

Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions: A Reflection from a Gender Perspective

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Ethiopia and its gender culture

For those of you who do not know, Ethiopia is located in Eastern Africa. Its population of about 105 million people is extremely diverse, both culturally and ethnically. There are also major differences in terms of urban-rural lifestyles and the various religions practiced in the country. The economy is mainly agriculturally based, with 85 percent of the labor force engaged in the agricultural sector. Ethiopia is young: those under 15 years of age comprise 41 percent of the population. The median age is 17, compared to a median age of nearly 50 years old in Japan.

While some variation can be noted, the gender culture within the society can be described as an oppressive one for women. This can be seen from three perspectives. First, gender power is primarily framed by patriarchal power, which assigns the highest value to masculinity. Accordingly, males disproportionately control resources. Second, there is an asymmetric division of labor, where household chores and childcare is exclusively assigned to women; men are not involved in these areas of life, even in the urban areas. Women are disadvantaged in that they labor, but they are not actually the beneficiaries of the fruits of their labor. Third, ingrained stereotypical cultural beliefs work to sustain asymmetric power relations in the society.

Obviously the result of this kind of gender culture is gender inequality, which can be seen in various sectors of society. If we look at education, for example,

women have a lower literacy rate compared to men and girls have lower enrollment rates in school. This is primarily because women are overburdened with household chores, so mothers tend to keep their daughters at home to help them. At the same time, when there is a shortage of finances to send children to school, parents will prefer to send their sons to school before, or instead of, their daughters. School dropout rates for girls are also high, due in large part because from the start the society does not have much confidence in girls succeeding in education. Early marriage also contributes to this, and specific cultural practices, such as female genital cutting and marriage by abduction, compromise the bodily integrity and health of girls. On the economic front, women have limited access to and control over resources.

Higher education in Ethiopia

If we look at the higher education system in Ethiopia, it is important to note that economic policy emphasizes human development as a key strategy for structurally transforming the agrarian economy to a more modern one. This is particularly justified given the youth of the population as described above. As education is the key aspect of human development, high attention is paid not only to general education, but also to expanding higher education. As a result, numerous universities have opened across Ethiopia during the past few decades. Until the early 1990s, Ethiopia had only two full-fledged universities; it now has nearly 50. There has been a subsequent exponential growth in enrollment: in the 2003 academic year, less than 100,000 students were enrolled in higher education and just three years later the number had risen to 800,000.

Until the mid-1990s, Ethiopia had very few private educational institutions, especially for higher education. Since the mid-1990s, however, private universities have flourished. While their capacity is not equivalent to government-run higher education institutions, they are contributing by opening up different programs, particularly in the fields of finance, business, and computer science. These institutions are run as a business and represent a broad range in terms of quality.

Ethiopia lacks a strong system with close supervision to ensure that private institutions implement what is stated in various policies or proclamations in terms of instituting gender equity. However, in terms of contributing to the enrollment rate, these institutions do play their role.

The Center for Gender Studies at Addis Ababa University

The Center for Gender Studies at Addis Ababa University was established in 1991 as a research and training center. In the early 1990s, after the socialist government was taken over by the recent government, several internationally-led gender initiatives swept the country. Within this environment, the United Nations Population Fund held a conference in Addis Ababa in 1991. This conference served as a seed for our Center. A group of interested women academics and researchers came together to establish the Center and the university volunteered to host it as a research center. Many committed volunteers from different disciplines, including medicine, psychology, and anthropology came together to support it in the early days. It was not a discipline-specific center, but rather developed based on the efforts of faculty members with tremendous commitment. The university officially established it as a research center, to provide research and training. At that stage, the Center was not engaged in academic activities, but instead conducted research and provided trainings to different government and nongovernmental organizations working on gender issues.

The Center progressed well and due to a huge demand from various sectors, in 2005 it established a M.A. program in gender studies, becoming a teaching unit within the university. Since then the Center has trained 13 batches of students, and more than 250 students have graduated from the Center. We are currently in the process of initiating a project to launch a PhD program in gender and development under the College of Development Studies.

The Center is engaged in research on a diverse set of topics, ranging from education to indigenous knowledge and development, specifically looking at any topic from a

gender perspective. The Center has numerous collaborative research projects and many partners in other universities. Unfortunately it does not have a partner from Asia, but we do have partnerships with Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian universities in addition to our many partners in Africa, including the University of Nairobi, Makerere University in Uganda, Zambia University, Ahfad University in Sudan, and Johannesburg and Cape Town universities in South Africa.

We do hope to closely work with Kyoto University because gender is a global agenda and the Memorandum of Understanding between Addis Ababa University and Kyoto University provides us that opportunity. The house is already built; it is up to us to furnish it with research projects by forging collaborative initiatives.

I myself work on rural development and development-related issues. My training is in statistics and information science. You may ask, how did I end up coming to the field of gender studies? After completing my undergraduate studies, I was extensively engaging in some statistical analysis and could see the gender disparity in almost in every sphere of life, be it economic, social, political, or wherever I looked. Statistics became a tool for me to apply to gender and development. The Center is a place that allows a researcher like me, working on rural development, poverty, and globalization, to analyze how these issues affect women's lives.

Ethiopia's policy framework

Looking at the policy framework, particularly related to women's equal participation in higher education, we can say that generally due attention is given to gender issues. The constitution assigns one article specifically related to the rights of women, but in other articles, the gender issue is repeatedly discussed. In the education sector, an education and training policy gives due importance to the equal participation of women. In alignment with this, five programs within different education sector development policies also all mention gender issues.

A 2009 proclamation on higher education highlights the importance of providing differential admission for disadvantaged groups, including women. A strategic document also outlines how to promote participation of women in higher education through different equity instruments, including affirmative action, assertiveness training, guidance and counseling, establishment of a gender office, and implementing affirmative programs for academically needy female students.

Achievements and challenges

When we look at the gender patterns in higher education, it is very important to recognize the achievements. Female participation in higher education has certainly increased during the past few decades. Undergraduate enrollment rates for women show a steady rising trend both in overall number and percentage. This is also true, albeit on a smaller scale, for graduate studies. The number of female academic staff has also increased, both in number and proportion.

Yet even if we have something to celebrate, we also have challenges. Gender disparity in enrollment persists despite the increases. Despite the overall increase in the number of female students, the gender gap in all programs from undergraduate to PhD, remains steep. When we disaggregate the data by field, the gap between male and female enrollment is quite wide, especially in the fields of engineering and technology. This is what we call horizontal gender disparity. Other worrisome issues include the higher attrition rates amongst female students compared to their male peers and a lack of women in the faculty.

While more women are being recruited to be faculty and staff in the higher education system, they tend to concentrate in the lower strata when it comes to academic qualifications and rank. For example, in Addis Ababa University, we have around 239 female faculty members, but 52 percent have not studied at the graduate level, and only 18 percent of women faculty have a doctorate degree.

Another challenge is the low participation of women in leadership positions and in different decision-making bodies. A study on 13 newly-established universities reveals that no university has had or currently has a female president. Only 9 percent of directors are female, but out of 20 directors, 13 are gender office directors. If the gender directors are not considered, then this percentage is reduced to 4.4 percent. Women's participation in various different decision-making bodies is also very low.

Structural barriers

Despite some gains over the last few decades, wide gender parity remains an elusive goal in higher education in Ethiopia. Given this reality, various researches were conducted in our Center to uncover some of the structural barriers to gender parity. One of these initiatives is the research sponsored by FAWE, the Forum for African Women's Educationalists. Other subsequent qualitative study particularly focusing on female academics was also conducted. The major research questions raised include 1) what are the experiences of female faculty in Ethiopia, and 2) to what extent do the gender instruments that I mentioned earlier actually address women's issues. These researches primarily focused on the challenges faced by female junior faculty members.

The major barriers noted in these studies are:

1. Lack of recognition and respect due to stereotypical attitudes in which case women's capacity is often questioned in different forms through the application of gendered meanings to their everyday life.
2. Women faculty also face this barrier in their relationships with their students, who do not pay due respect to female faculty as they do to male faculty. Because their capacity is continuously questioned, they are denied opportunities to engage in the university leadership and different research projects. As this pattern sustains, it has a negative impact on self-esteem, causing women to internalize the gender stereotypes.
3. Women also experience direct and indirect hostility and violence, mainly from students. There are reported incidents of sexual harassment in some of the recently-established universities as well.

4. Many women academics also repeatedly cited the challenge in relation to work-family balance. Their domestic role and household management is competing with the demanding work of academia. It was noted in the studies that women find themselves continuously guilty, whether they are at home or in the office. For male colleagues, if a woman in academia has a family, it is considered an impediment for her to take a leadership position and engage in activities such as research and collaborative works.
5. Long-held views on appropriate gender roles and behavior are another barrier. This is particularly related to women not having access to informal groups. In Ethiopia, at least where I work, informal groups are not for socialization only, they also serve as a source of information, a resource, and a channel for learning of potential research and other professional opportunities. However, since women are few in number, most of these forums are male-dominated, or for that matter, male-only. It is not “normal” or socially acceptable for women to join such informal groups. Although social norms apply to such groups, they actually discuss research and work-related issues, leaving women out of the information loop. Instead of understanding how prevailing gender relations create such barriers to women, male colleagues blame women for being ill-informed.

The importance of mentorship

I am a beneficiary of mentorship, because the first director of our Center initiated a mentorship program and invited me and another female colleague to join her in her research. Through that I learned a tremendous amount. It is very important for women to have such a forum and be supportive to each other. Our Center also hosts public lectures twice a year that intentionally focus on female role models. We invite very successful women working in or retired from different managerial and leadership positions to share their life stories, the hardships they went through, and how they coped with challenges to reach the positions they have today.

6. Some junior faculty members also noted with resentment that female senior faculty members do not create a supportive environment for them. This of course needs to be triangulated by talking to the senior faculty members to determine whether such behavior is intentional, or a result of their shortage of time. Women senior faculty members also are burdened with family and household responsibilities and many engagements.

7. Affirmative action comes with its own baggage, which inadvertently creates new barriers

for women. Male colleagues regard affirmative action as meant for incompetent women. Such confusion about the various affirmative measures and their implementation causes inaccurate meanings to be attached to them, further stereotyping women.

Limitations of the policy landscape

While Ethiopia's policies promote gender equality, gender inequality continues to persist, in quantitative and qualitative terms. The range of studies in the area reveal the following limitations. First, there is superficial representation of gender equality in higher education. Some would call this a mis-location of the problem, because the way gender inequality is understood in higher education is in quantitative terms

only. For example, the 2009 higher education proclamation identifies the problem of quantitative inequality, in such things as disparity in enrollment, poor academic performance of female students, and a lack of facilities. There is no mention of structural barriers that reproduce the problem of gender inequality. Naturally, if there is problem with how the problem is articulated, the equity instruments that are identified to solve the problem may not be adequate. The government identified affirmative action, provision of assertiveness training, guidance and counseling services, establishment of a gender office, and providing affirmative programs as useful instruments. These all are focused on women themselves, but do not address structural barriers that are creating impediments to women's advancement.

Second, the policy documents are silent with respect to academic women. Even as women faculty face so many problems, the issue of academic women is not discussed in full. Whenever it is discussed, it is in terms that reduce them to mere instruments in the quest for higher enrollment of female students. It is difficult for younger women to find mentors, or role models, because senior women faculty face their own problems. These are some of the issues that should be taken into account when seeking solutions.

In conclusion, notwithstanding the positive developments since the late 2000s, gender disparity in higher education is still widespread and worrisome in Ethiopia. This critical assessment of gender inequality in Ethiopian higher education shows that it is not only about inequality in access to opportunity, but also, and more so, a form of inequality in the opportunities themselves. Efforts to increase the number of women in higher education through affirmative action policies may not result in gender equity, as a gender-biased structural factors deeply rooted in the organization and functioning of higher education persist in hindering the progress and success of women. Hence, beyond merely facilitating access or entry into higher education institutions, it is crucial to be attentive to structural aspects of the problem and create a gender-friendly environment in higher education institutions.

A note to Japan

I have only been in Japan for a very short time and since I do not know the language it is difficult for me to fully understand interactions and the meaning of relationships. I have seen many female students at the ASAFAs and this is very good. But as I have heard and also noted, I do not think this is the same in other faculties and perhaps compared to the number of trained women, women remain under-represented quantitatively. It is important to analyze what is really constraining women not only to enter academia, but also for those who are in the university, what are the constraints and structural barriers to success. You need to really bring these out into the open and discuss them so that women will be successful once they do join the university. And encourage others to join.

I believe that every field has a gender dimension. Our Center has faculty with diverse educational background who are actively engaged in the analysis of gender aspect of various issues in the areas of law, psychology, education, language, sociology, journalism, and development, just to name a few. We welcome anyone that wants to collaborate with our Center.