

26 MARCH 2026  
ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

# SHECONF 2026

International Conference on  
Social Sciences and Humanities

*Event report*



**Rift Valley Institute**  
MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK



**Ethiopian Women  
Researchers Network**



**Peace  
Research  
Facility**

## **SHECONF 2026: INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES EVENT REPORT**

### **The Ethiopian Women Researchers Network**

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

### **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**

The Rift Valley Institute works in Eastern and Central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development. Copyright © Rift Valley Institute 2026. This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

### **Design/Layout**

Sue MacDonald, SMD Design

## Opening the conversation: Knowledge, visibility and institutional space

Convening scholars across disciplines and generations, SHECONF 2026 brought research on gender, governance, conflict and knowledge production into sharp focus. The conference revealed how local realities, often overlooked in policy and theory, are reshaping conversations on power, inclusion and the future of research in Ethiopia.

SHECONF 2026 opened with a clear institutional and intellectual agenda: To foreground local knowledge within policy discourse while strengthening the visibility of women researchers in Ethiopia. Welcoming participants, Brook Abdu of the Rift Valley Institute situated the conference within RVI's broader regional mission, marking its 25th anniversary and ongoing work in conflict research and knowledge production across eastern and central Africa.

The emphasis on institutional growth and collaboration was reinforced through reflections from EWNET's leadership, which traced the network's rapid development over just over a year. The conference, in this sense, was not merely a gathering but an assertion of presence, a deliberate effort to consolidate a scholarly community and create sustained space for exchange.



Opening remarks at SHECONF 2026.

L-R: Brook Abdu, Dalaya Ashenafi and Fikir Getachew

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**'Making local knowledge work' emerged not only as a slogan, but as a methodological and political commitment shaping the conference.**

**Brook Abdu**

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# Negotiating power: Gender, institutions and everyday structures | Panel 1

The first panel moved directly into the question of power, how it is structured, contested and lived across institutions, communities and daily practices.

Discussions ranged from the formal spaces of university governance to indigenous systems such as the *Gadaa* and *Sinqee* institutions. Research on Addis Ababa University's transition to autonomy highlighted a persistent contradiction: Institutional reform does not automatically translate into gender equity. Women, despite policy frameworks, remain underrepresented in decision-making spaces, revealing how structural change can reproduce existing exclusions.

By contrast, work on indigenous governance challenged assumptions about tradition. The *Sinqee* institution, often overlooked, emerged as a site of collective female agency, enabling negotiation, resistance and even withdrawal from community life as a form of protest.

Rather than positioning tradition as inherently restrictive, the discussion suggested it can provide alternative frameworks for understanding power and representation.

Urban life offered yet another dimension. Research on food practices in Addis Ababa reframed obesity not as individual failure but as a socially produced condition, shaped by time, infrastructure and shifting norms.

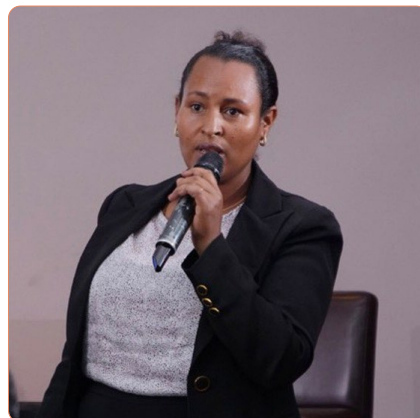
Similarly, climate adaptation studies revealed how institutional barriers constrain women's capacity to respond to environmental change, particularly among female-headed households.

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**Women's everyday lives are sites where global systems are negotiated, resisted and reproduced.**

**Hanna Haile**

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Presentations (L-R): Etaferahu Hailu, Mergitu Debela (PhD) and Marshet Tefera

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**'Gatekeeping' and intimidation within academia as barriers to women's progress.**

**Etaferahu Hailu (PhD)**

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## Resistance reimagined: From social media to silence and poetry | Panel 2

If the first panel examined structured forms of power, the second turned to resistance: Fluid, decentralized and often invisible.

Presentations on digital-era protest movements highlighted a defining paradox: While social media enables rapid mobilization and amplifies marginalized voices, its lack of structure can undermine long-term political transformation. The ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ emerged as a key tension, complicating narratives of digital empowerment.

Historical analysis of Ethiopia’s socialist revolution added depth to this discussion, revisiting the ‘woman question’ through archival research. By centring ‘common women’—including those excluded from formal political spaces—the research challenged dominant narratives and expanded the boundaries of political agency.

Perhaps most striking was the exploration of silence as a political tool. Through poetry and artistic research, silence was reframed not as absence but as a deliberate, communicative force—one that registers resistance where speech is constrained.

Meanwhile, research on women in political parties underscored the persistence of patriarchal structures, even as women navigate and resist them through subtle, often undocumented strategies.

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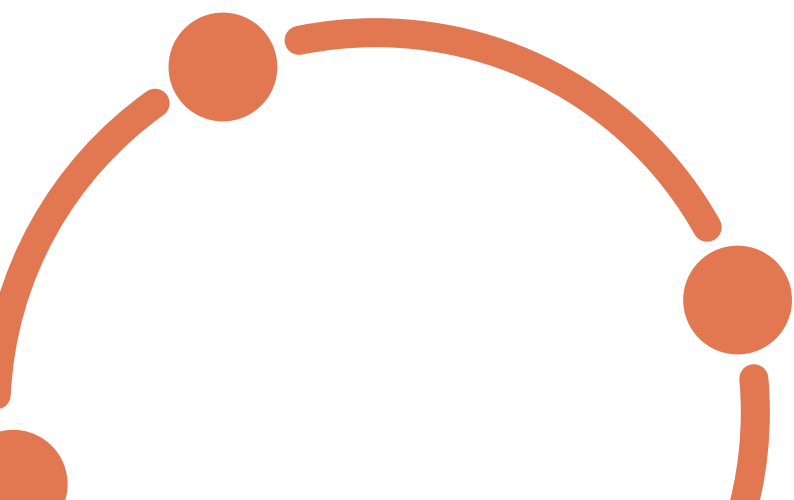
**Resistance does not  
always speak loudly—it  
often operates through  
what remains unsaid.**

**Mihret Kebede**

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Conference participants (L-R): Birtukan Midekisa and Ambassador Genet Zewde (PhD)



## Between evidence and power: Conflict, policy and lived realities | Panel 3

The third panel confronted the uneasy relationship between research and policy, particularly within the field of conflict studies.

A recurring theme was the ‘evidence–policy gap’: The difficulty of translating academic research into actionable policy. Researchers described a landscape marked by power contestation, where evidence is often selectively used or ignored. Policymakers, it was argued, may seek validation rather than insight, complicating efforts to ground decisions in rigorous research.

At the same time, the human cost of conflict remained central. Research on the 2020–2022 conflicts in northern Ethiopia documented the profound impact on women and girls, from displacement to systemic violence. These accounts underscored the urgency of including women in peacebuilding processes, not as symbolic participants but as central actors.

Legal aid initiatives offered a more institutional perspective, revealing both progress and gaps. While services exist, awareness remains low, and survivors frequently encounter further harm within the very systems meant to support them.

The panel ultimately called for a more grounded approach to conflict studies—one that integrates discourse analysis with empirical realities and prioritizes the voices of those most affected.



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**Policymakers often seek evidence that confirms their existing views.**

**Mercy Fekadu (PhD)**

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Presentations (L-R): Halifet Ayemohammed and Fikirte Adugna (PhD)



## Continuity and change: Literature, archives and institutional life | Panel 4

The final panel shifted focus to cultural and institutional continuity, exploring how societies remember, adapt and reproduce themselves.

Literary analysis of dystopian narratives revealed how fiction captures societal anxieties, using metaphor and symbolism to critique power and moral decay. These works, it was argued, function as archives of lived experience, offering insights that conventional academic forms may overlook.

Audience interventions throughout the conference repeatedly returned to a shared concern: The gap between formal structures and lived realities. Questions pushed presenters to clarify whether institutional reforms translate into meaningful power, whether individual agency can be disentangled from structural constraint, and whether locally grounded systems can be scaled without being romanticized. Across panels, participants also raised persistent doubts about the capacity of research to influence policy, highlighting both ethical dilemmas and the enduring ‘evidence–policy gap’.

At the same time, research on Harari manuscripts highlighted the fragility of intellectual heritage. Preserved in private homes, these texts represent ‘living archives’ at risk of loss, underscoring the need for urgent documentation and digitization.

Institutional challenges were also evident in studies of workplace childcare. Despite policy mandates, implementation remains uneven, reflecting deeper tensions between formal commitments and everyday realities.

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**What remains preserved in private homes today may not survive another generation without deliberate institutional support.**

**Muna Abubeker (PhD)**

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Presentations (L-R): Konjit Hailu (PhD), Muna Abubeker (PhD) and Abeba Amare (PhD)



Conference participants (L-R): Teketel Yohannes (Prof), and Yeraswerq Kebede

## Closing reflections: Toward reflexive and emancipatory research

In concluding reflections, Semir Yusuf (PhD) drew together the conference's central tensions, challenging binary thinking that separates modern from traditional, or theory from practice. Both, he argued, are deeply embedded in power structures, and both can either exclude or empower.

He called for a shift toward emancipatory frameworks rooted in local realities, urging researchers to remain critically self-aware of their positionality and influence. Concepts such as 'hidden transcripts' were revisited as tools for understanding how marginalized groups navigate and resist power in subtle but meaningful ways.

The closing remarks also turned toward the future. EWNET outlined plans to expand its reach through digital platforms, fellowships, and broader institutional networks, signaling an intention to sustain the momentum generated by the conference.

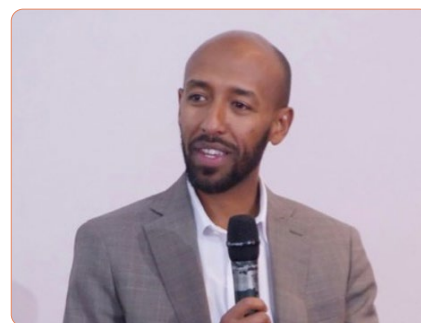
Ultimately, SHECONF 2026 positioned itself not just as an academic event, but as part of a larger intellectual project—one that seeks to reshape how knowledge is produced, shared and applied in Ethiopia.

### Moving ahead with EWNET

In her remarks, Netsanet Gebremichael (PhD) expressed gratitude to all conference organizers, moderators and participants, acknowledging their extensive labour in bringing the conference to fruition. She recognized the overwhelming contribution of attendees and addressed structural limitations that prevented some participants from accessing the podium, offering apologies and emphasizing EWNET's commitment to building inclusive scholarly networks.

Dr. Netsanet outlined several future plans: Continuing the conference podcast as a dissemination platform, launching a redesigned website for better engagement, holding ongoing writing sessions, working on papers, conducting mid-level workshops, and eventually publishing peer-reviewed proceedings. She also stressed the importance of regional engagement, with plans to host seminars and workshops in various regions and build continental networks with similar initiatives at universities across Africa. These include the EWIRA (Empowering Women's Research Affiliations) at Walter Sisulu University and networks of Sudanese and Somali women researchers under the RVI framework.

Finally, Dr. Netsanet highlighted plans to build both horizontal and hierarchical mentorship platforms by inviting senior scholars, including international solidarity members, and encouraged continued participation in seminars, conferences and future satellite fellowships. The conference concluded with a group photo, marking the community-building aspect of the event.



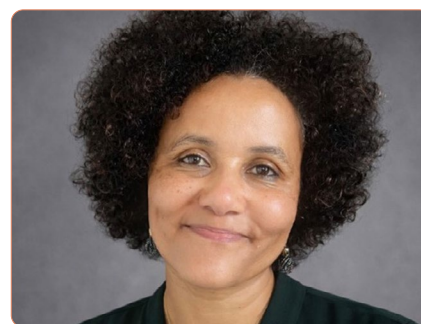
Semir Yusuf (PhD)

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**Research and policy are both power-infested spaces—bridging them requires more than evidence; it demands reflexivity.**

Semir Yusuf (PhD)

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Netsanet Gebremichael (PhD)

## Annex: SHECONF 2026 details

**Date:** 26 March 2026 | **Time:** 8.30 a.m. – 6.00 p.m.

**Venue:** Raddison Blu, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

**Organizers:** Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and Ethiopian Women Researchers Network (EWNET)

**Attendance:** Early-career and senior researchers: 89 (50 Female, 39 Male)

Panel 1: Negotiating Power–Gender, Governance and Institutional Change	
Presentation / Speaker	Moderator
<b>Etaferahu Hailu (PhD)</b> – Gender Equity in the university’s path to Autonomy	Firehiwot Sintayehu (PhD)
<b>Mergitu Debela Bedada (PhD)</b> – Women’s Role in Indigenous Governance: The Structural Position and Decision-making Power of Women within the <i>Gadaa</i> and <i>Sinqee</i> Institutions of the Oromo	
<b>Hanna Haile</b> – Exploring the Shift in Food Consumption Practices Amongst Urban Women in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.	
<b>Mareshet Tefera</b> – Gender Adaptive Capacity: Resource Access and Climate Resilient Land Management in Ejere District, Ethiopia	
Panel 2: Poetry, Resistance and Political Mobilization	
Presentation / Speaker	Moderator
<b>Suad Ahmed</b> – Mass Protest in the Age of social media: Transformations in Political Organizing	Muna Abubeker (PhD)
<b>Hosaena Tilahun</b> – ‘The Women Question(s)’: Anti-Patriarchal Organizing in Ethiopia’s Socialist Revolution	
<b>Mihret Kebede</b> – Haunting Silence: Devising Poetry in Political Upheaval	
<b>Frehiwot Sintayehu (PhD)</b> – Contested Spaces: Analyzing Gendered Resistance within Ethiopia’s Political Parties in the Post-2018 period	

### Panel 3: The State and Practice of Conflict Studies–In Theory and Lived Realities

Presentation / Speaker	Moderator
<b>Mercy Fekadu Mulugeta (PhD)</b> – The Liminal Interface of Research, Policy and Practice in Conflict Studies	Suad Ahmed
<b>Fikirte Adugna Andargie (PhD)</b> – The 2020-2022 Conflicts of Ethiopia and its impact on Women and Girls	
<b>Birhane Habtie (PhD)</b> – Conflict Studies Between Discourse and Reality: Insights from the Tigray War	
<b>Halifet Ayemohammed</b> – Bridging the Gendered Justice Gap: The Role of University-Based Legal Aid Clinics in Conflict-Affected Ethiopia	

### Panel 4: Themes of Continuity and Change in Society and Institutions

Presentation / Speaker	Moderator
<b>Muna Abubeker (PhD)</b> – A Preliminary Survey of Manuscripts in Harari Households	Mareshet Tefera
<b>Abeba Amare (PhD)</b> – Envisioning Ethiopia: Emerging Dystopian Narratives in Contemporary Ethiopian Literature	
<b>Konjit Hailu (PhD)</b> – From Mandate to Meaning: A Qualitative Study of On site Childcare and Family-Supportive Cultures in Ethiopian Public Organizations	

### Key Takeaways, Future Directions and Closing

Presentation / Speaker	Responsible
Semir Yusuf (PhD), Political Scientist and Researcher	Netsanet Gebremichael (PhD), EUNET Principal

