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The context for (un)employability among women graduates of Ethiopian higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT

As higher education expands in Ethiopia, the unemployability of graduates, especially women, remains a persistent challenge. An exploration of this issue that leaves women with limited employment opportunities in Ethiopia requires a thorough explanation of the underlying factors. Using a mixed-methods case-study methodology, this study investigated why college-educated women experience challenges in the Ethiopian labor market. Drawing from extant literature and survey data from a large-scale mixed-methods formative assessment of 460 human resources (HR) managers and 1,261 purposively sampled tertiary students, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives of employers, university faculty and administrators, and students. This paper provides a more nuanced illustration of the cultural, social, institutional, and political barriers women face in Ethiopia as they navigate higher education and the post-college/university job market. The findings show (1) gendered cultural expectations, (2) inequitable access to campus career support systems, and (3) uneven commitment to gender parity among employers. Based on these findings, one major implication is that colleges and universities should promote gender equity in the labor market and provide women with tailored academic and career support. Government and policy makers in Ethiopia should ensure gender equity policies are in place and functioning, incentivize gender equitable employment practices, and subsidize gender equality-related studies and awareness raising campaigns.

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Introduction

Across the world, young women are much more likely to be without a job than young men (United Nations 2022). In 2020, the global unemployment rate for youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET) was 31.5% for females, compared to 15.7% for males. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the unemployment rate for women during the same year was 25.7% compared to 17.9% for men (United Nations 2022, p. 43). Ethiopia, the second most populous nation on the continent and the focus of this inquiry, has similarly acute labor market challenges for females (Reda and Gebre-

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eyesus 2019). The country's urban unemployment is 18.7% overall, but the rate is more than double for women (26.1%) compared to men (12.2%) (Central Statistics Agency 2020). Ethiopians under age 30 especially struggle to find jobs. According to a 2018 World Bank survey, 30.9% of young women and 19.0% of young men were without full-time permanent employment in Ethiopia (Tamrat 2020).

Addressing gender disparities in unemployment is crucial for achieving economic empowerment and equity. Higher education can play a vital role in equipping young women with the skills and knowledge necessary to access better employment opportunities and overcome the existing barriers in the labor market. This would ultimately foster inclusive economic growth and sustainable development. However, in many nations, people with college and university degrees struggle to find jobs. In Ethiopia, for example, the 2018 unemployment rate for tertiary graduates was 19.1% (MOE 2018). The share of unemployed female graduates increased by 26% from 2014 to 2016, which is higher compared to the 24% increase for their male counterparts (Reda and Gebre-eyesus 2019). This implies that for every 100 unemployed females, almost three were graduates with at least a bachelor's degree.

The unemployability of higher education graduates is a major concern for the country's future. Like much of Sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia is experiencing rapid population growth: the labor force is projected to number 82 million by 2030, up from 33 million in 2005 (World Bank 2015). With this rapid rise in population, expanding the proportion of tertiary-educated workers is viewed by the government as an important mechanism to promote national economic growth and productivity. This is in line with the government's goal of achieving 'middle-income' country status, defined by the World Bank (2015) as a gross national income per capita of at least \$1560. Many entities (e.g. government ministries, civil society organizations, universities, international non-governmental organizations, development partners) have invested in empowering Ethiopian youth for the competitive job market. The authors' review of publicly available information identified at least 17 projects in just the past six years (i.e. 2016–2021) implemented by international groups (e.g. United Nations [UN], World Bank, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), German Development Cooperation, Mastercard Foundation) to improve employment opportunities for Ethiopian youth. Most of these initiatives identified women as a priority demographic, along with refugees. However, the majority directed their attention to job prospects for young people with minimal formal education or training, rather than women graduating from post-secondary colleges and universities.

This study aims to provide a more holistic understanding of the Ethiopian context needed to bridge the gap between higher education institutions (HEIs) and job market opportunities for Ethiopian university graduates, particularly women. Extant literature covers challenges common to men and women and barriers shared among global contexts. Two such common challenges include graduates' competency deficit (disconnect between labor market skill needs vs. graduates' capabilities or university curricula) and limited job supply (due to high population growth and higher education massification). This study fills the knowledge gap of analyzing employment barriers specific to women HEI graduates in the Ethiopian context, especially macro-level institutional, political, and socio-cultural factors.

Literature review

Although Ethiopian universities are legally autonomous entities (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE] 2023), they are shaped by the federal government (Halkiyu 2023). In the authoritarian political culture found in many African countries, including Ethiopia, the government largely follows a hierarchical and 'top-down policymaking [approach] with minimal engagement of the frontline implementers, e.g. faculty and students' (Halkiyu 2023, 166). This implies that policy and governance contribute to gender disparity in higher education institutions, and that the causes of these issues reach beyond academic institutions. The micro-level policies passed between the years 1990 and 2020 have been slowly drifting away from the constitutional commitment to

make up for historical injustices against women, creating more gaps and silences in relation to stated government goals to address gender inequality and injustice in higher education (Semela and Tsige 2023). Since more female than male graduates are unemployed in Ethiopia, significant factors contributing to these outcomes, including socio-cultural drivers, need to be explored vis-a-vis related challenges they face within HEIs.

Graduate unemployment: global context

In every national setting, graduate employability has been a topic of interest, and scholars have attributed graduate unemployment to different factors. The debate on graduate employability has been fierce in Australia (Bennett 2019; Prikshat et al. 2020). In Russia, unemployment is related to the disconnect between the industry's needs and HEIs' outputs (Natalia et al. 2015). Some of these factors include competence deficit in terms of soft skills and work readiness skills, such as self-management, communication, teamwork, system thinking, innovation, and creativity (Bennett 2019; Prikshat et al. 2020); skills mismatched to labor market needs (Mok and Qian 2018); and oversupply of graduates due to high education massification, for instance, in China (Mok and Qian 2018).

Graduate unemployment in Africa

High unemployment remains a major concern in Africa. There is increasing unemployment in South Africa (Rosenberg 2022; Tshishonga 2022), Kenya (Ponge 2013), Nigeria (Markjackson et al. 2021), and Tanzania (Mgaiwa 2021). Researchers attribute the high unemployment in Africa to several factors, including limited demand in the labor market, (Mseleku 2022; Ohei, Brink, and Abiodun 2019; Pacho 2022; Rosenberg 2022), technical skills mismatch between degree program content and job requirements (Mgaiwa 2021; Mseleku 2022; Sibiya and Ngulube 2023), lack of soft skills (Mgaiwa 2021; Ohei and Brink 2019), and lack of work experience (Mseleku 2022). For instance, despite qualifications, graduates in South Africa encounter high unemployment due to primarily poor economic conditions (Ohei and Brink 2019). For example, 'ICT graduates at all levels of qualifications struggle to get jobs, irrespective of their qualifications, due to socio-economic problems resulting in a shortage and non-creation of jobs to accommodate the up-and-coming ICT graduates' (Ohei, Brink, and Abiodun 2019). Regarding skill mismatch, in their study of analyzing the perceptions of employers in South Africa on Library and Information Science graduates' competence, Sibiya and Ngulube (2023) found that the employers of digital scholarship librarians expected the graduates to possess competencies to navigate digital scholarship activities and have familiarity with data management and digital publications ecosystems. Ahmed and Tessma (2020), in their study of expectations and perceptions of business and economics college graduates in South Wollo and Oromia zone of Ethiopia, found that there is a wide gap between university curriculum and market demand.

Graduate unemployment in Ethiopia

High graduate unemployment is common in Ethiopia (Tamrat 2023). Although the government aims for at least 80% of higher education graduates to be employed within a year after graduation (Olkaba and Duressa 2020), data show that graduate employability was 54% and 59% in the years 2017/18 and 2018/19, respectively (Ministry of Science and Higher Education [MoSHE] 2021). The employability of female graduates in those two years is 35% and 43%, respectively (MoSHE 2021), which is far below the national higher education graduates employment goal of 80%.

Gender disparities and skill mismatches (and related factors) in Ethiopian labor market

Scholars have identified several factors contributing to or exacerbating unemployment among Ethiopian tertiary graduates. Employer demand is a major issue. The employability of Technical

and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and university graduates is hampered by limited job opportunities (Fantaye 2019; Tamrat 2023). Besides graduates lacking job competencies (Ahmed and Tessma 2020), there are contributing external factors, such as population growth, the expansion of higher education in Africa at almost twice the global rate, and low economic growth to absorb the large numbers of graduates (Tamrat 2023). There has also been a lack of appropriate support from the government (e.g. underfunding, especially the TVETS sector [Tamrat 2023] and other stakeholders [Fantaye 2019]). Moreover, the lack of a well-organized information system for job seekers and the poor university-industry linkages were contributing to high graduate unemployment in Ethiopia, thus calling for coordinated collaborations among all relevant stakeholders (Tamrat 2023).

For Ethiopian women specifically, while statistics support the notion that female graduates struggle more to gain employment than their male counterparts, few studies have holistically examined why this is the case. Gender stereotypes and labor market discrimination are likely factors. An action research study conducted by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) (2022) suggested Ethiopia has strong existing social norms that reproduce assumptions about the types of jobs that are 'appropriate' for women, resulting in opportunities limited mostly to low-paying sectors even for those with postsecondary degrees. Demissie et al. (2021) found that while women who have access to higher education develop confidence and job skills that help them to compete in the labor market, factors outside of education, such as responsibilities at home, can create additional barriers for women to find and maintain employment. Moreover, women with disabilities face further hardships in the Ethiopian labor market (Malle, Pirttimaa, and Saloviita 2015; Mulugeta and Mekuriaw 2017).

Methods

Using a mixed methods, case study methodology, the authors investigated why college-educated women experience challenges in the Ethiopian labor market. Case studies are often used to describe and explain country-level phenomena in higher education research (i.e. Westnes et al. 2009). According to Yin (2018), a case study is 'an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident' (453). Examining the issue – the context for un/employability among women graduates of Ethiopian higher education as a case study at the national level allows for a comprehensive description of individuals and environmental factors.

Case study research draws from multiple sources of data, which can be both qualitative and quantitative, to understand a phenomenon (Yin 2018). In addition to the academic literature summarized above, the authors' construction of the case of Ethiopia draws from qualitative and quantitative data from a nationwide needs assessment conducted by a private monitoring and evaluation agency (anonymized as Monitoring Agency) in December 2021. The Monitoring Agency's data are part of a larger mixed methods formative assessment implemented by an international development project. The assessment included data of Ethiopian youth experiences related to employment, civic engagement, and public health, with particular attention to barriers for historically marginalized groups, including women.

The Monitoring Agency used a stratified sampling approach to data collection to ensure geographical representation of all 18 regions and city administrations in the country. However, Northern Ethiopia was excluded due to conflict in the region. As such, data were collected from 13 purposively selected large cities across Southern, Eastern, and Western Ethiopia. Each city where data were collected had at least one local university and polytechnic college. The Monitoring Agency then purposively sampled 'key' individuals representing organizations from those regions for both interviews and surveys. The focus was not limited to higher education: data were collected from employers; university and polytechnic college students and staff; staff of employment service providers, career centers; and assessments on healthcare facilities and youth centers. After receiving approval from the investigators' Institutional Review Board, the Monitoring Agency shared de-identified data

pertaining to tertiary-educated women and the labor market. It is important to note that the Monitoring Agency also used a standardized instrument to collect data, which ensures validity and reliability of the scale.

The present analysis incorporates quantitative data from two sources. The first was a survey of 460 human resources (HR) managers representing Ethiopian employers purposively selected through stratified sampling to represent several organizations from a range of sectors. The most common industry represented was hotels and restaurants (28%; $n = 130$), followed by health and social work (15%; $n = 67$), manufacturing (12%; $n = 56$), and government offices (12%; $n = 54$). The average number of full-time employees was 119. The organizations reported a mean of 67 male employees ($Mdn = 26$, $SD = 165$) and 51 female employees ($Mdn = 19.5$, $SD = 120$). The employer survey included approximately 75 Likert scale items about hiring practices, training practices, employee competencies, and linkages to HEIs.

The second source of quantitative data was an online survey of 1261 purposively sampled tertiary students, representing 13 universities and 13 polytechnic colleges. Nearly a quarter of respondents were women ($n = 296$), and all were in their third year of college or above. The survey instrument included over 100 items with sections about their civic engagement, health behaviors and family planning, and job preparation experiences. This analysis incorporates 12 Likert scale items asking for a level of agreement with different statements related to gender norms, eight items capturing their attitudes about education and jobs, and nine items pertaining to their HEI's career support services.

Finally, the study incorporates qualitative data from interviews with 'Key Informants' purposively selected by the Monitoring Agency, including career center heads and Gender and Special Needs office directors from nine polytechnic colleges and universities, as well as 12 students. The Monitoring Agency used a semi-structured interview protocol that covered a range of topics, including labor market, social engagement and inclusion, conflict analysis and peacebuilding, and gender concerns. Interviews were conducted in English, as well as local native languages, which were subsequently translated by the Monitoring Agency and organized into de-identified transcripts by topical theme. One set included all responses related to gender equity and gender-based violence, from which authors extracted codes related to higher education graduates' employment.

The authors analyzed the data concurrently, consistent with Yin's (2018) recommendation that construction of a case study 'consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing, or otherwise recombining both quantitative and qualitative evidence to address the initial propositions of a study' (109). Initially, authors reviewed the interview transcripts from the Monitoring Agency and identified preliminary themes pertaining to Ethiopian tertiary-educated women in the labor market. Authors then used IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics (2021, Version 28) software to calculate descriptive results for employer and student survey data and, based on the emerging qualitative results, ran several comparative and correlational analyses to expand the case's evidentiary basis (IBM Corp. 2021). The primary procedures used were parametric tests, which are robust to departures from normality for ordinal and continuous distributions when sample sizes are sufficiently large (de Winter and Dodou 2010; Fagerland 2012; Fagerland and Sandvik 2009). Finally, authors returned to the interview data and the literature review to ensure data saturation and confirm that there were no additional concepts to include based on the quantitative findings. Construction of the final case blended all sources of evidence into a narrative describing the intersection of gender and employability in the context of Ethiopia.

Findings

Overall, the authors found that Ethiopian women face cultural, social, and political barriers as they navigate higher education and the post-college/university job market, including (1) gendered cultural expectations, (2) inequitable access to campus career support systems, and (3) uneven commitment to gender parity among employers.

Gendered cultural expectations

A student shared: 'In [Ethiopian] culture, men are taken as superior ... we all are shaped by the culture ... [the women] would feel inferior.' When asked about disparities in the labor market, a Gender Office director said, 'It is culture. As a Somali [region in southeastern Ethiopia], there is a belief that sees women can't work as men do.' A colleague from Harar elaborated:

Even in the government, you won't see a man working as a janitor, bookkeeper, or secretary. This by itself is a gender role. This should be changed. Can't the men work as a janitor? They can. When it comes to the kitchen work, it is the women who go inside and work, but when it comes to an income generating activity, it is the men who are engaged to do that. This means that the women are disadvantaged economically.

The survey data suggest that male students are more likely to internalize such norms about traditional gender roles than are female students (see Table 1). On average, all respondents slightly agreed that they are living in a society with balanced and fair gender norms, and there was no difference in perceptions according to sex. When asked to reflect on particular behaviors, roles, and expectations associated with gender stereotypes, the typical student slightly disagreed that any of them are acceptable (i.e. all means were below the neutral midpoint of 3.5). However, male students were relatively more likely to express stereotypical views. They were significantly more inclined than females to believe that women should be responsible for housework and children while men should oversee financial decisions. Male students were also more likely to agree that gender-based violence is acceptable in certain situations.

The privileged position of men is reflected in differences in educational attainment over time. As the level of education increases, women's participation decreases. Illustrating this, one official from the Women and Children's Affairs Office in the Gambella region explained:

[In] primary schools, the number of female students is very high. As we go up to middle school, the number [boys to girls] is almost equal, and then above that level of education, the number of female students decreases dramatically. The reason is the culture. For example, after a certain age, the girl will be forced to enter into marriage and hence pregnancy and children come. This will prevent her from continuing her education after the marriage.

Additionally, parents seem to have varying beliefs and confidence in their sons' and daughters' education. According to an official from the Women and Children's Affairs Office Gender Directorate in the city of Hawassa, parents tend to invest more in sons than daughters:

If a father has two kids, one male and one female, and is requested to prioritize them for education, what do you think this father will do? He will prefer his male kid, whether the female is the younger or the elder. This indicates that there is a huge gap in the community's attitude.

Table 1. Student attitudes about traditional gender roles and norms ($n = 1261$).

	Men ($n = 965$)	Women ($n = 296$)	Mean difference	Sig.
I feel that I am living in a society with balanced and fair gender norms.	4.17	4.10	0.07	
Changing diapers, giving a bath, and feeding kids is the mother's responsibility.	3.19	2.78	0.41	***
A woman's role is taking care of her home and family.	3.15	2.85	0.30	***
The husband should decide to buy the major household items.	3.21	2.89	0.32	***
A man should have the final word about decisions in his home.	3.35	3.14	0.21	**
A woman should obey her husband in all things.	3.18	2.85	0.33	***
There are times when a woman deserves to be beaten.	3.09	2.76	0.33	***
A woman should tolerate violence to keep her family together.	3.20	2.85	0.35	***
It is alright for a man to beat his wife if she is unfaithful.	2.95	2.51	0.44	***
A man can hit his wife if she won't have sex with him.	2.88	2.51	0.37	***
If someone insults a man, he should defend his reputation with force if necessary.	2.98	2.79	0.19	*
A man using violence against his wife is a private matter.	3.05	2.73	0.32	***

Note: Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Slightly Disagree; 4 = Slightly Agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Strongly agree. Significant differences calculated with two-tailed independent sample t-tests; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Beyond the individual family unit, prevailing norms, values, and viewpoints in Ethiopia may also reflect traditional gender stereotypes. A respondent from the Women and Children's Affairs Office Gender Directorate in Hawassa shared: 'Negotiations, community leadership, community presentations, and community representatives are all the activities of males. Only one to two females might be accepted by our community; in contrast, males are readily accepted and prioritized by the community.' It also seems as if there was an arbitrary allocation and examination of gender roles without women's consent, such as who is better at leadership. A student from the same city expressed how 'the leadership position is primarily given to males. Nobody asks the reason for these cases ... The government is still influenced by the earlier attitude towards females. The females don't get any positions.' Sexist attitudes about women's physical capacities can translate into assumptions that they are less able leaders. A male leader in Jigjiga shared:

Females can't handle as much as males. For instance, if a female is a president of a given country, it will be a burden that she can't handle. We would have seen a lot of female presidents if they had such capability. There may be two or three female presidents, but it's insignificant as compared to the males. ... To be honest, females have many natural burdens that hinder them from a lot of things – they conceive, give birth – but males do not.

Such disparities have a lasting impact on the ability of women to secure and maintain employment after completing higher education.

Nonetheless, the study data suggest that the women who manage to defy the dominant culture and successfully matriculate to college are just as invested in their education and professional development as men. Although women are notably underrepresented in terms of overall enrollment numbers in three academic years from 2017/18–2019/20 (e.g. women 35% versus men 65% in undergraduate enrollment; MoSHE 2021), survey data indicate that female and male students demonstrated equivalently strong appreciation for their schoolwork (see Table 2). In fact, authors observed only one significant difference in attitudes about school according to sex: men were more likely than women to report skipping classes. The data suggest that by the time they reach higher education, individual female students have, in some ways, rejected the dominant social norms that position women for domestic roles. They want to attend college and appreciate the value of what they are learning, just as much as men. Moreover, where employment is concerned, the data indicate women have equivalent aspirations to secure a job after graduating, either by joining an existing organization or by establishing their own business.

Inequitable access to campus career support systems

Over the last decade universities, polytechnic colleges, and the Government of Ethiopia have engaged in efforts to improve higher education's ability to prepare students to succeed in the labor market. A key initiative has been to establish dedicated career services and vocational

Table 2. Student attitudes about education and jobs ($n = 1261$).

	Male ($n = 965$)	Female ($n = 296$)	Mean difference	Sig.
I enjoy being in school.	4.62	4.61	0.120	
I try to do my best work in school.	4.55	4.55	0.004	
I usually miss whole days of classes.	3.80	3.59	0.212	*
My courses and school subjects are mostly interesting.	4.56	4.55	0.006	
I often feel that the schoolwork I am assigned is meaningful and important.	4.54	4.59	-0.055	
I would like to find a job after I graduate.	4.59	4.63	-0.044	
I would like to create my own job or business after I graduate.	4.54	4.59	-0.059	
I would like to find a job or create my own close to my home.	4.48	4.36	0.111	

Note: Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Slightly Disagree; 4 = Slightly Agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Strongly agree. Significant differences calculated with two-tailed independent sample t-tests; * $p < 0.05$.

guidance offices in universities and colleges, respectively. The offices were planned to be led by professional staff who design and implement centralized systems to support the development of student skills to secure employment and build a meaningful occupational trajectory. These offices are relatively new and very small compared to the size of their institutions and the students they need to serve. Many have only one academic staff member as director/head of the center, and in most cases, this is not a full-time job. Similar to other academic administrative positions, an academic staff member assumes this leadership role, often with little role-related experience and with a reduced workload in teaching and research. And yet, through time and practical engagement, most of them were able to develop skills required to carry out their duties, including regularly organizing employability skills-related training, providing career counseling, and implementing programs, such as internships and job fairs, to connect students with potential employers.

The data reveal a clear gender-based disparity in student engagement with formal career service support opportunities provided by their institution (see Table 3). Female students were significantly less likely to know that their institution offered career services. Moreover, 38% of men had received services from their campus's career center compared to just 19% of females. Female students who had received career center assistance accessed information about how to apply for jobs at statistically equivalent levels to male students. However, females were significantly less likely than males to have discussed their career plans with a counselor, enroll in career-related training, obtain information about internships, or receive resume writing assistance.

Uneven commitment to gender parity among employers

The needs assessment data provide further insight into Ethiopian employer practices related to gender, specifically, which organizations were more likely to hire women. Authors estimated an ordinary least squares regression with percentage of female employees as the dependent variable. In addition to the employer's particular industry, the model's independent variables included responses to two Likert scale items about organizational practices in hiring women, as well as two factor-derived measures capturing how closely the employer collaborates with HEIs on workforce initiatives and the organization's overall commitment to equity and inclusion.

The relative share of an employer's female workforce significantly varied according to several occupational sectors. Compared to a government office, *Ceteris Paribus*, a company in the hotel and restaurant industry, employed 12% more female employees. Meanwhile, manufacturing,

Table 3. Student experiences with campus career centers ($n = 1261$).

	Male ($n = 965$)	Female ($n = 296$)	Mean difference	Sig.
Are you aware of the presence of a center in the University/TVET that provides career services? ^a	0.53	0.43	0.10	**
Have you ever received a service from your University/TVET 's career center? ^a	0.38	0.19	0.19	***
I am aware of all the services provided by the career center of my University/TVET. ^b	4.41	4.20	0.21	*
I have used the services from the career service center. ^b	4.33	4.18	0.15	
I have taken training related to career development. ^b	4.26	4.02	0.24	**
I have talked about my career plans with a career services center representative. ^b	4.27	4.03	0.24	**
I have gotten advice on my CV or resume from a career services center representative. ^b	4.22	3.94	0.28	**
I have gotten help on how to apply for a job from a career services center representative. ^b	4.11	3.93	0.18	
I have received information about internship opportunities from my university/TVET's career center. ^b	4.51	4.28	0.23	**

Note: Significant differences calculated with two-tailed independent sample t-tests; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

^aScale: 0 = No; 1 = Yes.

^bScale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Slightly Disagree; 4 = Slightly Agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Strongly agree.

construction, and logging companies reported significantly fewer women in their workforces (8%, 21%, and 21%, respectively). The qualitative data substantiated the gendered nature of certain occupational sectors in Ethiopia, which were referenced above in the literature review.

Rather than holding employers accountable, interviewees suggested that women self-select out of more physically demanding career pathways. A representative from a College Gender Office explained: ‘When it comes to sex, women do not choose hard skills. You will not find many women in [jobs that require] hard skills like manufacturing, woodwork, and auto.’ On the other hand, you will see many women in simple fields, such as business and ICT. Another official at the Benishangul Gumuz Saving and Credit Enterprise in the city of Assosa elaborated: ‘Maybe this is related to how they [the women] were shaped in childhood. As you know, manufacturing requires physical strength, which is more suited or dared by the males. The women prefer what is physically easier for them.’

Authors observed no significant difference between the government office and a company’s proportion of female employees in the following sectors: agriculture, retail or wholesale trade, transportation, finance, real estate, education, health and social work, mining, or food and beverage (Table 4).

The regression estimates included three measures to capture organizational policies and practices specific to diversity and inclusion. The formative assessment indicated that even though most employers (69.3%) do not consider gender in their hiring process, more employers showed a higher preference for hiring female workers (21.7%) than those who gave higher priority to hiring male workers (8.9%). No significant relationship existed between female representation in the workforce and employers’ general commitment to equity or existence of formal policies in place to hire women, nor were employers’ reported engagement with universities and TVETs associated with an organization’s proportion of female employees. A Gender Office director suggested that such policies are ineffective because few people know about them. She shared, ‘The “Equal Pay for Equal Work” regulation is written in the employer-employee strategy. However, most of us, including youths, are unaware of the rules and regulations. Youths, particularly females, do not know about the rules and regulations.’

Table 4. Employer characteristics regressed by proportion of female employees ($n = 460$).

	B	SE	b	t	p
Intercept	0.28	0.04		7.04	<.001
<i>Industry</i>					
Agriculture ^a	-0.05	0.06	-0.04	-0.87	0.384
Manufacturing ^a	-0.08	0.04	-0.13	-2.34	0.020
Retail trade ^a	0.08	0.07	0.05	1.11	0.269
Wholesale trade ^a	-0.13	0.10	-0.05	-1.22	0.222
Construction ^a	-0.21	0.07	-0.13	-2.95	0.003
Hotels & restaurants ^a	0.12	0.03	0.28	4.18	<.001
Transportation ^a	-0.11	0.07	-0.07	-1.59	0.113
Finance/insurance ^a	-0.04	0.04	-0.05	-1.01	0.314
Real estate ^a	-0.02	0.08	-0.01	-0.28	0.777
Education ^a	0.05	0.04	0.07	1.36	0.175
Health & social work ^a	0.06	0.03	0.11	1.87	0.062
Logging ^a	-0.21	0.07	-0.13	-2.97	0.003
Mining ^a	-0.16	0.18	-0.04	-0.88	0.377
Food & beverage ^a	0.05	0.05	0.06	1.21	0.227
Other ^a	-0.10	0.05	-0.09	-1.88	0.061
<i>Employer Policies and Practices</i>					
My organization places a high priority on hiring women. ^b	0.03	0.01	0.18	2.97	0.003
My organization has formal policies in place to hire women. ^b	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.21	0.835
Employer commitment to equity and inclusion. ^c	-0.01	0.01	-0.05	-0.97	0.333
Employer engagement with HEIs. ^c	0.01	0.01	0.07	1.43	0.153

Note: Model fit.

^aIndustry reference group is government offices.

^bScale is 6-point Likert: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Slightly Disagree; 4 = Slightly Agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Strongly agree.

^cFactor-derived standardized variable.

The regression results indicated, however, that organizations that explicitly prioritized hiring women had significantly higher percentages of women working for them (Table 4) compared to those that did not explicitly prioritize it. A one standard deviation increase in HR managers, indicating that their organization places a high priority on hiring women, was associated with a 0.18 standard deviation increase in the proportion of female employees. Several interviewees shared that their companies prefer women because 'females can perform multiple activities at a point in time than males. They are also more polite and always ready to receive orders from their managers. They have a high capacity to tolerate things' (HR Representative, Hawassa Industrial Park). Also, an HR Representative from Dire Dawa manufacturing company stated: 'Females have high patience as compared to males. They stay for a long time at work. We request more females when we recruit employees.'

Limitations

The authors recognize the limitation of the absence of a neutral option in the Likert scale survey questions.

Discussion and conclusion

While the extant literature covers employment challenges common to men and women and barriers shared among global, Africa – and Ethiopia-level contexts, this study analyzed employment barriers specific to female graduates in the Ethiopian context. For example, previous literature explored employment challenges that are common for men and women and common across global, national, and local contexts. This study analyzed barriers that were specific to women graduates in Ethiopia, including barriers related to socio-cultural, institutional, and political environments. Furthermore, the findings suggest that formal affirmative action policies may not be as effective as an employer's norms, culture, and internalized practices in promoting a gender-diverse workforce. This finding somehow contradicts a report that indicates that affirmative action and policy interventions could be more effective in certain environments, depending on implementation and enforcement (World Bank 2023). Additionally, the findings do not suggest what other studies indicate: that gender preference depends on the required skill level. Gender preference is often observed in jobs requiring a lower level of skill than a higher level of skill (Kuhn and Shen 2013). In some other cases, the gender preference could be related to other criteria. For example, in China 'Employers' relative preferences for female versus male workers ... are more strongly related to the preferred age, height, and beauty of the worker than to job skill levels' (Kuhn and Shen 2013, 287). These imply that instead of a commitment to gender parity, employers' gender preference is often based on the institutional culture and skills required for the specific job.

Moreover, this study provides insight into an understudied phenomenon: the career preparation-related experiences of females enrolled in higher education. Most Ethiopian university career counselors are males (Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency, 2008; as cited in Seyoum 2011). The secondary quantitative analysis, which uses a mixed-methods needs assessment, indicates that gender-based cultural expectations and social norms play a role in shaping the career choices of Ethiopian students. This is in line with the findings of other studies, which also asserted that gendered expectations shape the future career trajectories of youth in Ethiopia and elsewhere (Akinlolu 2022; Jones, Tafere, and Woldehanna 2010). According to the qualitative data, there is a perception that women are inferior to men, which results in families and communities giving priority to men for educational, economic, and leadership opportunities. Among college students themselves, men are significantly more likely than women to express stereotypical beliefs about gender roles. Men make up the majority of Ethiopia's TVET and university enrollments, thus magnifying the impact of their beliefs within the campus community. Men are also overrepresented among Ethiopian HEI leaders and faculty (Adamu 2023; Hailu 2022), but unfortunately, survey data did not include administrator

staff views. The authors encourage further research into campus climates for women that encompasses additional stakeholders' perspectives, including graduate students, academic staff, administrators, and leaders, in addition to undergraduates. Another key finding from the formative assessment was that female students accessed their institution's career support systems at significantly lower rates than males, which disadvantages their readiness for the job market.

Theoretical and practical implications of study

The study indicated that institutional culture and other factors could shape career preferences more than skill sets. This nuance adds complexity to labor market theories that focus on skill-based discrimination, urging theorists to consider non-skill-based factors like culture and gender stereotypes in employment contexts. Overall, these findings underscore the role that colleges and universities play in promoting gender equity in the labor market. Perhaps in Ethiopia, female students are less likely to network on campus than their male counterparts and, therefore, are less aware of co- and extracurricular events/activities. Another possibility could be that the career services may disproportionately focus on science fields, in which female students are seriously underrepresented (Egne, 2014). This could be avoided if the career services were evenly distributed among different fields of studies, leaving the possibility to improve female students' representation. In 2020, recognizing the value of campus career services, MoSHE issued its Directive for the Provision of Career Development Services in Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions, which explicitly states: 'The Career Service Development Center shall be inclusive in terms of gender and students with physical disability' (MoSHE 2021). The data suggest that more work is required to achieve this goal. Students themselves are often missing from the discussions for policy recommendations. Frontline policy practitioners, such as teachers and students, are excluded or minimally included – less genuine involvement 'that amounts to fake participation, mainly for political consumption, and to bypass criticism' (Halkiyo 2023, 168). Moving forward, students need to be involved in all policy and strategy assessment stages to enhance equity for all students, especially women.

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