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ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

LAUNCH OF THE ETHIOPIAN WOMEN RESEARCHERS NETWORK (EWNET)

Event report



Rift Valley Institute
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**Ethiopian Women
Researchers Network**



**Peace
Research
Facility**

Launch of the Ethiopian Women Researchers Network (EWNET): Event report

Acknowledgements

The organizers express heartfelt gratitude to all individuals and institutions that contributed to the success of this event to launch the Ethiopian Women Researchers Network (EWNET). Generous support from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has made EWNET possible. Special thanks go to Hannah Stogdon, former head of the Ethiopia office of the Rift Valley Institute (RVI), and Fatuma Abdishukri, former project officer for the RVI Peace Research Facility (PRF), for supporting the network in its inception phase. The event organizers also extend their gratitude for the support and participation of the presenters, panellists, the emcee, Yasmin Bushra, the rapporteurs, Hewan Endashaw and Sofanit Demissie, the sign language interpreter, Hanna Degife, the camera crew, which was led by Dirbdil Assefa, and all those who attended the event for contributing to its success.

The Ethiopian Women Researchers Network

This report was produced by the Ethiopian Women Researchers Network within the Peace Research Facility. EWNET is dedicated to creating a vibrant and supportive network for Ethiopian women researchers in the social sciences and humanities. EWNET uses platforms such as podcasts and seminar series to disseminate and amplify the voices, work and research journeys of Ethiopian women researchers. Check the EWNET website for more information about the network and its activities:

<https://ewnethub.net>

The Ethiopia Peace Research Facility

The Peace Research Facility is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict-sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the RVI and funded by the UK government.

The Rift Valley Institute

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Summary

This report details the launch event for the Ethiopian Women Researchers Network (EWNET). The event took place on 6 February 2025 from 9.00 a.m.–2.30 p.m. at the Skylight Hotel in Addis Ababa. It was organized by the Peace Research Facility (PRF) of the Rift Valley Institute (RVI), with generous support from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). This report covers the launch event, which consists of four main parts.

Part 1 includes a welcoming and opening session, with a greeting delivered by Dr Semir Yusuf from the RVI, followed by opening remarks presented by Chiara Galletti from the British embassy. Bringing Part 1 to a close, Dr Mulumebet Zenebe from Addis Ababa University (AAU) gave a keynote speech. Part 2 consists of a presentation by Dr Firehiwot Sintayehu, an Assistant Professor of Political Science at AAU. Part 3 focuses on live testimonies: the lived experiences of women researchers in Ethiopia. This includes remarks given by Dr Muna Abubeker Ibrahim, Assistant Professor of Linguistics at AAU, Dr Weynishet Girma, Assistant Professor of Special Needs and a disability rights activist, Marshet Tefera, PhD candidate in Development Studies at AAU and Samrawit Tassew, policy and communications consultant. In Part 4, Dr Netsanet Gebremichael, the principal lead of EWNET, led the session on formally introducing the network.

The presentation, live testimonials and official launch were each followed by both question-and-answer sessions and open discussion sessions, allowing the audience to reflect and share feedback throughout the day. The EWNET launch event was concluded by Dr Netsanet, who gave closing remarks and thanked the presenters, participants and everyone else who contributed to the success of the event. (See Annex II for the complete agenda.)

Background

The Peace Research Facility, implemented by the Rift Valley Institute with funding from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, is dedicated to producing timely and relevant research on key peace and conflict dynamics in Ethiopia. This research serves to inform policy and programming for the FCDO and for a diverse range of stakeholders in Ethiopia and at the international level. By addressing crucial issues related to peace, conflict and stability, the PRF aims to facilitate evidence-based decision-making that supports peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts across the country.

The RVI has extensive experience in bringing together research communities of practice as exemplified by its previous programmes, including the [Research Communities of Practice](#) (RCoP), the [South Sudan Women's Research Network](#) (SSWRN) and Gender and Responding to Violent Extremism (GARVE) initiatives. These programmes have successfully fostered collaboration, knowledge exchange and policy influence both in and across specific sectors. Building on this foundation, the PRF has led the creation of the Ethiopian Women Researchers Network.

EWNET is a network dedicated to creating a vibrant and supportive network for Ethiopian women



researchers in the social sciences and humanities. The primary objective of EWNET is to amplify the voices of Ethiopian women researchers in research, publication and policy dialogue. To achieve this, EWNET is committed to creating an inclusive and intersectional platform for Ethiopian women researchers in the social sciences and humanities. To create a platform where female researchers present their work, forge collaborative research, create networks for information sharing, support one another and bridge intergenerational conversations among women researchers of diverse generations and social backgrounds, EWNET has three major streams of work: 1) building a collaborative network among Ethiopian women researchers; 2) supporting academic research through financial and non-financial assistance; and 3) promoting active knowledge dissemination. The network is membership based and features a dedicated website (ewnethub.net). The network is led by Dr Netsanet Gebremichael, lead principal, and Dalaya Ashenafi, deputy principal.

The EWNET launch event was conceptualized around the notion of chronicling the presence of women researchers with diverse disciplinary backgrounds. The key objective was twofold: to officially launch EWNET while simultaneously incubating collaboration and knowledge-sharing among women researchers. In so doing, the aim was both to acknowledge their presence and to discuss the state of women researchers in Ethiopia. By unveiling the notion of ‘absence’, which is how women researchers are typically categorized, the primary intention is to ensure that the voices of women in academia are heard through their testimonies about their experiences of being a woman and becoming a researcher in Ethiopia. Bringing together participants who represent a diverse community of women researchers from both academic and non-academic research backgrounds, the EWNET event marked the official launch of EWNET and its website, thereby enhancing the visibility and engagement of women researchers across Ethiopia.

Part 1. Welcome

Greeting and opening remarks

Dr Semir Yusuf, head of the Ethiopia office at the RVI, opened the EWNET launch event by highlighting both the role of the RVI as a leading research institute and the PRF mission to facilitate evidence-based decision-making. In his remarks, he emphasizes the significance of EWNET in amplifying marginalized research voices and fostering collaboration among women researchers. He details three primary streams of work for the network: 1) developing a collaborative network; 2) supporting academic research; and 3) facilitating knowledge dissemination. Dr Semir also expresses hope for a productive and engaging session, encouraging active participation from all attendees. He emphasizes the importance of collective contributions to the launch and the ongoing development of EWNET. He also highlights the potential for the network to grow and thrive with the support of its members and stakeholders.



Dr. Semir delivering his remarks at EWNET launch event, 6 February 2025.

In her remarks, Chiara Galletti, representing the British embassy, acknowledges the hard work of women researchers and celebrates their advancements. She challenges the narrative of personal struggles as too narrow or limited (and potentially negative), emphasizing the importance of recognising a view of the broader experience of women researchers, which consists of both challenges and achievements. She values the launch of EWNET as testimony to the positive steps forward and the concrete achievements of women researchers in Ethiopia.



Chiara delivering her remarks at EWNET launch event, 6 February 2025.

Keynote address: Chronicling presence—women in Ethiopian academia

Dr Mulumebet Zenebe, an Associate Professor of Gender Studies at Addis Ababa University (AAU) delivered a powerful keynote address, focusing on the significance of women's collaboration in research. She reflects on the historical challenges and successes of women's collaboration in academia. In particular, Dr Mulumebet highlights the establishment of the Center for Gender Studies at AAU, with reference to its trajectory, its



Dr Mulumebet delivering the keynote address at EWNET launch event, 6 February 2025.

struggles and its negotiations. Established 34 years ago by 6 women from different academic departments, she identifies the centre as a testament to the power of perseverance and collaboration among women. She presents the centre as a product of the successful efforts by women scholars, despite working a hostile and male-dominated environment.

Beyond research publications, Dr Mulumebet notes the significance of networking and capacity-building as crucial for sustaining women's participation in research. She argues that the solutions to the problems women researchers face should come from those researchers themselves. They should not expect the university or other institutions to address their problems. Subsequently, Dr Mulumebet emphasizes the importance of capacity building, networking and creating safe spaces for women researchers. She acknowledges the difficulty

of sustaining a network and juggling the many responsibilities women face. With this in mind, she encourages participants to prioritize research, maintain a work-life balance and develop clear visions in pursuit of moving to actualizing their visions. (See Annex I for the full text of this keynote speech.)



Part 2. Presentation

The state of women in social sciences and humanities in Ethiopia: Addis Ababa University as a case study

Dr Firehiwot Sintayehu, Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations of Addis Ababa University, bases her presentation on research that she undertook on the current state of affairs for women in the social science and humanities at Addis Ababa University (AAU) in 2024-25. She begins by highlighting the increasing involvement of women in research, in particular due to their enhanced presence in higher education. She notes that while the number of female faculty at AAU is increasing, this growth is incremental. Despite progress, women's engagement and career development in academia remains limited due to the cultural and numerical dominance of men in African universities. She cites statistics showing that while the enrolment of female students in higher education is growing at a rate of 16.4 per cent—significantly faster than the male average of 8.2 per cent—their overall representation remains low at 5.3 per cent. This starkly contrasts the 10.9 per cent representation of male students, and is far below the global average of 41.6 per cent for women. The representation of female academic staff is also low at 15 per cent, and only 10.6 per cent of executive management positions in public universities in Ethiopia are held by women.



Dr Firehiwot presenting her paper at EWNET launch event, 6 February 2025.

Dr Firehiwot then focuses on the representation of women in the social sciences and humanities at AAU. She notes that out of 284 faculty members in these fields, only 46 (16.2 per cent) are female. She highlights that senior women researchers, with more than ten years of experience and PhDs, are more likely to lead research projects and publish. In contrast, junior faculty with less experience often struggle to engage in research beyond completing their thesis or dissertation. Dr Firehiwot identifies several barriers that hinder women in research. One key problem is that existing networks at the university are largely inaccessible to women, limiting their engagement in research. Her study participants report a lack of guidance and clarity during their early careers, forcing them to navigate opportunities independently. The absence of formal and informal networks also leaves them isolated in their professional development. She further notes that gendered stereotypes persist in

professional spaces, leading to women being excluded from key academic roles. For example, women are often assigned administrative tasks rather than research roles. Moreover, women are frequently invited as gender experts, limiting their academic scope to that topic. Dr Firehiwot also points to the societal

and familial expectations that place additional burdens on women, making it difficult to dedicate time to research.

Dr Firehiwot goes on to point out that there are ways researchers can alleviate at least some of the problems. She suggests that senior women researchers can proactively assert themselves in their professional space, challenging injustices and advocating for equal opportunities for women researchers. She also notes that the growing number of women in academia is breaking existing stereotypes and serving as role models for younger women. In addition, she indicates that AAU has established women's research groups and dedicated funding schemes for female researchers, albeit on a limited basis.

Dr Firehiwot concludes that despite the increasing number of women researchers in the social sciences and humanities, their involvement in research is limited due to a combination of institutional and societal factors. She emphasizes the need for creating supportive environments and networks to enhance women's engagement in research. Subsequently, Dr Firehiwot recommends several activities that EWNET can undertake to better women's engagement in research. These include using the platform to:

- share the personal and professional experiences of female researchers to define their unique challenges;
- create formal and informal connections among women researchers to foster support and mentorship; and
- provide training in time management, communication skills and grant writing, among others.

After this keynote presentation, Dr Mercy Fekadu from the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) of AAU shared her insights on Dr Firehiwot's research on women researchers. Dr Mercy remarks that women are faced with what she calls a 'triple responsibility'. That is, they strive to be competent researchers; they work to prove themselves and establish their presence in the professional space; and they serve as caregivers at the personal level. As Dr Mercy asserts, all these responsibilities are fulfilled under the male gaze. In the professional space, she notes that women are often stereotypically pushed toward teaching and researching gender studies. She points out the challenges they face, such as limited networking opportunities and the necessity for mentoring that acknowledges diverse backgrounds.

In addition, she highlights the disparity in funding for the social sciences compared to the natural sciences, while stressing the importance of supporting and establishing research institutions for the social sciences in Ethiopia. Finally, she suggests that the difficulties women face in fulfilling their triple responsibilities require diverse and effective interventions. (The full report of Dr Firehiwot's study will be made available at RVI and EWNET websites.)



Dr Mercy presenting her reflections on Dr Firehiwot's paper at EWNET launch event, 6 February 2025.

Part 3. Live testimonies: The experiences of women researchers

Part 3 of the event consists of a session on the live testimonials of women researchers, who share their experiences about the obstacles they have encountered in the academic world. In general, these testimonies showcase the resilience and determination of women researchers, while highlighting the importance of support networks and the necessity for equitable opportunities in academia.



L to R: Marshet Tefera, Samrawit Tassew, Dr Muna Abubeker, Dr Weynishet Girma and Sarah Bushra at EWNET launch event, 6 February 2025.

Moderated by Sarah Bushra, an independent curator of visual and performing arts exhibitions, the panellists are a diverse group of women researchers, including: Dr Muna Abubeker, assistant professor of linguistics at AAU; Dr Weynishet Girma, assistant professor of special needs and disability rights activist serving, among others, as the president of the Addis Ababa Persons with Disabilities Association; Marshet Tefera, PhD candidate at AAU; and Samrawit Tassew, policy and communications consultant.

Many valuable insights emerge during this afternoon session of the EWNET launch event. As the panellists explain, their journey to go into research is driven by personal passion, resilience and the desire to address societal issues. As Dr Weynishet states, for example, she is motivated by her experiences as a woman with a disability and her desire to contribute to research on sign language based on these experiences. Samrawit likewise highlights the necessity of relying on evidence-based research. She speaks about difficulties posed by gender stereotypes and recognizes that being a woman consequently means dealing with added pressures. She notes the isolation she often feels in her research environment, while also expressing her enthusiasm for her work.

While answering the question ‘What does the life of a woman researcher look like?’, Marshet underscores the importance of resilience and establishing a structured routine to effectively juggle social and professional responsibilities. Alongside this, Dr Muna shares her journey of completing a master’s

degree while raising young children. She stresses the importance of passion, prioritization and striking a balance between her teaching, research and family responsibilities. Dr Weynishet expresses gratitude for the support of her partner and emphasizes the importance of prioritizing mental health in her research work.

The panellists also discussed the themes of self-criticism and motivation, with Dr Muna stressing the significance of support from her faith and family, while Dr Weynishet points out the specific challenges women with physical disabilities encounter. Samrawit cautions against the risks of overextending oneself in both personal and professional aspects of life.

Following the testimonies, an open discussion allowed participants to engage further with the panellists, drawing out more detail about the challenges women researchers face and how they address them.



Part 4. Official launch of EWNET

In the fourth and final session of the day, Dr Netsanet Gebremichael, principal lead of EWNET, formally launched the network. In doing so, she outlines the EWNET mission and vision, emphasizing the need to amplify the voices of women researchers and create a dedicated platform for their work. She points out that it is essential to be conceptually and empirically aware of women-led researchers and to address systemic alienations they face. In other words, she says, it is necessary to know exactly what to do, beyond lamentations. She announces the key goals of EWNET in more detail, which include:

1. amplifying the voices of women researchers in Ethiopia;
2. creating a database and dedicated platform for women researchers;
3. addressing systemic alienation and contextualizing the lack of women's presence in research; and
4. implementing initiatives such as a quarterly newsletter, publications, website, podcasts, seminar series and capacity-building programmes.



Dr Netsanet leading the official launch of EWNET, 6 February 2025.

Dr Netsanet emphasizes that not only does EWNET aim to increase the visibility and influence of women researchers in the social sciences and humanities, but that the network seeks to identify and address the systemic barriers that limit women's participation in research. She elaborates that the comprehensive database of women researchers in Ethiopia developed under EWNET is designed to provide a centralized resource for collaboration, mentorship and networking. The dedicated website is intended to serve as a hub for sharing research findings and disseminating relevant information about upcoming opportunities, resources and news among women researchers. Its launch marks a significant milestone in the establishment of EWNET.

Dr Netsanet also details the membership framework, explaining that EWNET has various membership tiers: core membership, global solidarity membership (intended for international colleagues and the diaspora), honorary members and volunteers. Regarding research grants, she indicates that EWNET plans to provide biannual funding opportunities, with eligibility contingent upon active membership status and the relevance of the proposed project.

Audience engagement and media coverage

The 50 participants engaged with the EWNET launch event, with active participation during all the question-and-answer sessions and open discussions that followed the presentations and panel discussions. Consequently, they were able to share their feedback and reactions to the event. The health break and the lunch also provided invaluable networking opportunities. Participants congratulated the RVI for leading this exciting initiative and expressed their hopes for the success of EWNET. Media such as *Ethiopia Insider* and *Sheger FM* were present at the event, which received positive coverage.

The way ahead

The official launch of EWNET on 6 February 2025 marks a significant milestone in the journey towards amplifying the voices of Ethiopian women researchers and highlighting their presence in academic institutions and policy infrastructure, where their presence is traditionally underutilized and their absence is normalized—if not even naturalized. EWNET underscores the importance of addressing the systemic barriers women researchers face and must overcome. It also points to the necessity of creating inclusive opportunities for growth and development among women researchers. The EWNET launch event brought together a diverse community of women researchers, scholars and advocates all united by a common goal: to amplify the voices of Ethiopian women in research, publication and policy dialogue.

Throughout the event, several key themes emerged. These reveal both the challenges and opportunities faced by women researchers in Ethiopia. One of the most prominent themes is the importance of creating platforms such as EWNET to provide a supportive and collaborative environment for women in academia. The testimonies shared by panellists emphasize the resilience and determination of women researchers, who often navigate complex professional and personal landscapes. Their stories demonstrate the need for robust support networks and equitable opportunities to thrive in their careers.

Another significant theme is the impact of systemic barriers and gender stereotypes on the academic progression of women. The panellists and presenters alike discuss the challenges of balancing research responsibilities with family duties, limited access to both funding and mentorship, and the pervasive gender biases that often marginalize women in academic settings.

Despite these challenges, the event also highlights numerous opportunities for growth and development. The establishment of EWNET itself represents a significant step towards enhancing the visibility and engagement of women researchers in Ethiopia. Network commitments to providing financial support (for example, seed grants for research), capacity-building programmes (including academic writing and publication workshops and grant writing sessions) and a dedicated platform for knowledge dissemination offers a promising outlook for the future of women in academia.

As EWNET moves forward, it carries with it the hopes and aspirations of countless women researchers, ready to contribute their unique perspectives and insights to the global academic community. The success of this initiative can empower individual researchers and enrich the broader academic and policy landscape in Ethiopia and beyond.

Annexes

Annex I. Keynote address

(The full text of the keynote speech is lightly edited to facilitate readability.)

‘Chronicling Presence. Women in Ethiopian Academia’: Remarks delivered by Dr Mulumebet Zenebe, Associate Professor of Gender Studies at Addis Ababa University (AAU):

In Ethiopia, women’s networks are few. The ones we have are not vibrant or strong. EWNET will play a significant role in filling this gap.

To address the topic ‘Chronicling Presence. Women in Ethiopian Academia’, I will take the Center for Gender Studies (or CGS) at AAU as a point of reference. CGS is the first women’s research and teaching centre in Ethiopia, which was established in 1991, 34 years ago. I will talk about the trajectories of the centre. What were some of the struggles and negotiations required to run the centre? I will also talk about the lessons I learnt about teaching and researching gender issues. The trajectories of the centre will give us a sense of how women’s and gender issues are seen in the academic institutions in Ethiopia. But also generally in Ethiopia.

1. CGS trajectories

1.1. The establishment of CGS and the significance of networking

CGS at AAU was established because of the women’s academic network 34 years ago. The hostile university environment towards women’s issues and women academics during the 1990s contributed to the inception of CGS at AAU at that time. Women academics were marginalized. I had the chance to interview some of them. Their stories are very interesting. They said they wanted to form a committee because they were not happy with the way female staff were treated at the university.

One of the interviewees, for example, narrates her encounter during the conversation she had with her male colleagues: ‘When I talked about women’s issues, my colleagues used to laugh at me.’¹ The women staff members knew that they should do something to address the unequal gender relations within the university. Six women formed the Committee for Interdisciplinary Research on Women (CIDROW), which consisted of women university staff who came together from different colleges.

CIDROW organized the first and most successful seminar on gender issues in Ethiopia in December 1989, before the official establishment of CERTWID [Center for Research, Training and Information on Women in Development]. Papers on a wide range of women’s issues in Ethiopia were presented and discussed during the conference. A book also came out of this seminar, which was edited by Tsehai Berhane-Selassie.²

1 Aynalem Megersa and Mulumebet Zenebe, ‘The Institutionalization of Women’s and Gender Studies in Ethiopian Higher Education: The case of Center for Gender Studies’ (Unpublished research report), Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 2024.
2 Tsehai Berhane Silassie, ‘Gender Issues in Ethiopia’, Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, 1991.

Towards the end of the seminar, a panel discussion was held on the significance of establishing a research centre on women in development. As a result, CERTIWID was established in [September] 1991.³

THE CONCEPT: Here we can mention the concept of ‘affective solidarity’ by Hemmings.⁴ According to this concept, individual experiences of rage, frustration and desire for connection would bring women together.

In the case of CERTWID, the women academics created solidarity because of the hostile university environment 34 years ago. Not only CIDROW and the committee of six women—individuals also played a major role in the establishment of the CERTWID.⁵ The role of individuals was important, both male and female. The [then] vice president of the university, for example, was an ardent supporter of the centre.

In terms of CGS achievements, it is worth noting the MA graduates serving in different capacities, holding important positions. [The MA in Gender Studies program was launched in 2005]. Graduates in government, NGOs, higher educational institutions. Now there are many gender studies centres in Ethiopia. Hawassa University, Bahir Dar University, Alemaya University, etc. It is our graduates who teach at these centres. As academic staff, it is difficult to see your contributions to knowledge production. But when we go to different gender meetings, we find our graduates, holding senior positions, leading big NGOs. More than 300 MA theses were written.

2. My experiences of teaching and research at CGS

2.1. Teaching

Meaningful discussions take place in class. Because of the nature of the subject of gender, students give examples from their own experiences. Example: One student told in class about her experience of rape (attempted rape). Mostly the discussions are meaningful and passionate. When some students share their stories, they become so emotional.

FOCUS ON LOCAL KNOWLEDGE: Usually, gender studies in Africa have been criticized for leaning very much on Western concepts and theories. The same is true in Ethiopia. We very much lack home-grown concepts and theories. In our teaching, whenever we try to give attention to local knowledge, we conduct meaningful discussions in class. An example is Ethiopian women and conflict resolution. In my research on women’s religious associations, *Tsiwa Mahber*. Forgiveness has a great value. Members won’t sit and eat together before they forgive one another: ‘*bemawekina balemawek yaskeyemkuachihu hulu beegziabher sim yikir blugn.*’ [‘Forgive me in the name of God If I have offended you knowingly or unknowingly’].

3 Tsehai Berhane Silassie, ‘Gender Issues in Ethiopia’, 121.

4 Clare Hemmings, ‘Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation’, *Feminist Theory* 13/2 (2012): 147–161.

5 Author’s Note: The name of the center has been changed, and it was restructured. CERTWID was established in September 1991 as a unit under the Institute of Development Research (IDR) through a three-year project agreement between the Ethiopian Government and the UNFPA. In 2000, CERTWID became an independent unit reporting to the Academic Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies. In 2006, CERTWID was upgraded to an independent institute - Institute of Gender Studies (IGS). In 2008, IGS was renamed as the Center for Gender Studies (CGS) and restructured under newly established College of Development Studies (CDS).

FOCUS ON WOMEN'S POSITIVE STORIES/AGENCY: In our classes, we try to give special attention to positive stories and women's agency. In gender studies, there is a tendency to focus on women's challenges. Women are presented as victims of poverty, violence, etc. This has been criticized by some researchers. We focus on traditional customs that support and protect women rather than oppress and harm them. When we do that, students are very much inspired.

These are positive stories of individual women, women's organizations and groups. Example: the AAU Yellow Movement, *Yewendoch Agarenet*, creates awareness about gender issues.

Why focus on positive stories? This is very important: 'Positioning women as weak or damaged subjects gives renewed legitimacy to patriarchally motivated discourses of control and protection.'⁶

2.2. Research

What are the lessons that I have learnt? In my research experience of so many years, I have realized that the level of oppression and injustice women experience in Ethiopia is beyond imagination.

In a research project I participated in, I was shocked by the poverty of urban women in Ethiopia. In this research, there was a woman who said she couldn't go to church because she didn't have a *Netela* [shawl] to wear. In my study on AAU student sexuality and reproductive health, I interviewed a student who was raped in the main campus and gave birth—she was an athlete and had been exercising at 5.00 a.m. She got pregnant and gave birth to child she was not able to take care of. When I heard her story, I was heart-broken.

These stories tell a lot about women's position in Ethiopia. While researching gender, we sometimes face ethical challenges. In gender research, the research participants are mostly women with some serious challenges. We want to support them. We want to show our solidarity with them during the research period. But it is not ethical to provide such support.

In my research on gender and urban poverty in Addis Ababa, I interviewed very poor women, some of whom had nothing to eat. We wanted to give support, but it is not ethical to provide money to your research participants. The research participants also expected support.

Literature on research relationships also shows that there may be misunderstandings, disappointments and exploitation of participants.

The university work environment is generally unsupportive. Studies indicate that the institutional culture at Ethiopian universities is hierarchical and male dominated. Women academic career experiences are largely shaped by society's gender role expectations. Numerous studies have documented the widespread marginalization of female scholars throughout their professional journeys in various societies. CGS has faced many challenges due to the gender insensitivity of the university management.

One major challenge CGS has encountered, for example, is the repeated relocation of the centre. The centre was relocated five times. This was a very challenging experience for us. We tried to argue that

6 Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, 'Thinking with Pleasure: Danger, Sexuality and Agency', in *Women, Sexuality and The Political Power of Pleasure*, eds. Susie Jolly, Andrea Cornwall and Kate Hawkins, London: Zed Books, 2013: 30.



the centre should not be relocated. The reasons include the interdisciplinary nature of the gender. The centre was working closely with the staff members of various departments. We provide different services to the university community, both staff and students.

We tried to explain our case to the members of the university management but they wouldn't listen. They said: '*Akaki tihedalachihu. Gender Akakim Alle.*' 'Go to Akaki. There is Gender also at Akaki'. We resisted, wrote letters and went in person and talked to officials of many government institutions, including the minister of education. We also talked to members of parliament but there was no response. We were surprised that we didn't obtain support from outside. Had we had a strong women's network within the university. Our voice could have been heard. But there is a lack of strong women's advocacy groups in Ethiopia, very few organizations, and they didn't have strong networks. That has not changed much.

Being located at Akaki, on the outskirts of the city of Addis Ababa, the centre has lost most of its contacts. It was difficult to organize public engagements as it was challenging for participants to travel to the outskirts of Addis Ababa to attend events.⁷ Mainly, the repeated moves of the centre have reduced staff member focus and motivation. In addition, the move contributed to the loss of institutional memory about the centre's research activities.

Another example of the challenges CGS has faced in the insensitivity of many of our colleagues. It was in a higher education diploma class, when there were some senior professors in the class. The curriculum has a gender section. One senior professor said that female graduate students are costing the university because they get pregnant after joining the programmes. He said some even seem to intentionally get pregnant after they joined the programme. He said these women should not be given extra semesters for completing their studies. What was surprising is that his point was supported by many of the senior professors. There was a heated debate in the class. I was really shocked. I also realized we have a lot to do to change people's perceptions about gender issues.

3. The way forward and possibilities for change

3.1. Changing the organizational culture is important

Of course, there are some efforts to address the unequal gender relations in academic institutions but they are not sufficient. There is a gender policy but women's participation in research and publication activities is very minimal. One of the strategies is to establish joint academic female staff networks within and outside the university. But this has not been properly implemented. Research indicates that the major challenge is a lack of a system of accountability for gender mainstreaming, or the integration of gender equality concerns. As a result: Gender mainstreaming = more women in organizations = getting rid of the focus on women.⁸ In other words, everybody is answerable for gender equality commitments but nobody is ultimately responsible for getting it done.

3.2. Creating solidarity through collaboration and networking

The solutions to our problems that we face as women researchers should come from us. We should not

7 Center for Gender Studies, 'Program review'(Unpublished report), Center for Gender Studies: Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa: 2013.

8 Author's Note: In gender mainstreaming the focus has been on increasing the number of women. Examples could be putting more women in leadership positions or including more women in training programs. The focus has been on the representation of women. However, we cannot achieve meaningful changes unless we properly address the structural issues of gender inequalities. But unless structural issues of gender inequalities are properly addressed, meaningful changes cannot be obtained.

expect the university or other institutions to address our problems. Networking and local networks are essential.

KEY BENEFITS OF NETWORKING: An efficient way to use collective power to achieve a common goal is through a network. Members of a network could create spaces of belonging.⁹

LOCAL NETWORKS: I was a member of the Women's Health Research Working Group but at present I am not an active member due to personal reasons. We were able to publish three articles in a special issue of a journal. In our group, most members are medical doctors. It is good to know 18 doctors in Ethiopia. Whenever a family member has a medical problem, I call my network members and I ask their medical advice. That is a big advantage.

CHALLENGES OF NETWORKS: It is not always difficult to form networks but sustaining them is a challenge. We need to be aware of the challenges of networks. The issues are about the decision-making processes in networks, about the sufficient representation of all types of members and if current needs are being satisfied by networks. Some of the internal challenges identified with networks are the complex task of coordinating a large number of members, as well as attracting and keeping the interest of different members.

The issue of difference is another challenge. One question asked about women's networks or solidarity is the issue of difference. If we are different, how can we have a common agenda? Members have different identities. In academic networks, literature shows that age differences are important. Members come from different disciplines and that is also a challenge because members have different needs. The issues related to addressing differences are a particular challenge in gender studies and have been theorized a lot. As one writer sums up: 'It has been demonstrated that the biological similarity of all women cannot be taken for granted as the basis of solidarity (sisterhood) in the face of a multitude of differences that emerge contextually. Some women occupy a position of power.'¹⁰

To form strong networks, we need to give attention to differences. We need to acknowledge the multiple power differentials that exist among women while still allowing for concerted action. In the case of women academics, we have common challenges that we need to address. We want to work in an environment free of discrimination. We want to publish. And we seek academic promotion. In the end: Women can form 'alliances across their differences.'¹¹

9 Macoun, Alissa, and Danielle Miller. "Surviving (thriving) in academia: Feminist support networks and women ECRs." *Journal of Gender Studies* 23, no. 3 (2014): 287-301.

10 Oyeronke Oyewumi, ed., 'African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood', Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2003, 40

11 Ramazulungu, Caroline & Janet Holland. 'Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices', London: SAGE Publications, 2002, 19.

4. Conclusion

My advice to young female researchers:

- Make more time for research and reading: Allocate one afternoon, or one day to do research and work on your publications.
- Learn to say ‘No’ to unnecessary assignments. Or as one writer puts it, we should say No, a ‘high-quality no.’¹²
- Encourage our fellow women colleagues more: It is good to say nice things to our colleagues. It could be something such as, ‘You look nice today.’ This boosts her energy. Encouraging a woman is important. After her presentation, encourage her to write more. Women do not often receive words of encouragement. This is because they always give and give. They don’t receive. So they would be happy when you encourage them or thank them.
- Have more time to relax and have fun. Having a good time with friends—very helpful!

THANK YOU!



12 Tolle, Eckhart. ‘A New Earth: Awakening to your Life’s Purpose’, Penguin Life, 2006, 216.

Annex II: EWNET launch event agenda

Date: 6 February 2025

Time: 9.00 a.m. – 2.30 p.m.

Venue: Skylight Hotel, Addis Ababa

Time	Activity	Responsibilities
9.00 a.m. – 9.15 a.m.	Registration and networking	RVI–EWNET facilitators
9.15 a.m. – 9.25 a.m.	Welcome address and introduction to the workshop objectives and agenda	Emcee: Yasmin Bushra
9.25 a.m. – 9.45 a.m.	Opening remarks by Semir Yusuf, head of Ethiopia office, RVI Opening remarks by Chiara Galletti, British embassy representative	Rapporteur: Hewan Endashaw
9.45 a.m. – 10.15 a.m.	Keynote address by Mulumebet Zenebe: ‘Chronicling Presence. Women in Ethiopian academia’	Rapporteur: Hewan Endashaw
10.15 a.m. – 11.00 a.m.	Presentation by Firehiwot Sintayehu: ‘The state of women researchers in Ethiopia’ Q & A, with open discussion	Moderator: Dalaya Ashenafi, deputy principal, EWNET Discussant: Mercy Fekadu, associate professor, IPSS
11.00 a.m. – 11:15 a.m.	Tea/coffee break and networking	Hotel
11.15 a.m. – 12.15 p.m.	Live testimonies: experiences of women researchers Panellists: Muna Abubeker Ibrahim (PhD), AAU Weynished Girma (PhD), president, Addis Ababa Persons with Disabilities Association Marshet Tefera, PhD candidate at the College of Development Studies, AAU Samrawit Tassew, consultant on policy and communications Q & A, with open discussion	Moderator: Sarah Bushra, independent curator of visual and performing arts Rapporteur: Sofanit Demissie Interpreter: Hanna Degife
12.15 p.m. – 12.45 p.m.	Official launch of EWNET by Netsanet Gebremichael, EWNET principal lead: EWNET mission and vision Introduce and official launch of EWNET Launch the website Q & A, with open discussion	Presenter: Netsanet Gebremichael, EWNET principal lead Brook Abdu, website presenter, RVI Rapporteur: Sofanit Demissie
12.45 p.m. – 1.00 p.m.	Networking	Emcee: Yasmin Bushra
1.00 p.m. – 2.00 p.m.	Lunch	Hotel



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