

Experience of Research Undertaking among Women Academia at Addis Ababa University: a Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: As a pioneer University in the Country, Addis Ababa University engages itself in collaborative and local research undertakings along with teaching, community engagements and technology transfer. Despite its long engagement in research, the participation of women academia in research is limited as manifested by their low research productivity in terms of publication in peer-reviewed scientific journals. However, the reasons for their low research participation are less known and needs further exploration.

Objective: To explore the experience of research undertakings among women academia at Addis Ababa University.

Method: We conducted an exploratory qualitative study using a phenomenological approach among women academia. Eight women who have been working in the University with a rank of a lecturer having at least two years participated in in-depth interviews. We used NVivo10 software to code and categorize the transcripts.

Result: Our study revealed that only a few senior informants with more than 10 years of stay at the University had a better experience in applying for national and international research grants. Although all the participants said they had ever undertaken research, their publication track in peer-reviewed journals is limited. Social and economic factors, lack of networking, low salary and family responsibility, limited internet and library access, and lack of research skill among young faculty were raised as impediments to undertake research.

Conclusion: This study has indicated that women in academia had limited research engagement in terms of grant application and publication in peer reviewed scientific journals. Balancing work and family life, low salary, lack of access to common University facilities were some of the challenges. While structural change ensures gender equality at a long time, addressing the gender gap in research is the responsibility of AAU. [*Ethiop. J. Health Dev.* 2021; 35(SI-2):22-29]

Keywords: Addis Ababa University, experience of research, women in academia

Background

Ensuring gender equality has been a significant challenge in Ethiopia's higher learning institutions despite the Government's effort to increase women's participation in these institutions (1). This is mainly due to the hierarchical and male-dominated structure and culture of the higher learning institutions in Ethiopia (2). Among women who had been employed in higher learning institutions, most of them encountered several challenges to participate in research. A limited number of role models, lack of access to information, lack of networks, absence of programs that promote collaborative engagement in research, and misconceptions about women's capacity have affected women's participation in research(3, 4).

On the other hand, the place women occupy in the society and the unequal division of labor confines women to the domestic sphere as is the case elsewhere in Africa (5-7). Due to the time constraint caused by child bearing and other family responsibilities, the work-family balance is offset, and women in academics are deterred from thriving in research and obtaining higher academic ranks (5).

Addis Ababa University (AAU), the largest and the oldest University in Ethiopia, has continuously increased the number of female students and women in academics with a protracted growth rate. For example, the number of women were only 16.9% of the total academia at the end of the 2019/2020 academic year (6).

Not only the proportion of women academia is small, but their participation in research and publication is also diminutive. The limited publication experience of women in the Ethiopian Journal of Development Research (EJDR), an academic journal at AAU can be reflective of this trend. Even though the journal started publishing in the 1970s, it was in 2006 that a woman author published her work as a principal investigator for the first time. Moreover, women authors appeared in less than 15% of the issues the journal and they did not appear as the first or corresponding author; in the majority of the cases, their participation has been limited to co-authorship (4). Because of such limited engagement in research, women academics thus experience difficulty getting promoted and achieving a higher academic rank(2).

Much effort has not been put into exploring women researchers' experiences in higher learning institutions of Ethiopia. Therefore, this qualitative study was conducted with the aim of exploring the research experiences and productivity of women in academia, the challenges they face and opportunities they have come across in their research career path, using a phenomenological approach.

Methods

Setting: We conducted this study in Addis Ababa University that consists of a student population of 46,692 pursuing their studies in 366 graduate programs (including 96 Ph.D. programs) opened in ten colleges

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and six institutes of the University. The University conducts its teaching and research activity through its 2,987 full time faculty, of which women comprised only one eighth 507(16.9%) by the end of 2020 (6).

Study approach and participant: phenomenological approach was used to generate data from women academia at AAU from July to August 2019.

Sample size and participant selection: We purposively selected eight women participants based on their service year at the University. While five of them were senior faculty who served the University for more than 10 years and held a rank of assistant professor and above, three of them were junior faculty who served the university for at least two years with a rank of lecturer.

Data collection: We used a semi-structured interview guide based on phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of women in academia. The discussion guide mainly focused on values towards research and its implication, experiences, challenges, and opportunities on research undertakings. However, other issues emerging from the discussions were also pursued in subsequent interviews. A case in point is intimidating treatment by male faculty, which was experienced by all the participants. Interview time and place was flexible to suit the timetable and preference of the informants. The interviews were conducted by four members of the research group members who hold a Master of Public Health degree or medical doctors with specialty and had special training and experience in undertaking qualitative research. Two researchers participated in each interview as note-takers and interviewers, and interviews were conducted in the informants' offices to maintain privacy. All interviews were recorded using digital recorders. On average, one interview took 60-90 minutes, and all the interviews were conducted in Amharic language.

Data quality assurance and analysis:

The data collectors who were also the investigators of this study transcribed the interviews, verbatim and then translated it to English language. The translated texts

were read thoroughly by the investigators, handwritten notes were also used to fill in less audible statements and to complement non-verbal communications observed during the data collection. The transcripts were read by the researchers to develop the preliminary codebook. Then, the investigators sat together and developed a codebook while including new codes as emerged from the data. The coders carefully read the transcribed data line by line used data segmentation into meaningful analytical units and coded the data using NVivo 10 software. Then, similar codes were organized and grouped into categories/ sub-themes. Themes and subthemes were created based on the predesigned discussion guides which were designed using phenomenological approach. Finally, data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on themes included in the discussion guide. The study's trustworthiness was ensured using member checks by summarizing the findings to the interviewees. Moreover, multiple coders independently coded similar files, inter-coder agreement was checked and obtained.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the College of Health Science (CHS-IRB No -035/18/SPH). Informants were enrolled into the study after they signed informed consents. Confidentiality of information was assured throughout the study by coding and keeping all relevant documents in a secured place.

Results

The finding of the study is presented using three main themes with eight sub-themes. The three themes include: Involvement in research undertakings containing two subthemes (experience in grant applications and experience in research dissemination); challenges in conducting research consisting of four sub themes (challenges at a university, in research dissemination, at community and at individual and household level); and opportunities for conducting research comprising two subthemes (opportunities at a university and individual or household level). (Table - 1)

Table-1: Themes and sub-themes generated from the data collected from eight-woman faculties, Addis Ababa University, 2019.

S.N	Main themes	Sub-themes
1	Involvement in research undertaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience in research dissemination • Experience in grant application
2	Challenges faced in conducting research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges at University level • Challenges in dissemination • Challenges at a household and community level
3	Opportunities for conducting research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities at University level • Opportunities at individual/ Family level

Table-2: Profile of Study Participants (Female Researchers at AAU) from July-Sept 2019

S. N	Interview	Year of Experience	Academic rank
1	Informant I	14	Lecturer
2	Informant II	4	Assistant professor
3	Informant III	15	Lecturer
4	Informant IV	21	Assistant Professor
5	Informant V	32	Assistant professor
6	Informant VI	39	Associate professor
7	Informant VII	4	Assistant professor
8	Informant VIII	5	Lecturer

Profile of the study participants: We were able to generate data from eight informant at three colleges/institutes of AAU. The informants had served

the University between 4 and 39 years. While three of the informants were lecturers, the rest held a rank of assistant professor and above.

Involvement in Research Undertakings.

Almost all participants indicated that they have high value for research. They say it is central to academics and it is part of their obligation both in their trainings and in their academic practice. However, their engagement was varied depending on their years of services in the University. Senior women academicians reported to have been highly engaged and were well published. On the other hand, the experience of young women in academia was limited to writing their master's thesis which is usually done during their pre-service training years. Narrating about her experience, one of the junior participants for example has to say the following:

When I began to write a proposal for my first research, I was stressed. I personally wanted to do things properly; hence, whenever I get information about trainings on research, I tried to participate actively as I believed that I need to know more about research before I started doing it. After I took few days of trainings, it helped me a lot. Even though I struggled a lot to submit my final paper, I managed to get the best out of the trainings. (Informant II)

Senior informants, on the other hand, express their active research participation and success proudly. A senior informant indicated her participation in research as follows:

I have many publications both in local and international journals, I have produced a book and a teaching material, I can say I have made studies in a wide range of topics in my field of training. (Informant VI)

One of the areas that was explored was research focus area. Some informants mentioned that they have certain area of focus such as gender-related issues, leadership, HIV/AIDS. Most, however, lack specialization in research area because most of their studies were mainly driven by international and local grant calls and the amount of money attached with it. A senior informant indicated the situation as follows:

In my department, most of the research done are unrelated to the fields of researchers. They [the researchers] surely contribute to solving problems through research undertakings. But [their studies] are not [necessarily] related to

their profession. I mean faculty are researching many areas. (Informant V)

Experience in grant application:

Almost all junior faculty lack research grant application experience. On the other hand, senior informants reported to have had significant experience in writing grant winning proposals from both national and international sources. Those who had grant application experience admitted that the process is challenging and needs a lot of effort and repeated application before winning an application. Explaining the ups and downs those researchers undergo, one of the informants used the following metaphor and she cautioned that research should not be discouraged by letters of regrets/ rejection:

Of course, you must get up and walk again after you fail in the sludge. Because, if you do not shake the sludge from your body, get up and walk, the sludge will not allow you to go. There are many types of sludge, and that is the challenge, is it not? (Informant VI)

Informants also indicated that international grant application is more attractive than the local University Thematic Grant. Some also indicated that announcements on AAU Thematic Research Grant did not often given ample time to applicants and it was hard to meet the deadlines. One of the informants indicated her dissatisfaction with the Thematic Research Grant application as follows:

In addition to being bureaucratic, the Annual Addis Ababa University research grant application process is long, unacceptable, and inefficient. That is why I often get discouraged from applying]. (Informant IV)

Experience in research dissemination:

Research dissemination was raised as one of the main tasks of research undertakings by almost all participants irrespective of their degree of participation. Most also indicated that, on top of academic consumption for promotion and conference presentations, dissemination of findings to the community is crucial since it can be used to resolve problems and it is a way paying back to the community. A remark by one informant is presented below:

There is limited culture of disseminating research findings to beneficiaries at AAU. The only way research is disseminated is in the

academic circle through conferences. [In my opinion], an agricultural researcher must go to the farmers' fields to show his/ her experimental findings. In general, all research findings must be disseminated to the respective responsible body. (Informant V)

A senior informant also indicated a similar concern about the limited outlets for research findings and suggested that researchers should look for outlets by themselves as follows:

Sometimes, when you finish your research, you must go to concerned authorities or organizations and inform them about your research findings. You may even ask them to set up a stage to present your findings. (Informant VI)

Challenges faced by women in academia in conducting a research.

Participants of this study raised several challenges that deter women in academia from participating in research undertakings. The challenges mentioned had different manifestations including problems related to workplace, balancing work and life in terms of challenges at a family, community, and university level. The challenges are discussed below using three subthemes.

Challenge at a University level

The academicians pointed out that one of the significant challenges in research undertaking is the lack of information and poor communication regarding research grants. A junior informant indicated her opinion as follows.

"It is usually difficult where to get information on in grant calls". At least, currently, we could have some information from the Office of Research but [that too] is not enough" (Informant I).

Some women also indicated obtaining the information alone is not adequate. Responding to grant calls, needs a rich experience and they further mentioned that young women in academia need mentorship prior to starting an application. In the words of a participant,

"There are grants calls which are only dedicated only for women researchers, but the most important thing is mentorship. Young female faculty need to have a role model, so I believe it would be great to work on this. (Informant III).

An unsupportive working environment was stated as one of the challenges of research undertakings. Informants further indicated that though the university envisions a conducive research environment, the reality is far from that. Challenges raised in connection with obstructive environment include limited internet access, poor connection with repeated power interruptions, and lack of access to the University research portal for online grant application /CONVARIS/ while working from home were mentioned. Illustrative of these challenges are remarks made by two of the informants:

I have little time to go to the library and check for materials. Even when I go there, the library

is mostly crowded with students and other people. Access to the AAU research portal is also impossible when you are away from the campus. (Informant II)

The internet connectivity is fragile. There is repeated power outage. When I make a schedule and come to the library to work, the internet connection is lost for the whole day and, I must wait for the connection to come back and waste the whole day doing nothing. (Informant V)

The other challenge to research undertaking is access to reputable scientific Journals. Sustaining the annual subscription of renowned Journal by the university is crucial as stated by one informant:

Now the good journals for which the university had paid for are not there anymore; (Informant V)

Informants also pointed out that the budget allocated for research in PhD programs plays a significant role in conducting research. Some needed to withdraw from research projects they planned to conduct due to limited financial resources.

As you know, the AAU budget for research is minimal; it is not sufficient. I get worried when I think about the future. For example, in the PhD. study, our primary advisors are expatriate academicians, and when we tell them about the budget allocated for a Ph.D. work, they would be surprised by its amount. (Informant VIII)

Some also mentioned that the amount of salary the academicians earn inadequate, thereby forcing them to look for part-time job. That in turn makes their life busy and hinders them from engaging in research.

Challenges in networking and information acquisition

Informants indicated that men perform better than women in research undertakings since they have more time than women as they have less responsibilities at home. Even then, men underestimate the capacity of women in research and do not want to work with them.

A senior informant explains the situation as follows:

The big challenge is that we are taken for granted to take non-research related activities such as teaching. In rare cases when we engage in research, men academicians assume we are only good at data collection or data entry. Most of the time, men do not see woman academicians seriously deserve leading research undertakings. (Informant VI)

Some also indicated that women, unlike their counterparts, lack networks that enables them to share information about research grant announcements. According to a participant

Men tend to gather in a café after office hours and share work and research related information and prefer to collaborate with

men, but we [women] do not develop such kind of attitude" (Informant IV)

The informants also indicated that the networks do exclude women, and they are formed based on affiliations. A junior informant indicated the situation as follows:

"There is a circle, and you cannot penetrate that circle," says a junior faculty, "and the informal network will exclude you" (Informant VI).

Challenges in research dissemination

Most of the study informants engaged in research as part of their learning experience without being sure whether it would influence policy. Contrary to that, some believe that their research could have policy implications. Even though they believe that their research can impact policies, deep inside they say the doors of policymakers are not open to researchers. In the words of one interviewee,

"Policymakers fail to see the value of research; they often associate researching with academic requirements only" (Informant I).

Explaining the disconnect between researchers and policy makers, the informant further notes:

When your research finding shows pitfalls, policymakers feel like you are accusing them. Instead of seeing you as someone trying to resolve problems, they see you as a troublemaker, and they do not dare to take your problem-solving ideas and give you a chance to be part of the solution. (Informant I)

Lack of experience and skill in writing publishable manuscripts by peer reviewed scientific journals was raised as one of the challenges in disseminating research findings. In the words of a participant,

Because of various reasons, we were not equipped with the necessary skills in writing acceptable manuscripts.... Thus, even if we write a manuscript, we often get letters of regrets....." (Informant VII)

Another challenge stated by the informants that deter publishing, especially in international journals, is the requirement of payment in foreign currency, which is not affordable or feasible due to lack of access to foreign currency. The publication process in the international journals that are free access is usually long and that is demotivating.

One of the most discouraging issues in publishing, especially in international journals, is a delay in response. Researchers will not be able to submit the paper to other journals by the time they get a very delayed negative response. Delay in publication could make the study outdated which at times is demotivating. (Informant V)

Challenge at household and community level

Women's family responsibility and limited support from spouses at a household level was reported as another

limiting factor in undertaking research by most participants.

Women must breastfeed their child, and it becomes a double burden to engage in research. Since women must discharge responsibilities that sort all alone without much support from their husbands, that makes research engagement a double burden. (Informant-IV)

Others also put women's research participation in a lifecycle perspective. They divided their lifecycle into premarital, marital, and childbearing period, and the period when women start to think for themselves as their children grow. The following quote is typical example of such a perspective:

"I think a woman's life is seasonal. When she is single, she will have more time for herself, but she will be occupied with her family after marriage. Later in her life, after raising her children, she will get time to do her Ph.D. ...And unlike that of men, the academic life of a woman has ups and downs due to those reasons,"(Informant IV)

Both junior and senior informants underlie that they do not have adequate time to engage in research as they are also expected to play their social role as a woman. Explaining the situation, a junior faculty has this to say:

We [women] have time constraints because of our social burden, and we could not spend time on papers as much as the men. As a woman, raising a child and taking care of the family is a big burden. Even a husband who is supportive of his wife is not appreciated; the community we grow in assumes all that is women's duty. (Informant IV)

Speaking from her experience, a senior faculty expresses challenges faced women academics more vividly:

I do not publish a lot because I have multiple responsibilities. On the one hand, I teach, and on the other I manage my family. And when I try to focus on my writings with my limited time, I encounter problems of power outage and I can no longer use my computer. All that is time consuming....You know what I am saying? Men do not have all these hassles. They come here [to campus] at 7 am in the morning and leave at 8 or 9 pm in the evening. But I cannot do that. (Informant V)

Opportunities for women for conducting a research.

Despite the many challenges encountered in relation to undertaking research, informants also admit, though limited, there are also opportunities both in the university and at home that encourage women to conduct research.

Opportunities at the University

Informants remarked that Addis Ababa University avails research grants and has created opportunities to undertake research.

Even though the resources are minimal, the University encourages women led research, and we take this as an opportunity. I hear that there is a special offer for women in the grant application package as one criterion and that is motivating. It makes me think about engaging in research! (Informant III)

The arrangement of short-term training on research methodology by the University dedicated to woman academicians was also raised as another opportunity by some informants.

Opportunities at Household/family level

Even though some of the participants complained about lack of family support as a challenge, others indicated otherwise. Those who indicated that they have family support appreciated their husbands to have shared their family responsibility which was reported as helpful. Owing her success to her husband's help, a respondent has, for example, this to say:

There must always be some small push and backup from a partner. It was not without my husband's support that I was able to do some research work while I was pregnant and raising kids. My husband and I were equally sharing the responsibility of taking care of the kids. We both had academic commitment, but my husband was helpful. Without my husband's assistance, I would not be that successful. (Informant VI)"

Discussion

This exploratory qualitative study found that female faculty had limited participation in research and publication productivity. The study also revealed that those who are engaged in research work do not have specific research focus area. Only some senior faculty had history of applying for research grants both locally and internationally. Family-work-balance, lack of networking and underestimating their research ability by their male counterparts which is manifested by less involvement of women in collaborative projects. In addition, limited access to university resources such as staff dedicated library space, access to continuous internet connection and lack of strong research skill were mentioned as challenges to undertake research. Short term trainings on research methodology, especially for female faculty, research grants dedicated for women only and family support were raised as opportunities contributing for future undertakings.

This study was not without limitations. The exclusion of female faculty who took part in the quantitative the research might have decreased the richness of the information as the pool of women in academia is small. In addition, the exclusion of men faculty from this qualitative research might have also provided one sided story mentioned about male faculty.

According to the findings of the present study, most participants had no publication in peer-reviewed journals except the few senior participants. This was mostly due to lack of research writing skill among young faculty, unfavorable environment, and lack of role

models (9). The limited visibility of women faculty in peer reviewed journals is also reflected in the academic staff profile of Addis Ababa University where only 2% of all women were full professors and 5% were associate professors (10). Besides, the annual research publication incentive of the University indicated that the percentage of women who received publication incentive were very few in the past five years (11). With the aim of maximizing the publication of junior faculty including women, the current AAU legislation had put a new article that encourages students and staff to publish their research works as a requirement for graduation (12). As per the AAU legislation, research publication in reputable scientific journals is a requirement for promotion among other things where only faculty members with sound research track could be promoted to a higher academic rank (12).

The study participants mentioned several challenges that deter female faculty from conducting research. The challenges mentioned by many centered around multiple responsibilities women shoulder as an academician, as wives and mothers. Other studies in Ethiopia have also indicated that one of the significant challenges female faculty face is the difficulty of balancing family-work-life (4). A study in Ghana also revealed that universities do not pay attention to gender differences or provide special support to female academics who must rear their children (7). Structural factors such as patriarchy surpass women's agency to use their own time for their professional enhancement and overburden them with household tasks leaving them with less time for their professional enhancement (5). This was affirmed by participants from current study where women who had spousal support were able to be successful in publications and research grant application as compared with their counterparts who did not have spousal support.

Male faculty members were reported to have had undermined women's ability as researchers and somehow recommend them for tasks which do not require strong analytical. In Ethiopia, masculine traits are more appreciated than feminine traits (12) where girls are not encouraged to pursue their education but pushed to only focus on their reproductive roles (5). Moreover, due to the limited number of female leaders and role models in research, female faculty do not tend to aspire to higher achievement in their careers (3, 4).

The low salary they get as an academician was also reported as one of the main challenges that force female faculty to work part-time to fulfill their family needs. Though the salary scale is the same for both sexes, women lose additional time in family responsibilities and social engagements than men and that makes women less engaged in research activities. A study conducted in AAU in 2011 indicated that more focus was given by the staff towards income generation than research engagements (4).

On the other hand, senior female faculty who had achieved a lot indicated that research undertakings need knowledge-driven interest and experience. Hence, in the views of the senior faculty, work overload could not be

the only reason for not involving in research performance. However, we argue that all faculty have been exposed to research at least in their thesis work and have basic knowledge/experience of research though there would be a variation in the depth of their engagement. The performance of the junior faculty in research is low because they are at their prime life and have new family responsibilities including being a new parent and balancing their work and life is yet to come. Due to time constraints caused by childbearing and other family responsibilities, a study in Ethiopia has noted that female faculty are unable to have the necessary publications for academic promotion (13).

This study also showed that female faculty had little participation in applying for grants. The AAU documentation also indicated that women had less participation in both international and University-wide thematic and adaptive research grant applications (13). Women in this study indicated that lack of networking is the leading cause for their low performance in grant writing. And networking has been demonstrated to be a vital component of information and writing a grant-winning proposal (15).

A study in Ghana noted that female faculty are mostly unaware of their resources due to a lack of information and possibly networking (7).

However, one must take note of that unless one is interested in research, chooses an area of focus, and demonstrates a capacity to publish, it is less likely that the individual would be able to penetrate any network or a research team.

Regarding a supportive university environment, while a few participants claimed that the University's support is limited, most indicated that the University had started supporting female researchers by providing research courses targeting only female faculty and announcing calls for female-focused research grants. These differences could be due to a lack of information about what is going on in the University as stated by some participants.

Some participants reported that they have benefited from trainings related to research. They also suggested that organizing special training for female faculty and creating a mentorship scheme is essential. Similar study conducted in 2011 also suggested that the University needs to create a new system that provides mentorship and training (4). Though the participants in this study were not aware of what is going on in colleges other than theirs, some Colleges had a strong mentorship and research training programs that has been helpful in creating a critical mass of researchers (16).

Overall, it was found that gender-based structural inequalities are the leading causes of the challenges of female researchers at AAU in addition to inequalities at home. Addressing the gender gaps in research at AAU requires a closer look at gendered experiences and power relations within the University. Men and women have different experiences due to gender power relations (17, 18). These structural factors are deeply rooted in

organizations and society and that necessitates a closer look at culture and social structure (19, 20).

Conclusion: Gender-based inequalities mediated by patriarchy had affected the research participation of women in academia. Women who participated in this study had reported to have had lower research productivity in terms of research publications and generating research funding through competitive research grant applications. While structural issues to address the gender gap at community level seems unreachable soon; the gender gap in research at AAU requires a closer look at gendered experiences at structural and system level.

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