

WOMEN IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES IN ETHIOPIA

THE CASE OF ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY

Firehiwot Sintayehu and Netsanet Gebremichael



October 2025



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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.

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.

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DESIGN/LAYOUT

Maggie Dougherty

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the increasing number of female researchers in the social sciences and humanities in Ethiopia, their career progress is often limited by a combination of institutional and societal factors, as occurs elsewhere on the continent.¹ Typically, African universities remain male-dominated spaces with norms and stereotypes that deter female faculty from progressing as quickly as their male colleagues.²

In Ghana, authors such as Rabaru and Adusah-Karikari cite the impact of culture, lack of female role models and mentors, family-work tension, discriminatory practices in institutions, inability to form women's networks, and other socio-cultural factors as restraining female academics from progressing in their careers.³ Similarly, Mama argues that deep-rooted patriarchal institutions in Africa maintain gender inequality: '...while the mainstream scholarship continues to display androcentrism and an unwillingness to engage with gender, and indeed many of the other social divisions that organize our societies.'⁴ A study conducted by Adiam et al. illustrates that women at Addis Ababa University (AAU) had limited experience in conducting research as a result of multifaceted challenges including work-family tension, low salary, lack of networks, limited internet and library access and lack of training opportunities.⁵

This preliminary assessment is part of the launch exercise of the Ethiopian Women Researchers Network (EWNET), which is dedicated to creating a vibrant, supportive network for Ethiopian women researchers in the social sciences and humanities. Focusing on Addis Ababa University as a pioneering higher institution in the country, the study looks into the status of women within these disciplines examining their representation, research activities, mobility challenges and

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- 1 Addis Ababa University saw an increase in female faculty staff from 11.1 per cent in 2008–09 to 16.9 per cent in 2020. Kidist Mekasha, 'Women's Role and Their Styles of Leadership', *International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies* 9/3 (2017): 28. Adiam Nega et al., 'Experience of Research Undertaking among Women Academia at Addis Ababa University: A Qualitative Study', *Ethiopian Journal of Health Development* 35/2 (2021): 22–29.
 - 2 Akua O. Britwum et al., 'Institutionalising Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana', *Rwandan Journal of Education* 2/1 (2013): 4–19.
 - 3 Patricia Rabaru, 'Motivation of Women Academics and Balancing Family and Career', *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 5/1 (2015): 359–70; Adjoa Adusah-Karikari, *Experiences of Women in Higher Education: A Study of Women Faculty and Administrators in Selected Public Universities in Ghana*, PhD dissertation, Ohio University, Athens, 2008.
 - 4 Amina Mama, 'The Challenges of Feminism: Gender, Ethics and Responsible Academic Freedom in African Universities', *The Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 9/1–2 (2011): 3.
 - 5 Adiam et al., 'Experience of Research Undertaking'.
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other factors that influence their academic engagement. AAU was selected as it is a pioneering university in the country. The assessment reveals that despite AAU's leading position in research, women are underrepresented among the faculty and in their research output, as evidenced by publication rates in peer-reviewed journals.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The assessment used primary and secondary data. Secondary sources include journal articles and research reports authored on women's engagement in research in higher education in Ethiopia and beyond. In addition, primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with female researchers from the social sciences and humanities at AAU. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured checklist that was developed based on the assessment objectives (See Annex 1).

A total of eight female researchers were sampled from the social sciences and humanities. Four of the participants were senior researchers who had obtained their PhDs and had more than ten years of experience in academia, while the other four were junior faculty who had not completed their PhD and had fewer than ten years of experience. The informants were sampled using a non-random purposeful sampling technique. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Raw data from interviews were processed in their textual form and categorized under each research objective for further analysis. Then the major ideas were summarized and discussed.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMING OF PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

Feminism's contribution to academia in Africa has been both institutional and intellectual. At the institutional level, it has driven reforms aimed at addressing gender disparity. Intellectually, it challenged patriarchy in scholarship by demystifying androcentrism.⁶ Otunga and Ojwang wrote that at the turn of the twenty-first century, men constituted more than 80 per cent of staff and 75 per cent of students across 400 African universities.⁷ While progress has been made, women remain underrepresented, holding just 24 per cent of academic staff roles and 2.5 per cent of vice-chancellor positions in sub-Saharan African Universities.⁸ Barnes argues that African universities that portray men as thinkers and aggressive debaters cannot be considered

6 Mama, 'Challenges of Feminism'.

7 Teresa Barnes, 'Politics of the Mind and Body: Gender and Institutional Culture in African Universities', *Feminist Africa* 8 (2007): 8-25.

8 Edmund A. Tarimo and Innocent A. Swai, 'Female Academics' Career Development—Stories from Senior Female Academics in Tanzania's Public Universities', *African Journal of Governance and Development* 13/1 (2024): 22. Accessed 31 July 2025, <https://doi.org/10.36369/2616-9045/2024/v13i1a2>; UNESCO, *A New Generation: 25 Years of Efforts for Gender Equality in Education*, Paris: UNESCO, 2019. Accessed 31 July 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/2019-gender>.

gender-neutral spaces that have integrated women.⁹ The inclusion of women in these spaces should extend beyond mere statistics, as it carries social and symbolic significance.

Mama uses the Feminist Ethics of Care to emphasize the responsibilities of universities to promote gender equality. Universities are public institutions delivering public goods and educating the next generation, and are tasked with knowledge production.¹⁰ The Feminist Ethics of Care redefines the conventional understanding of the morality of justice, which was long presumed to be universal and referred to free, equal, and independent individuals in the Western sense. Ethics of Care instead argues that individuals enter relationships willingly or unwillingly, and that the social groups that individuals belong to determine their identities.¹¹ She argues the arena for care is not limited to the family and should incorporate all acts that require significant concern and effort. It rather expands into what Held describes as ‘care institutions of the welfare state, to the social ties that bind groups together, to the bonds on which political and social institutions can be built, and even to the global concerns that citizens of the world can share’.¹² As feminists, it is critical to understand care beyond its function as labour to integrate crucial dimensions such as motive (the reason why care is given) and value (the importance placed in it).

Universities have attempted to play their part in fighting patriarchy as reflected in mission statements and legal commitments to gender equality. Nonetheless, they fall behind in terms of ensuring the academic environment upholds the ethics of gender equality.¹³ In many instances, gender policies are put in place in order to comply with requirements or to enhance the reputation of the institutions rather than to substantively transform institutional gendered power relations.¹⁴

The situation at AAU reflects the patterns across Africa that Mama examined through a feminist lens. The patriarchal environment at the university manifests in terms of the low percentage of women academic staff as well as their limited engagement in research and publication. In response, the university has established the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusive with a mandate to ‘...create an environment where no gender stereotype exists and where all females are fairly represented, equity and inclusiveness are maintained’. Moreover, AAU launched a

9 Barnes, ‘Politics of the Mind’.

10 Mama, ‘Challenges of Feminism’.

11 Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

12 Held, *Ethics of Care*.

13 Mama, ‘Challenges of Feminism’.

14 Oluwakemi Igiebor, ‘Can institutional gender policies advance women to academic leadership positions in Africa?’, *Africa at LSE Blog*, 8 March 2024. Accessed 31 July 2025, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2024/03/08/can-institutional-gender-policies-advance-women-to-academic-leadership-positions-in-africa/>.

gender policy in 2015.¹⁵ The outcome of these measures, however, remains limited, as women still comprise only 21 per cent of total academic staff.¹⁶

In Ethiopia, while the percentage of female students enrolled in higher education is growing at an annual rate of 16.4 per cent, double the male rate. Some 5.3 per cent of women in the country are enrolled in higher education which stands in stark contrast to 10.9 per cent for men and dramatically below the global average of 41.6 per cent for women.¹⁷ In addition, the representation of female academic staff is recorded as 15 per cent.¹⁸ This gender gap is worse in leadership as only 10.6 per cent of executive management positions were held by women in the 45 public universities of the country as of 2019–20.¹⁹

Women in higher education institutions in Ethiopia are less engaged in research and community services, due to various reasons including the paucity of women-friendly environments as well as a lack of networking opportunities. Women are also not engaged as much as their male colleagues due to their multiple roles in society. As women are primary caregivers, they have more challenges to navigate and hence struggle to find the time to dedicate to research work in addition to their teaching responsibilities. This lack of supportive institutional structure for women faculty in the university creates a conundrum of their presence as absence due to a lack of substantive and meaningful engagement of those who are already present within the university.

Bezawit and Singh argue that women's ability to progress in their academic career is influenced by personal, institutional and social factors.²⁰ Lack of confidence and poor self-image, as well as their socialization into typical gender roles in society, are considered personal and social factors, while institutional glass ceilings result from gender-based discrimination and stereotypes are considered an institutional aspect of barriers for women academics to progress in their careers. The study found that factors such as work–family conflict, patriarchal power structure and disproportional access to resources affect women's progress in their academic careers.

15 Addis Ababa University, 'Gender Policy', November 2015.

16 Jemal Oumer and Mulugeta Yilma, 'Redressing Gender Inequality in Academic Rank and Leadership at Addis Ababa University', *The Ethiopian Journal of Education* 44/1 (2024): 48.

17 Semela Tesfaye and Meseret Tamiru, 'Gendered Policies in Ethiopian Higher Education: Are Policy Promises Vanishing with Time?', *Higher Education Policy* 37 (2023): 568–89.

18 World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2021* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2021). Accessed 31 July 2025, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2021/>. Easaw Alemayehu, 'Gender and Leadership in Ethiopian Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities—The Case of Addis Ababa University', *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal* 25/S2 (2021): 1–22. Accessed 31 July 2025, <https://www.abacademies.org/articles/gender-and-leadership-in-ethiopian-higher-education-challenges-and-opportunities-the-case-of-addis-ababa-university-12332.html>.

19 UNESCO and Bella, *A New Generation*.

20 Getachew Bezawit and Manju Singh, 'Women Empowerment in Public Higher Education Institutions in Ethiopia', *Developing Country Studies* 9/4 (2019): 1–11. Accessed 31 July 2025, <https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/DCS/article/view/47573>.



ACCOUNTING FOR PRESENCE

Addis Ababa University (AAU) has a total of 46 female faculty actively engaged in teaching and research in the social sciences and humanities (Figure 1). This represents 16.2 per cent of all staff in these subject areas.

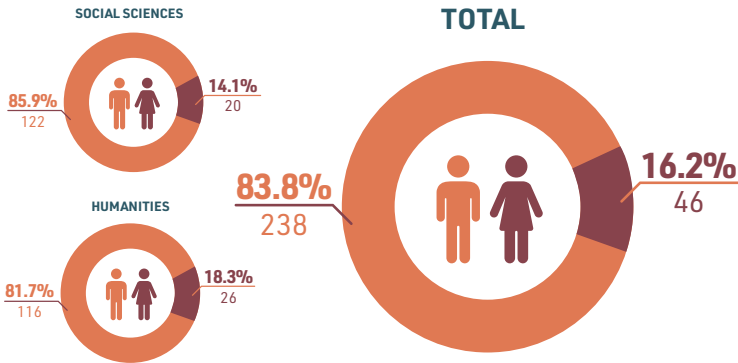


Figure 1. Proportion of Female Staff in Social Sciences and Humanities (AAU)

Duration seems to be central in determining career trajectories. With time they gain exposure, networks and credibility. Those female academics who had more than ten years of research experience are able to apply for grants as principal investigators based on their track record of leading research projects. Women enhance their experience and build their reputations by writing proposals and conducting research, which enables them lead research projects and publish. Yet those with less experience struggle to get any opportunity to engage in research apart from through their thesis or dissertation. When less senior members get opportunities to engage in research their role tends to be limited. Some academics interviewed had mentors from their departments. These women encountered fewer challenges to explore research opportunities within the university and beyond compared to the many more who did not have a mentor.

While being a principal investigator was relatively common among senior women researchers at AAU, publishing in peer-reviewed journals remains a challenge, primarily as a result of the bottlenecks that women encounter in institutional and societal settings.²¹ Emezat found that only 12 women have appeared as authors or co-authors of articles across 11 issues within

21 Emezat H. Mengesha, ‘Female Voice in Academic Publications: The “Female Voice”’, *Ethiopian Journal of Development Research* 39/1 (2017): 103–29. Adiam et al., ‘Experience of Research Undertaking’, 22.

more than 40 years of publications by the *Ethiopian Journal of Development Research*. Similarly, Robin Wilson (2012) as cited by Emezat shows that women were much less represented in publications accessed through the JSTOR digital archive.²² The number of Ethiopian women published in peer-reviewed journals is limited by their representation in academia, which in turn is a factor of discriminatory practices across society. Some women have managed to advance in their academic career as they are serving as principal investigators while also publishing in journals. Nonetheless, research activity and output are skewed towards men. This is partly because some women do not take the initiative to assert themselves but largely as a result of systemic barriers. The academic system is neither inclusive nor transparent. There are no clear guidelines or formal processes for how to pursue opportunities. Instead, many decisions and project participations rely on informal networks and personal relationships, which inherently disadvantage women. The following sections look into the specific challenges.

22 Emezat, 'Female Voice in Academic Publications'.

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS: NETWORK CHALLENGES

Most networks at the university are largely inaccessible to women. Several interviewees reported a lack of guidance and clarity during their early careers, forcing them to navigate opportunities independently. The absence of accessible formal or informal networks left them isolated.²³ Networks are typically based on academic discipline, cohort, friendship or shared experiences, which are often easier for men to participate in. These networks, while challenging for all newcomers, are especially exclusionary for women.²⁴ Women often struggle to find mentors or establish their networks. Furthermore, informal networks, which may not always be safe for women, can systematically marginalize them. This exclusion impacts hiring and promotion processes, as opportunities are frequently secured through recommendations within these networks rather than through open competition. One of the informants emphasizes that these challenges are difficult to address, as they often take subtle forms that are hard to define and regulate:

For me, it is easier to navigate networks within my institute because the bureaucracy is less complex. However, the bureaucracy at AAU is much more complicated if I want to apply to major calls. Applying to large calls with international funding institutions has its own formality which requires approval from higher officials. Even when I am required to get a formal approval from the university as an institution, it is much easier for the men because they know the officials in their informal networks so they just need to call them and explain.²⁵

Women researchers with longer years of service at the university had better opportunities to engage in research. Here, intersectionality is relevant in understanding the different levels of engagement. Intersectionality was for first used by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to speak to the marginalization of black women which the feminist and anti-racial theories failed to explain on

23 The establishment of Women's research group in the Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities and the Ethiopian Women Researchers Network (EWNET) will play a significant role in facilitating networking opportunities among women academics in and outside of campus.

24 Interviews 1 and 2.

25 Interview 7.

their own.²⁶ In this context, this concept is relevant as not all women in academia encounter similar challenges. Many of the informants are of the opinion that those with less experience are more prone to these challenges as they are exploring opportunities without sufficient guidance. Hence, in addition to gender there is a need to consider how different categories of women are affected by the patriarchal environment. The senior researchers interviewed, who spent more than ten years at the university, are more active in research as they have managed to navigate these challenges and are engaging in collaborative projects.

Adiam et al. found senior researchers possessed significantly greater experience in securing grants and conducting research, both nationally and internationally.²⁷ Similarly, those with more than ten years of experience at the university and with PhDs are in a better position to lead and participate in research. An informant who had withdrawn from her PhD studies states the following:

For me, the senior-junior divide is more disempowering as compared to gender relations. In my experience, I've encountered significant challenges due to senior colleagues holding an unfair advantage, limiting my ability to achieve better outcomes. Whenever there are training or research opportunities at my department, priority is given to senior colleagues. I was also unable to compete for the women's research fund at Addis Ababa University because I do not have a PhD.²⁸

Network challenges also inform women's lower publication rates. Women are often underrepresented in decision-making forums such as editorial boards. The implication is men, already favoured by the system, gain better access to publications either through friendship, the favourable attitudes of editors or both.²⁹

Women in the social sciences and humanities were unable to foster strong informal or formal networks. Such networks are essential to hold intergenerational dialogue among female scholars, providing opportunities to learn from the experiences of senior women. The lack of such networks meant that women often struggled in isolation without adequate support.

26 Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989/1 (1989): 139-67. Accessed 31 July 2025, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf>.

27 Adiam et al., 'Experience of Research Undertaking'.

28 Interview 8.

29 Emezat, 'Female Voice'.

GENDER STEREOTYPES IN ACADEMIA

Gendered stereotypes in society follow women to their professional spaces. One informant recounts the following from her early days at AAU:

About 20 years ago, during my early career, the institute I work with was reestablishing its journal and appointing editors, as well as assigning roles for seminars and other positions. The total number of staff at the institute was around 20 men and only three women. I recall that discussions on role assignments progressed without consulting the women, and key academic roles were filled by men through their networks and recommendations. However, as the discussion neared its conclusion, the committee decided that someone needed to handle snacks and tea breaks during seminars. Without any clear criteria, I was assigned to this role. I found this deeply offensive, as it was based on my traditional household responsibilities despite my academic qualifications. I immediately rejected the role.³⁰

Informants state that male colleagues assumed that women lack the time to fully engage in research, leading to concerns that they might slow down projects. This results in women being excluded from important roles and assigned tasks that do not allow them to showcase their capacity. A senior researcher from the humanities observes that men often confidently take up spaces, make decisions and represent women, often speaking for them rather than allowing women to assert their own voices. The same informant states:

I led one team, composed of three women and one man, while the other two teams were led by men. I recruited my team members and chose the research topic. The project required extensive fieldwork, including travel to the countryside, and one of the women, who had just given birth, also participated. Issues arose when my male colleague started receiving instructions from the director of the institute on behalf of the entire project, bypassing me as the team leader. I discovered that the director had contacted the male subordinate on my team. When I confronted him, he explained that he believed women didn't have the time for major tasks, including fieldwork.³¹

Women's involvement in research is mostly limited, as women are frequently invited as 'gender experts', creating an expectation that all female academics should specialize in gender studies.³² As a result, many women feel confined to this label, even when they are capable of conducting research in other fields as well. This limits women's academic scope, as they are often expected to focus on so-called 'soft areas' in both teaching and research. One of the female researchers interviewed states:

30 Interview 1

31 Interview 1

32 We believe this aspect should be studied further, to further understand the institutionalized nature of gendered practice in research activities.

Significant barriers arise when women attempt to challenge these stereotypes and venture into areas considered outside the traditional boundaries for female scholars. These constraints not only marginalize women's contributions but also hinder their ability to demonstrate their expertise in broader disciplines.³³

The tokenistic engagement of women in research groups is also identified as a challenge. The recent trend of encouraging research teams to include women has led to their inclusion as members while not substantively engaging in research activities. In these cases, women may be involved in projects even if it is outside their area of expertise or interest, or without having the necessary skills. Such modalities of inclusion reduce their role to merely fulfilling numerical requirements, rather than allowing for meaningful contributions. As a result, they miss opportunities to develop their expertise. A young researcher from the social sciences states:

Even when women choose different fields, there is an expectation to relate their work to gender issues. For example, a woman researching climate change might be urged to include how it affects women or examine its gendered impacts, which can redirect the focus of their study.³⁴

Similar to challenges related to networks, the stereotypes are impactful in terms of deterring women from having more professional roles in the initial stages of their career. In many instances, young women in academia are assigned administrative tasks instead of academic responsibilities. These women are mainly tasked with managing exams, including grading papers, and do not have the opportunity to engage in research.³⁵

Women researchers have their own ways of dealing with the stereotypes in the professional space which at times discourages them from progressing along the career ladder. At times they waste their time and energy comparing themselves with the men and strive to show their presence and capability, hoping to be given a chance to demonstrate their abilities. The resulting exhaustion leads them to prematurely believe they cannot measure up to men. Women researchers struggle with lack of confidence, fear of rejection and the perception that women must do much more to succeed.³⁶

CHALLENGES AT THE HOUSEHOLD AND COMMUNITY LEVEL


Women researchers face challenges not only within their institutions but also in the community, particularly during data collection. Biased attitudes create obstacles. Even in formal institutions and offices, similar stereotypes persist, where conversations often begin with men, ignoring

33 Interview 3.

34 Interview 3.

35 Interview 5.

36 Interview 2.



women researchers despite them holding a higher position. In rural areas, it is particularly challenging for women due to cultural norms. Women researchers are unable to freely move by themselves in some instances and areas as they face the risk of gender-based violence. The women researchers interviewed find it exhausting to constantly defend themselves and make their presence known. Many female researchers deplete their energy trying to prove themselves. For some researchers, data is obtained better when the researcher immerses themselves. This, however, poses a challenge for female researchers who find it difficult to obtain such data from male members of the community. One of the informants working on conflict states:

It is not the same type of data that women researchers and men researchers obtain from the field. There is a research project that I am working on with others, and in one instance, I travelled to the field with another female researcher. At the time, the data that we were able to obtain was about women's problems in the community. We were trying to find out about the security challenges, which were not easy for us to uncover. When our male colleagues travelled for data collection, the dynamics were totally different. They were able to obtain rich data on the security challenges in the area.³⁷

While some cultures may treat women better than others, the overall societal norms do not promote their empowerment. Women in Ethiopia face challenges from nearly every direction—not just from the community, friends or religion, but from all aspects of life and all at once. These societal pressures dictate how women should live and what they should aspire to, creating a rigid set of expectations.

The societal and familial expectations placed on women, particularly regarding household roles and caregiving for children, have been identified as a challenge for female researchers. Maintaining work-life balance is challenging for women researchers. Many women are conducting their PhDs, are challenged by their family responsibilities after marriage. Once they are married and have children, they struggle to complete their dissertation as they try to balance family life with their professional aspirations.

Adiam et al. have also identified women researchers having children, creating gaps in their careers.³⁸ This particularly creates an obstacle in instances where women lack supportive partners and family members. Married women with supportive partners were able to engage in more research. The constant shift between tasks makes it hard for female researchers to gather their thoughts and get back into a productive rhythm. One of the senior researchers interviewed recites the following:

During my PhD research, fieldwork was difficult as I often had to check on my children, which disrupted my focus and led to disagreements with my husband, especially when

³⁷ Interview 7.

³⁸ Adiam et al., 'Experiences of Research Undertaking'.

the children became ill in my absence. These responsibilities hindered my ability to meet academic deadlines, transcribe and organize data, and find time to write and read.³⁹

There are also biological struggles that women encounter. Factors such as menstruation, pregnancy and maternity can cause physical discomfort and emotional fluctuations, which may require women to take breaks from their academic work. These interruptions can delay research and hinder career progress, leading to missed opportunities or, in the worst cases, exclusion from the academic system.

MOBILITY CHALLENGES

Most of the interviewees argue that women researchers often encounter challenges in conducting fieldwork alone and typically require accompaniment. As a result, they travel with colleagues or hire individuals to protect them from harm. A young researcher states:

Fieldwork is often unsuitable for women to conduct alone due to safety concerns and the risk of harassment, a reality I personally experienced. This has made it essential for her to bring someone along during field visits.⁴⁰

Female researchers frequently encounter scepticism from respondents, who may doubt their authority, seek bureaucratic verification or question their competence. In some cases, women are subjected to ridicule, verbal abuse or even physical attacks, especially when researching sensitive topics. Such risks deter many women from conducting fieldwork, leading them to rely on secondary data or to collaborate with co-authors, often male, for added security.

Traveling to the field is more expensive for women because of the extra cost of ensuring that they have safe transportation, which may require them to hire a vehicle and also obtain the support of a local assistant. In contrast, men find it easier to travel using more affordable transportation and without assistants unless they are working in the area of a conflict. One of the informants says:

A colleague of mine, who was a female researcher, once travelled to a conflict area. The conflict was a minor one. In that area, there were events of rape which meant that she was unable to spend the night there. She went without a car as she had to cross a river to get there. This meant that she had to walk a long distance [to a crossing point] by herself as the boats were also not operating anymore since the river was too high. She struggled to get out of that situation.⁴¹

39 Interview 1.

40 Interview 5.

41 Interview 7.

The potential violations that women encounter are more severe in conflict zones. Despite the presence of research opportunities in conflict areas, it is men that predominately fill such positions as the risks are higher for women.

Women use various mechanisms to cope with the mobility challenges. One of the mechanisms they use is choosing research sites that are considered safe. Many mention that it is particularly difficult for women to travel outside Addis Ababa for fieldwork considering the conflict situation in the country. Others synchronize their fieldwork schedules with male colleagues or friends to ensure safer travel. One of the women researchers, however, states that she is able to conduct her research work despite the difficult conflict situation in Ethiopia:

I consider travel an exciting adventure and willingly take risks. Despite the ongoing conflicts in Ethiopia, I have frequently travelled for fieldwork, including to areas like Benishangul-Gumuz and Assosa, near the Sudanese border. Even during the war in northern Ethiopia, when flights were there, I was stranded in Lalibela but continued my journey by car, traveling through conflict areas such as Tigray, Gondar, and Bahir Dar due to my work in conflict analysis, which often requires direct involvement in such areas.⁴²

NAVIGATING INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIETAL OBSTACLES

In an attempt to overcome institutional and societal barriers, women in research tend to amplify notions of safety and domestic responsibilities over academia, step aside beyond the university and step forward in the digital space. Female researchers that have family responsibilities cope with their challenges using different approaches. Some manage to balance between their role as researchers and domestically, which often creates with a lot of stress which has led to health problems, while others prioritize their family responsibilities, putting aside their research and publication work. Young researchers state that they defer marriage as a necessary step toward establishing themselves in academia.

The shortage of informal or formal networks that enable women researchers implies that women have to explore funding opportunities outside the university. At times, this can mean women are not aware of research opportunities that would also lead to publication, and so advance their careers. Women at the initial stages of their career look for opportunities outside the university as they are not able to be part of the networks that exist within.⁴³ One of the informants at the initial stage of her research career mentions:

In the lack of sufficient networks for women researchers in academia, they can benefit much from online learning, which is accessible to everyone, offering free certificates and providing exposure to different forms of education. It helps people to realize that they can compete globally with the right resources and training.⁴⁴

42 Interview 3.

43 Interview 2.

44 Interview 2.



BEYOND BARRIERS

The opportunities that exist for women researchers emanate from the changing context in academia with the emergence of more female academic staff, institutional initiatives to build the capacity of women researchers, and international research funding opportunities. Since 2015, this has been accompanied by AAU's gender policy.

The situation for female researchers is improving as experienced women are entering academia. There are some initiatives for women researchers, with women researchers' groups established in the Colleges of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Language Studies, and Journalism and Communications, while the university has dedicated a separate funding scheme for female researchers and women could benefit from scholarship opportunity dedicated to women to pursue their masters studies, women researchers at the early stages of their careers, find it difficult to access women-only funding schemes as it is highly competitive.

Having more female researchers helps break down existing stereotypes. These women serve as role models for the next generation of women researchers, encouraging them to seek out opportunities even when they are not immediately offered to them.

The Women's Research Group in Health Science has shown progress in terms of helping women win grants and publish their work. The women's research groups in the Social Sciences and Humanities started operating recently and should also be able to do the same. Women also make use of informal networks, including a close-knit group of women who meet regularly to track each other's progress, providing mutual inspiration and support. Women who are as qualified and competent as men can also benefit from international funding opportunities aimed at the Global South, as such calls encourage women to apply.⁴⁵



CONCLUSION

The research attested that existing networks remain male-dominated and largely exclude women, limiting access to opportunities, mentorship, and support. Gender stereotypes also contribute towards relegating women's role in assignments and limiting them to specific research areas, often perceived as less challenging.

Women researchers grapple with the challenges of maintaining work-family balance, overcoming mobility challenges, as well as countering stereotypes within their institutions and the community. These challenges significantly reduce their access to research opportunities and lead to multifaceted obstacles in their research endeavours.

Despite these obstacles, women researchers are coping by asserting themselves at their institutions and advocating for change. They navigate through stereotypes and operational mobility challenges through various mechanisms. Women researchers use mini-networks within their departments and institutes to support one another and advocate for the inclusion of women. The increasing number of women in the social sciences and humanities is also likely to play a positive role.

RECOMMENDATIONS

EWNET may undertake the following activities in order to enhance women's engagement in social science and humanities research:

- **Document the experience of female researchers in Ethiopia:** Women will be able to share their personal and professional experiences through the network, as it can help define Ethiopian women researchers by their own unique challenges.
- **Foster formal and informant connections and relationships among women:** Networks of women researchers should not only focus on professional work but also foster informal connections and relationships. Discussions and experience-sharing sessions are essential to help women researchers navigate through challenges. Creating awareness, especially for junior academics, is crucial in helping them define themselves and their goals.
- **Capacity building initiatives:** Women researchers in social sciences and humanities would benefit from training on time management, communication skills and grant writing, skills that are essential for women to succeed in academia and advance their careers.

- **Platforms to apply for grants:** Women will be able to work together if they manage to win research grants through collaborations. EWNET may serve as a platform to enable female researchers to identify funding and collaboration opportunities.
- **Platforms for exchange and learning:** Creating platforms for women to share their work, present research and learn from each other is crucial. This would help women understand who is working in what areas, share challenges and discuss coping strategies. These exchanges may also be in the form of mentorship through which senior researchers support and collaborate with junior researchers.



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ANNEX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

EWNET is a pioneering initiative aimed at fostering intergenerational dialogue among women researchers across diverse backgrounds in Ethiopia. Recognizing the significant yet often overlooked contributions of women in academia, EWNET seeks to establish a robust platform for collaboration, networking and the dissemination of research findings.

The objective of this research is to conduct a preliminary assessment of the status of women within the social sciences and humanities in Ethiopia. This study will illuminate their representation, research activities, mobility challenges and other pertinent factors that influence their academic engagement.

Personal and Demographic:

- What is your full name?
- What is your current academic affiliation (university, institute, etc.)?
- What is your highest academic qualification?
- In what year did you receive your highest qualification?
- What is your specific field of research/academic discipline?

Research:

- Have you experienced any gender-based discrimination in academia? If so, can you provide specific examples?
- What are the challenges you encounter as a female researcher? What barriers do you face regarding research dissemination and access to academic networks?
- How do family and community expectations influence your career progression?
- What are some of the unique cultural or social barriers that women researchers face in Ethiopia?
- Are there gender-based differences in access to resources (funding, equipment, mentorship) in your field? If so, what informs such gender-based differences in accessing resources?
- What are some mobility challenges that you encounter in relation to research?
- How do you navigate those challenges?
- What type of opportunities are there for female researchers? How does your institution promote gender equity in research?
- How equitable do you perceive the academic hiring and promotion processes to be in your field?

- Have you experienced any gender-based discrimination in academia? If so, can you provide specific examples?
- Have you had any mentors who significantly helped you in your career? If so, how did they help you in advancing your career, if not, how were you affected by not having a mentor?
- Are you currently involved in mentoring other researchers? If so, how do you support them? If not, why not?
- Are you aware of any existing networks for women researchers? Do you belong to any? If you belong to any network for women researchers, what type of activities do you participate in? How do you benefit from the network?
- If there are no such networks, why are they not there?

Identifying Opportunities and Potential Solutions

- How could institutional policies better support women researchers in terms of accessing funds, capacity building, etc?
- What types of training or development opportunities do you think are most needed for women researchers in Ethiopia?
- What steps can we take to increase women's engagement within academic communities?
- What strategies can be used to foster stronger peer networks among women researchers?
- What are the most effective approaches for improving access to resources for women researchers?
- What type of capacity building programs (e.g. academic writing, grant proposal writing) would improve your work?
- How can we ensure women's research is highlighted and influential?
- What is the most pressing issue that we must address to help women researchers?
- How can initiatives like EWNET help support women in academia and research?

ANNEX 2: INTERVIEW LIST

1. Senior female researcher from humanities, 31 December 2024.
2. Junior female researcher from social sciences, 2 January 2025.
3. Senior female researcher from social sciences, 2 January 2025.
4. Senior female researcher from social sciences, 2 January 2025.
5. Junior female researcher from social sciences, 3 January 2025.
6. Junior female researcher from humanities, 10 January 2025.
7. Senior female researcher from social sciences, 10 January 2025.
8. Junior female researcher from humanities, 10 January 2025.



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