

Gender Inequity in Higher Education in Ethiopia

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Despite their recognizable role in the political arena and resultant gender mainstreamed policies, women in Ethiopia face day-to-day obstacles to ensure gender equity, and academia is no exception. In the past few decades, higher education in Ethiopia has rapidly expanded, resulting in increased enrollment of female students and faculty employment in various academic fields. Although the progress in the sector is highly promising, ensuring gender equality has still been a significant challenge. Several studies have revealed different barriers to women's academic, leadership, and research participation in higher educational institutions in Ethiopia (1).

The Ethiopian societal value for female children, ways of rearing, the primary to secondary educational depression leading to a low proportion of female university students and later to minority female role models is a reality show in the current higher education system. Much emphasis is made on increasing females' enrolment in Ethiopia, much remains to be done to retain them (2). Of particular concern in this regard is the very high level of attrition observed in the field of engineering, natural sciences, and technology that has the potential to leave the damaging perception of such fields labeled as "men's domain." Initiatives like affirmative action for enrolment and special educational support at universities in Ethiopia did not help the Education sector achieve the expected gender equity in the past three decades (3).

Even though research is one of the core functions of higher education, it has pushed female faculty aside. The systematic apathy of not recognizing women's multiple responsibilities at their prime academic life has limited their participation in research. Women in academia have less spare time to research training within and outside their universities. The cumulative effects are fewer networks within and outside their universities, leave women with less participation in research and publication (1). Moreover, the criteria include research, work experience, and higher academic ranks, possibly excluding women from the competition for grants application by universities. Female academia's limited participation in research makes it difficult for them to be promoted to higher academic rank, hence their academic leadership involvement (4).

Higher education in Ethiopia is also noted to shy away from women's engagement in academic leadership. Toppled on the limited number of women academic faculty in the universities and colleges, the gender stereotype towards women's leadership roles has made higher education's immune to women leaders (5). The strain on women faculty to allocate time for family, teaching, and research leaves little interest in joining leadership positions. The resulting lack of policy intervention, high tolerance to an unsupportive working

environment, and exclusion from critical social and professional networks have contributed to the absence of women in senior academic and leadership positions in Ethiopian Higher Education institutions (6,7).

Gendered attitudes and structures that force female academics to behave traditionally are prevalent. Compared to males, female academics face several challenges related to sexuality and reproductive health. The lack of clarity on components of sexual harassment in the Ethiopian context; lack of clearly defined structures to report cases of sexual harassment; lack of basic training regarding sexual harassment; the "culture of silence"; fear of reprisals to report incidents; absence of interest amongst stakeholders to debate over the issue have collectively perpetuated sexual harassment as a serious obstacle to achieving academic potential in higher institutions in Ethiopia (8, 9).

Mechanisms to amend the gender inequity in Ethiopian higher education need to envision a multi-pronged strategy that brings a paradigm shift to the societal mindset with concerted actions at every step of the growing female child (10). Such visionary strategies will lay a strong foundation for female students to fare better than their counterparts. The structural redressing to bring gender parity at higher education in Ethiopia needs to look through this lens of societal changes to enable the direly needed change to achieve the global promises Sustainable Developmental Goal (SDG) goal 5 'Gender equality.

Ministry of Science and Higher Education should signal the legislative green light for Higher education in Ethiopia towards gender equity by gender mainstreaming their functions and structures to impact gender-stereotyped roles of women in academia positively. Creating a hospitable gender environment in higher education institutions through proactive legislation that explicitly places gender as a decisive factor for academic positions provokes provocative academic promotion. Gender mainstreamed curricula and structures to zero tolerance to gender-based violence at Higher education will transform universities to the whole purpose of their establishment.

Model initiatives like the Addis Ababa University female faculty research grant open opportunities for female researchers to win grants and create a network of researchers to retain and attract female faculty to engage in research and mentoring. Scaling up support for research working groups is a workable platform to lay a fertile ground for junior faculty and researchers to work together with the few able female researchers and nurture the academic support to career development. An example of such an initiative is the Women's Health Research Working Group (WHRWG) at the College of Health Sciences, Addis Ababa University.

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In attaining gender equality in Ethiopian universities, there is a need to consider an in-depth assessment of factors that hinder progress so far. A gendered analysis of university systems at higher educational institutions will give insight into the existing situation, and help map solutions transform the institutions (11, 12).

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