The responsibilities of looking after her child put a lot of strain on her work. Sharing her challenge with her supervisor only managed to get the following response, “leave your studies and raise your child.”

The participants pointed out that mistakes committed by female faculty members in executing their duties were often cited as evidence of the inadequacies of women to academic career. On the other hand, mistakes by male faculty members were taken just as mistakes with no reflection on their capacities. Participants expressed that this eroded their self-esteem and

their willingness to take up leadership roles and function effectively. They were, thus, made to fear taking decision making risks.

The capability of women is challenged from different angles. One, among many, is that their earned success in the academia, coming from own capabilities and hard work, is considered to have been won through sexual favors to men. The participants shared their stories of how initial employment into the academia (entry) had been attributed to such kinds of sexual favors instead of their high performance. One of the participants stated:

I was the second top performing student in my class during our final year. When I became a teacher and the top performing male student did not get similar opportunity, it was automatically attributed to me getting sexual favors from the department head during the recruitment process. (Meseret, graduate assistant).

The findings conform to the well-established literature (Eerdewijk 2014) with regards to the long held stereotypical views and attitudes which often lead to women's capabilities to be under-recognized. The findings have further shown that the stereotypical views question women's capabilities, not only through denying women of opportunities, but also detracting from their success by attributing their success to factors other than their capacity.

The policy, in particular the Gender Strategy for the Education and Training Sector, speaks of attitudinal challenges among male colleagues and university leadership and suggests advocacy to improve attitudes towards women as educational professionals (MoE 2014b). 'Attitudinal challenges' is quite broad and may cover issues of gender roles and expectations. Further, as the policy articulates, the stereotypical views are not just that of male colleagues. The views are so predominant that female faculty members are often seen doubting their capabilities. While addressing attitudinal challenges may serve as a general framework, it may not be a sufficient strategy. There should be clear strategy of ensuring that female faculty members are not omitted from opportunities on account of stereotypical views.

ii) Work-family (life) balance

The pressure from the work-family (life) balance is also a major challenge identified by the participants of the study. They pointed out different manifestations of this challenge in their academic career.

The participants often expressed frustration regarding their domestic role of taking care of children, cooking, cleaning and generally taking overall responsibility for household management, which takes up much of their time. As such, they end up having less time to engage in the ever demanding work of academia: research, publishing and teaching. The attempt at balancing these two demands often leads women to feelings of guilt for not giving sufficient time for their children or their work. One of the participants pointed out her dilemma in this regard:

it is a constant battle, I am always agonized when I am at work because I am thinking of my small child and when I am at home I am thinking of being left behind. (Emebet, lecturer).

With respect to having supportive home environment to strike the work-life balance, participants shared the view that, whereas the home environment relieved men in the academia of the domestic work burden and provided ample time for publishing and research, women in the academia often faced criticism from their spouses, extended family and friends for shortfalls in their time for domestic work. Interestingly, having a family (spouse and children) is often a plus for men's career development in the academia, whereas it is often perceived as an impediment for women to study further, take up leadership roles and engage in activities such as research and collaborative work. One of the participants shared her experience:

My male colleagues are hesitant to include me in research projects and proposals. They claim that I may not be available and give the work a 100% of my time as I have to look after my young child. (Tirsit, lecturer).

Related to this is the tension between the tenure clock and the biological clock which, sometimes, forces women to abandon one for the other. One of the participants recounted her recent experience as follows:

Both my husband [her husband is also in the academia] and myself got opportunity to pursue our PhD education at the same time. At the time, however, I just found out that I was pregnant. I tried very much to delay my enrollment, however I was not able to succeed. So I chose to give birth to my first child as I thought I was not going to get any younger. My husband is now well into finalizing his PhD but I am still here. (Tirsit, lecturer).

The findings generally correlate well with the challenges of work-life balance found in the literature (Samble 2008; Beddoes et. al. 2012). Despite the fact that support of extended family members in raising children is noticeably high in Ethiopia, the challenges of female academics in striking the work-life balance are still acute. The country's gender equality strategy in education and training also lists out the burden derived from the reproductive role of women with implications on time use and work burden on women educationalists (MoE 2014b). Unfortunately, the strategy as well as other policy documents of the sector remain silent on possible measures that can be taken to address the challenges that derive from the work-life balance.

iii) Views on appropriate gender roles/behavior

Expectations around gender roles point to acceptable forms of behavior among women and men and in their relations to one another. These are rooted in socialization. As the participants pointed out, it is very common for men faculty members to come together during lunch and tea breaks and even during evening outings. On the other hand, for female faculty members, as their numbers are quite limited, they do not get to form such groups and joining male colleague's for socialization feels awkward. It is these informal groups that often serve as sources of information, resources and potential formation of research and other professional groups in campus. These social factors effectively isolate female colleagues from opportunities that come with them.

Male colleagues often mock females for not keeping abreast of information on opportunities in campus obtained through such informal socialization. They often present women's lack of access to information as a failure, on the part of the women, instead of understanding the gender relations that

serve as barriers for women. One of the participants remembers a time when she was mocked by her male colleagues:

One day I was asking my male colleagues information about a certain opportunity that has come for faculty members in my university. The male colleagues were already privy of the information and have taken steps towards utilizing the opportunity by the time I was asking for information. They laughed at me and said, 'are you even around? How come you do not know about this opportunity? It means that you are not among us [one of us]'. Hearing this made me question if I was indeed part of that community. This sort of assessment by male colleagues only serves to undermine us [female faculty]. (Birtukan, graduate assistant)

One interesting revelation from the participants is that, it is not only through the inability to access informal networks that female faculty miss out on information and opportunities, they alluded to deliberate attempt, on the part of male colleagues, to withhold information from females. The participants raised incidents when opportunities for scholarship and training, that target certain percentage of females, had come but such information was not shared to female faculty. Instead, the opportunity was fully utilized by male faculty and the lack of female faculty in the department/s (absence of pool) was given as explanation to enable male faculty utilize such opportunities.

I was the only female faculty member at the time when the opportunity for scholarship came about. It specifically asks for female faculty. My colleagues, including the department head, did not inform me of the opportunity while a male colleague of mine was readying his application all along. When I came to know of the information from the gender office of the University, I approached the department head who informed that they had already endorsed the application of my male colleague. I approached the vice-president of the university who promised to look into the matter but only to tell me, in the end, that the next opportunity would be availed for me as this one was too late to change. If I had known of the information in time, my complaints might probably have resulted in positive outcomes before it was too late. (Blen, graduate assistant).

Male colleagues benefit from their informal networks in different ways. When they have cases/issues that need to be settled, friends (colleagues) can take care of the cases for them while female colleagues have to go up and down to get things done.

I was transferring from my previous university to the current one. Getting clearance was quite a difficult task which required one to go around campus and secure signatures. Unfortunately, my new university is in one end of the country while the other is at another end. While male colleagues that departed from the same university with me had their clearance taken care of by their colleagues, I was told to travel back and forth to my previous university more than once to get my clearance. (Almaz, graduate assistant).

The findings in this section are also similar to the literature (UCSW 2014, Beddoes et. al. 2012). The policy documents, such as ESDP IV (MoE, 2015) and the gender equality strategy (MoE, 2014b) in the sector, do not spell out or articulate the challenges that arise from expectations around roles. As a result, the inhibiting circumstances that bar female faculty from active engagement in different facets of university activities are missed. Instead, the limited presence and visibility of female faculty is often attributed to their incompetence, lack of willingness/desire and their low number/proportion among the faculty (though a factor not necessarily the explanatory factor).

Creating good understanding of how underlying gender relations shape the manner of interaction among female and male faculty as well as the leadership is crucial to debunk such assumptions. Though the challenge arising from gender relations is not articulated as such, creating a gender friendly environment is one of the strategies in the policy towards increasing the representation of female faculty in HEIs (MoE 2014b). Creating gender friendly climate and gender awareness as well as targeted interventions to address the lack of opportunities for female faculty may help skew the unfavorable outcomes from unequal gender relations.

iv) Discriminatory practices

Discriminatory practices, according to the participants, abound in their respective universities. They cited several cases where male and female

colleagues were treated differently when they should be getting similar treatment or were entitled to similar treatment under the law. In one example, one of the participants shared how she was discriminated against with regards to payment.

I became head of the department that I am part of recently. This position comes with different kinds of benefits. While some of the benefits directly come from government, other benefits are related to projects – as department head I now take the role of overseeing [the] project. This used to be the practice with the previous department head. As soon as I took over, benefits that come from the project overseeing were automatically suspended. This is despite the fact that I have continued the work of overseeing the project. (Mulu, lecturer and vice dean of college)

Another participant shared her experience as follows:

During examination of MSc thesis, male faculties, however junior, are invited to be part of the examining board while female academics that are of similar status as the males are excluded. (Rahel, lecturer)

At times, the discriminatory treatment usually takes an indirect form. The participants pointed out that the different criteria used to avail opportunities, such as scholarship, took into account factors which female faculty might not fulfill. A typical example of this is ‘experience in leadership position.’ When a criterion like this is used to allot scholarship opportunities, it serves to exclude women as women are not, in the first place, given opportunities to occupy leadership positions. These kinds of requirements, which in practice tend to exclude women, are very discouraging for the advancement of the academic career of female faculty. It is these kinds of requirements which, in practice, exclude the vast majority of women that constitute cases of indirect discrimination.

The findings correlate with the various forms of discriminatory practices that female faculty face as reported elsewhere (Morely 2005; Rathgeber 2003; Adusah-Karikari 2008). The country’s policies namely the ESDPs (MoE 2015) as well as the Gender Equality Strategy (MoE 2014b) in the sector do not provide anything on discrimination. Perhaps this is due to the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sex enshrined in the

constitution as well as the legal frameworks of the country governing the sector. However, discrimination, particularly indirect discrimination, is not something that can easily be discerned. It is also the form of discrimination which often disadvantages female faculty. As such, without explicit articulation of the problem and strategies to combat it, including through education and awareness raising, the legal fall back may not be sufficient remedy.

v) The baggage that comes with affirmative action

Affirmative action has been one of the strategies of the ESDP, particularly ESDP IV to increase the proportion of female faculty in HEIs. The program document lists out the measures of affirmative action to be implemented in favor of female faculty. These include preferential access, academic support programs, establishment of gender friendly environment and climate at HEIs as well as establishment of a system that can develop gender awareness in university communities. The participants of the study raised different concerns regarding the practice of affirmative action. One participant highlighted that:

Although we know that we are supposed to benefit from affirmative action, there is confusion regarding what an affirmative measure constitutes in practice. The confusion is evident both within the management as well as among female faculty. (Liya, graduate assistant)

This appears to be a major problem of implementation of affirmative action programs in the country and particularly so in the context of higher educational institutions. As it has been highlighted earlier, the problem partly emanates from the lack of clear and simple regulatory frameworks detailing the manner of implementation (specifically in the context of HEIs).

As some of the participants have highlighted, the controversy is not limited to confusion regarding the different types of affirmative measures as well as manner of implementation. The concern also revolves around the meaning attached to the 'practice of affirmative action'. Participants reiterated that there is a general tendency to view women who are beneficiaries of

affirmative action as incompetent. This view is rife among male colleagues. The negative stereotype associated with affirmative action affects all female faculty. One of the participants said:

I myself have not been a beneficiary of affirmative action, they [male faculties] think that we are all the results of affirmative action. I constantly hear male colleagues complain about the incompetence of female colleagues that are beneficiaries of affirmative action. (Kebron, graduate assistant)

Another participant shared the same view and added that there is resentment among male colleagues against female faculty members for affirmative action.

They [male faculty] even tell us we should not worry about any competition because we will have our ‘plus three’ [to point out the current form of implementation of affirmative action whereby female candidates are given three additional points during recruitment]. (Selam, graduate assistant)

It is interesting to note that during the focus group discussion, the participants often started with ‘I am not a beneficiary of affirmative action but....’ when they talked about affirmative action. One observes a tendency of dissociating oneself from affirmative action and to point out that one made it through only based on one’s grades. It seems as though benefiting from affirmative measure/action detracts from one’s merit. One of the participants stated:

The problem is because they [male colleagues] do not know who is a beneficiary of affirmative action and who got their position through merit, they tend to lump us all together. We [female faculty] do not know who is a beneficiary and who is not among us. (Selam, graduate assistant)

The findings on the biases against beneficiaries of affirmative action agree well with other studies on the subject of affirmative action (Eerdewijk 2014). The policy instruments provide affirmative action as one of the main strategies of addressing the challenges of female faculty. Though this is commendable, the findings have revealed that there are some concerns regarding the implementation. The conversation regarding affirmative

action has highlighted that there is deep misunderstanding of what it is, why it is implemented and the basis for implementation among the community within HEIs, male and female faculty as well as management. These challenges may deduct from the intended benefits of the program.

vi) The absence of female role models in the academia

Study participants pointed out to the absence of female role models in the different HEIs as one of the challenges for them to push boundaries. Female faculty that are well accomplished in terms of, for example, high ranks in the academia – with assistant and associate professorship ranks – are rare and far between. Some of the HEIs, particularly the regional institutions, are severely affected by this challenge.

The participants raised the lack of role models, not only in terms of having virtually no female professors, but also the absence of women in leadership positions within their respective HEIs. They pointed out, during the discussion, that they did not have female role models (as leaders) when they were going for their undergraduate study. Now that they have joined the ranks of faculty, the problem is the same; no or few females in positions of leadership that can serve as role models. One of the participants sadly put it as follows:

I did not have any female teacher while I was doing my undergraduate degree or a female in leadership position within the University. I was hoping, when I moved to my current university position, it would be different. But I see that it is the same picture again and it makes me wonder if it will ever change? (Selam, graduate assistant)

This is a worrying concern. If female faculties today do not see women rising in academic ranks and in leadership positions as their male counterparts, the academia may not seem to be an attractive option or career. The literature on female faculty in advanced economies points to the same challenge and how the very few women with high ranks and leadership positions is making the academia an unattractive option for those in the pipeline (UCSW 2014). The policy instruments (MoE 2010; 2014b) provide for increasing the number of women in decision making positions

as well as the respective share of MA and PhD holders. Further, professional capacity building and skills development programs for female educationalists, as well as special funding for female researchers, are envisaged. Combined, these measures can contribute to higher level degrees and increasing research output which, in turn, constitute necessary conditions for attaining higher ranks within the academia.

vii) Women putting down other women

Some of the participants complained of how women put down other women. In the discussion, they raised how the few women that were in positions of authority, either with higher academic ranks or leadership positions in their respective institutions, were creating hostile environments for them to succeed.

The participants pointed out that, at times, these women might not be approachable or accessible. In such instances, approaching them for advice and mentorship would be out of the question. At other times, it might be that there was direct working relationship with women that were in positions of authority. In such instances, there was a tendency to put down the work of junior female faculties. One of the participants recounted her ordeal as follows:

there was an opening for promotion. I fulfilled all the criteria and a male colleague of mine also fulfilled the criteria. When we applied and got the test, I scored better than him. After the management committee meeting that reviewed the results, I was informed that I passed with better grade and should expect the letter soon. When the letter came, it was the male colleague that got promoted under the direct order of the [female] boss. (Meaza, lecturer).

The participants could not understand why this should be the case. Given the very small number of female faculty and females within leadership positions, it should have been the case that they encourage and open the door for more women to succeed.

The literature shows that women are, by no means, homogeneous (Idahosa 2014). The distinction based on position, age, class and other factors may be a source of tension among women. Conforming to Idahosa (2014), the

findings of the study show that female faculty in higher positions may not be as supportive towards advancing the academic career of junior female faculty. This is perhaps another issue that the policy document does not articulate as one of the challenges of female faculty in HEIs in the country. The complexity of gender relations, as manifested here, is an issue worth examining deeply, particularly with the plans to use senior female faculty as potential role models and mentors for junior female faculty.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The experiences of female faculty members in the selected public universities of the country show that their challenges emanate from complex gender relations that shape societal views and expectations about the proper role and place of women and men in society. Feminist perspectives show that these, in turn, are reflections of the deeply entrenched patriarchal views that adversely impact on different aspects of the lives of women. Such widely held societal views and practices are, by and large, woven into the fabric of HEIs pretty much unaltered and unmodified, despite the expectation that institutions of higher education are change setters (sources of change).

Governing policies in the education sector, particularly on higher education, the institutional culture as well as practices and, even personal dispositions of people in leadership, deeply reflect this skewed nature of gender relations which often disadvantage women. ‘Man knows better’, ‘man is the boss’ ‘tenure clock that ignores the biological clock’, and ‘it’s a man’s club’ are all manifestations of the pervasive unequal gender relations in the academia.

Towards promoting gender equality in the academia, the governing policies as well as institutional practices show that the thrust of the policy appears to be on increasing numbers; increasing the number of female faculty members. This is reinforced by clearly defined goals and indicators within the policy document. However, this thrust shows an oversimplified understanding of the various dimensions of gender inequality within the academia. It reflects challenges in comprehending the complex nature of gender relations. The low level of representation of female faculty is but

one of the multifaceted equality issues that affect females within the academia. As such, a policy thrust that mainly equates gender equality with increasing access and, therefore, numbers, may end up missing the target of promoting gender equality in the academia.

As the findings and discussion have shown, there appears to be less focus, clarity and articulation on creating equal opportunities for female faculty members to succeed in the academia. There is fuzzy articulation of the various challenges of female faculties that arise from unfavorable gender relations. Further the proposed strategies are without clear mechanisms for intervention, set goals and indicators unlike the goal of increasing numbers. There is an urgent need for the policy and its implementation to focus not only on access but also on creating conditions for female faculty to thrive once within the system of HEIs. This, in turn, requires addressing the conditions necessary for career advancement and retention.

Notes

¹ This should be a worrying trend given the 70:30 allocations which will lead to more and more females entering into higher education getting into science fields like Engineering but with limited number of role models.

²The data was collected in the course of a wider research aimed at formulating strategies for mainstreaming gender under the project ‘Sustainable Tourism Based on Natural Resource Management with Gender Balance towards Women’. It was a project specifically designed for capacity building in selected Ethiopian Higher Education institutions in the field of natural resource management.

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1.1	2.1	3.1
1.2	2.2	3.2

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