



# Addressing gender disparities to create a more equitable knowledge system in Ethiopia

## LEARNING BRIEF

Partnership between EAS and INASP to strengthen the research system in Ethiopia

April 2023

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## Addressing gender disparities to create a more equitable knowledge system in Ethiopia

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Cover image: Members of the Ethiopian Gender Learning Forum at a meeting in Addis Ababa, 2020



## Executive summary

Globally, women are underrepresented in research and university leadership. This also holds true in Ethiopia, where women make up only 11.5% of all researchers and hold around 10% of executive positions at universities or research institutions.

INASP's vision is of research and knowledge at the heart of development – where decisions are informed by relevant and rigorous evidence, and where knowledge is created with the communities it is intended to serve. That requires many voices, many institutions, and many types of knowledge – we call this an equitable knowledge ecosystem. If women are excluded from this process, a knowledge or research system cannot be equitable.

The Ethiopian Academy of Sciences (EAS) is committed to contribute to Ethiopia's national development agenda through promoting a culture of scientific inquiry and excellence across the country. Furthermore, one of the main objectives of the Academy is to 'sustain the active engagement and benefits of women and other underprivileged and marginalized groups in all scientific work'.

Grounded in our shared objectives and commitment to equity, during 2019-2022 EAS and INASP worked in partnership to strengthen Ethiopia's research system and to address barriers to women's participation in it.

Following an initial dialogue event with key stakeholders in 2018, the Ethiopian Gender Learning Forum (EGLF) was established in 2020 with the aim of improving gender equity in universities and research institutions in Ethiopia. Under the guidance of EAS, this forum includes individual and institutional members, reaching beyond the capital and flagship institutions.

The EGLF enables members to share experiences and best practices and advocate for the need to address gender inequities in the research system. As the forum and its activities have now gained momentum, future plans are underway – including strengthening its organisational structure, potentially registering as a legal organisation, and expanding its reach to more institutions. Recognising the importance of engaging men in gender initiatives, the EGLF is also actively working to increase the number of men involved. Although there is no quick and easy solution to the barriers women face in research, the forum and its members are committed to taking the necessary steps to tackle gender inequity in the Ethiopian research system.

### Key achievements

- **Establishment of the Ethiopian Gender Learning Forum (EGLF).** The EGLF is a national forum which aims to foster gender equity in Ethiopia's universities and research institutions. The forum currently has more than 70 individual and institutional members throughout Ethiopia.
- **Creating conducive institutional environments for women researchers.** Following their participation in workshops hosted by the EGLF several institutions have taken action to address gender barriers. As examples, the University of Gondar has created a competitive call for research grants aimed specifically at women academics and Salale University has provided training on manuscript writing and systematic review specifically for women academics.
- **An evolution in the EAS' programme from isolated activities to address gender to an integrated gender programme.** An integrated programme will contribute to sustainability and greater impact of activities.

## Introduction

Significant investment and clear policy directions have enabled Ethiopia to drive substantial change in its research system, with national strategies for improving science and technology, including a five-year National Growth and Transformation Plan. However, gaps in research skills and experience continue to be identified as a barrier to strengthening the research system. Additionally, a rapid expansion in the public university system – from just two universities in 1991 to now over 50 – has necessitated a focus on undergraduate teaching and learning, with most research and research investments concentrated in a small number of flagship institutions (Fosci et al., 2019).

Women researchers have faced particular obstacles (Nzegwu, 2019), but the impediments to women’s research and careers are often under-recognized by men, despite clear policy ambitions to increase gender equity in higher education and research (Young, 2023). In a 2021 survey conducted by INASP with researchers from the AuthorAID community, 60% of women respondents in Ethiopia agreed with the statement “women in research get fewer opportunities than men in similar positions”. By contrast only 25% of men agreed with this.

Our recent partnership was part of the Global Platforms for Equitable Knowledge Ecosystems (GPEKE) project. The overarching goal of the project was to enable stronger and more equitable research systems that allow more talent to be unleashed. GPEKE sought to achieve this through enabling the production and communication of quality, credible and relevant research by a more diverse range of individuals and institutions across Southern research systems. Activities were implemented on a global level through INASP’s learning platforms – including our [AuthorAID programme](#) – as well as more in-depth nationally in collaboration with partners in Ethiopia and Uganda.<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia was chosen as a focus country for the GPEKE project because there was strong alignment between the national vision for a stronger research system, INASP’s history and experience of partnership in Ethiopia, including with EAS, and because it was a focus country for Sida’s bilateral research cooperation.

Recognising the strong commitment among actors in the research and knowledge system in Ethiopia to build stronger national mechanisms, INASP and the [Ethiopian Academy of Sciences](#) (EAS) came together to explore how the research system in Ethiopia could be strengthened and how barriers preventing women from participating equitably could be addressed<sup>1</sup>.

Our starting point was a dialogue event which we jointly developed and co-hosted in November 2018. It was important that we explored needs, defined problems, determined a vision, and conceived of next steps together. The dialogue explored how the national research system in Ethiopia could “nurture a wider pool of research talent and foster an inclusive knowledge ecosystem to help achieve national development priorities”.<sup>2</sup> Participants included representatives from universities, national research institutions, regulatory and policy agencies, and government. The event produced a declaration, subsequently launched in Addis Ababa by EAS, which called on government, academia, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders to work together to achieve a unified, nationally driven research system that can respond to national priorities.

The consultations during the dialogue event, along with lessons from INASP’s previous work in Ethiopia<sup>3</sup>, indicated that for Ethiopia to realise its ambitions for research to contribute to the national development agenda, a wider network of institutions and individuals needed to be able to undertake research that addressed national priorities. Partners and stakeholders noted that there were limited mechanisms for research outputs to be consolidated and published nationally, making it difficult to access Ethiopian research, that many researchers lacked essential research skills, and that newly established universities had significantly limited resources with which to address these challenges. In

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<sup>1</sup> For learning from the parallel work in Uganda in partnership with the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology see: <http://inasp.info/publications/gpeke-uganda>

<sup>2</sup> <https://blog.inasp.info/needed-equitable-research-system-ethiopia/>

<sup>3</sup> INASP has supported partners in Ethiopia since 2000. Further information on INASP’s work in Ethiopia is available [here](#).

addition, a lack of coordinating mechanisms across the system, beyond sector specific networks in agriculture and health, was identified as a significant gap.<sup>4</sup>

A key area of inequity in the research system explored during the dialogue event was gender and participants agreed to form a gender network to support one another and to jointly work to improve gender equity in research in Ethiopia. Out of this grew the Ethiopian Gender Learning Forum (EGLF).

## Why gender?

Globally women make up only 33.3% of researchers, publish less than their male colleagues, and are found in increasing lower numbers as they move up through the academic ranks (Bello et al., 2021). Research systems that are substantially lacking the voices of women are less likely to be responsive to their needs and priorities. The power of research and knowledge to achieve national development and contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals can only be fully harnessed if the solutions, products, and technologies being developed are responsive to the needs and priorities of both women and men.

According to the 2021 UNESCO Science Report, women made up only 11.5% of all researchers in Ethiopia in 2018 (Bello et al., 2021), and in 2019-2020 women held only 10.6% of executive management positions across the 45 public universities in Ethiopia and made up less than 5% of deans and 3% of department heads (Bothwell et al., 2022).

*“Higher education is expanding, research institutions are expanding, but the balance between women and men in these high-level institutions is not the same as in high school for example. Mainstreaming is also important, not only in terms of equality and equity but also in terms of knowledge. We can’t leave 50% of the total population behind and not being able to contribute to the economic development of the nation.” (Professor Teketel Yohannes, Executive Director, EAS)*

The Global Gender Gap report published by the World Economic Forum shows that while Ethiopia drastically improved its overall position in the latest country index, climbing from 97<sup>th</sup> position in 2021 to 74<sup>th</sup> position in 2022, there remains a 14.6% gap for Ethiopia to close on the Educational Attainment index. This compares with a 5.6% gap to be closed globally (World Economic Forum, 2022).

## The Ethiopian Gender Learning Forum

### The story so far

In response to the dialogue event jointly hosted by EAS and INASP at the end of 2018, the [Ethiopian Gender Learning Forum](#) (EGLF) was launched in [February 2020](#) following an initial gender champion workshop in Addis Ababa. The forum’s vision is “to be a cohesive and integrated platform for fostering gender equity and equality in Ethiopia’s knowledge system”. The forum strives to achieve this vision by focusing on four thematic areas:

1. Enhancing governance and women’s participation in national higher education and research decision making.
2. Empowering women to be able to participate in research.
3. Ending discrimination against women in the higher education and research system.
4. Strengthening partnership and collaboration.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://blog.inasp.info/enabling-equitable-ethiopian-research-system-declaration/>

During its initial establishment, the EGLF benefitted from having a small group of experienced academics with gender expertise acting as advisors. These advisors have played a key role in the development of the forum including facilitating subsequent workshops and meetings.

A key principle of the partnership between EAS and INASP, stemming from the initial dialogue event, was to reach beyond the capital and usual flagship institutions in Ethiopia. The initial workshop in Addis Ababa was therefore followed by three further regional gender champion workshops hosted by Arba Minch University, Arsi University, and the University of Gondar respectively. The EGLF currently has more than 70 individual and institutional members.

The workshops aimed to create awareness of the gender related inequities that exist in research systems globally as well as in Ethiopia specifically and for participants to become gender champions in their institutions.

*“The gender disparity in Ethiopian higher education institutions is very large. We have very few female academicians, and those we do have are not engaged in research, community activities, even in teaching and learning activities – for a number of reasons. They need empowerment, they need support, they need someone to help them to get academic promotions, to release publications, and to get them into leadership positions. In all these cases, capacity-building is a very, very determining factor for them.” (Dr Haregewoin Fantahun, Addis Ababa University, former EGLF advisor and current member)<sup>5</sup>*

From the outset of the establishment of the gender forum, it was clear for all participating stakeholders that any work to address gender inequities in the Ethiopian research system must involve both women and men. The workshops to establish the Ethiopian Gender Learning Forum therefore actively sought to include men as well as women.

*“Men are also involved in participating in gender activities. Before the workshops were conducted, people believed that gender is only a women’s issue, but the awareness is changing after the workshops and trainings.” (Mahider Mekuannent, Senior Project Officer, EAS)*

During the gender champion workshops, participants developed action plans to address gender gaps in their institutions. Actions undertaken following the workshops include the creation of a competitive call for research grants aimed specifically at women academics at the University of Gondar, training on manuscript writing and systematic review for women academics at Salale University, awareness creation sessions on gender equality and equity at Debarq University, a gender audit and subsequent work to address the gender gaps identified at Debre Birhan University, and Amhara Public Health Institute has engaged a gender expert to provide training, including training in gender mainstreaming. Participants at the gender champion workshops have now become focal persons linking their institutions to the wider EGLF network.

The EGLF has created momentum for people to work on addressing gender gaps at their individual institutions as well as to work collectively to improve gender equity at a national level – e.g., through influencing policies and policy makers. This momentum has in part been built by bringing people with various profiles – in terms of qualification level, disciplines, region, and gender – together through the network:

*“The Ethiopia Gender [Learning] Forum is really good because the mix is good; young, middle and also experienced scholars or academicians, researchers. The exchange is good – there could be fresh and new ideas and there is an opportunity for experience-sharing and role-modelling. Because I’m senior I can share my experiences and it’s also good for me to see the motivation and the vision that the younger scholars or female academicians have that come from different parts of the universities of Ethiopia and research institutes.” (Professor*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://blog.inasp.info/ethiopian-gender-forum-partone/>

*Yalemtehay Mekonnen, Addis Ababa University, former EGLF advisor and current member)*<sup>6</sup>

Alongside growing the forum through regional workshops and outreach, a board has been created and elected for the EGLF. In the latter half of 2022, the board oversaw the development of a 2023-2027 strategic plan and roadmap for the forum, and they will now look after the implementation of this plan as the forum continues to grow and strengthen its presence within the Ethiopian research system.

### **Plans for the future – hopes and what it will take**

As mentioned, the EGLF currently has 70 individual and institutional members. The plan is to extend this membership further. So far, most institutions that have been involved in forum activities are public universities and research institutions. The EGLF intends to also raise awareness with private universities and colleges going forward.

In addition to growing the membership, there are plans to strengthen the organisational structure of the forum. This includes potentially setting up a separate office for the EGLF and having a dedicated person being responsible for the day-to-day administration of the forum along with fundraising. The board are discussing the option of registering the forum as a legal organisation in its own right. This would enable the EGLF to become an independent entity and to expand even further. However, there is also a recognition that the forum will need be further consolidated before it is ready to become independent of EAS – currently, the EGLF is benefitting greatly from the exposure and support that EAS is providing. And EAS continues to be committed to supporting the forum:

*“The good thing is we as an Academy are committed not only to the EGLF, but to gender issues more broadly, It is also good for the Academy to be associated with EGLF in a broader sense, because it will also brand the Academy. And gender issues are issues that we have discussed in higher education and research institutes in government offices as it is a concept of this time.” (Professor Teketel Yohannes, Executive Director, EAS)*

Encouragingly, our evaluation of the 2019-2022 collaboration to establish the EGLF found that there was very strong commitment to the forum among its members (Young, 2023). There is also evidence of growing awareness of and interest in the EGLF among higher education and research institutions in Ethiopia: specific reference was made to the EGLF during a visit that the Executive Director of EAS, Prof. Teketel Yohannes, recently made to a university in the north of the country.

### **What we learnt**

- **Engaging men in addressing gender inequities is important but takes time and effort.** Gender has for many become synonymous with women and is often seen as a concern for women only. This can make it difficult to engage men in gender initiatives. However, addressing gender inequities requires action from both women and men. When establishing the EGLF a deliberate decision was made to name it a *gender learning* forum rather than a women’s forum, and participants at the gender champion workshops examined how both women’s and men’s opportunities and experiences differ and how these differences contribute to creating gender inequities in research. Although efforts have been made to actively engage both women and men in the EGLF, and the forum has committed members who are men, most of the individual members are currently women. The forum is therefore actively working to increase the number of men involved.
- **A national network can build momentum and support mechanisms.** Addressing gender inequities in higher education and research requires sustained efforts as there is no quick fix. Linking people working to address institutional inequities through a national network like the EGLF enables members to share experiences and best practices and combine efforts.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://blog.inasp.info/ethiopian-gender-forum-partone/>

- **Gender inequities need to be addressed at both national, institutional and grassroots level – and policy makers need to know how these inequities can undermine research.**

In addition to building momentum and support systems for institutional efforts to address gender inequities, a national forum like the EGLF is also able to advocate for the need to address gender inequities in the research system at a national level. An important part of this advocacy is to ensure that policy makers are aware of how gender inequities can and do undermine the potential of research to contribute to national development.

*“But what this forum has been doing, is to address gender equity in a holistic, integrated, and participatory manner. The benefit of dealing with the issue in this way is to bring about a strategic approach to tackling equity problems; because the inequity could be social, it could be political, it could be religious, cultural, you name it. So when you approach it holistically, you can list out the various gaps and address them in an integrated manner.” (Professor Tsige Gebre-Mariam, Addis Ababa University, and former President of EAS)<sup>7</sup>*

## Working as partners

To ensure that we would be able to reach a wider range of institutions and individuals in Ethiopia it was important to have a country partner that aims to serve researchers across the whole system. The ability of EAS to work across the science system and reach beyond the capital through their fellows along with their commitment to assist in the national development agenda made them an ideal partner.

Furthermore, EAS was well placed to coordinate the establishment of the Ethiopian Gender Learning Forum as one of the main objectives of the Academy is to ‘sustain the active engagement and benefits of women and other underprivileged and marginalized groups in all scientific work’.

Alongside existing institutional connections between EAS and INASP, the Executive Director of EAS has also had connections with INASP on an individual level going back several decades. This longstanding individual connection contributed significantly to creating a strong partnership between EAS and INASP characterised by supportive and open communication. This in turn enabled us to have frank conversations when needed, including when deciding to pause additional planned work in Ethiopia, which had been stalled by the COVID-19 pandemic, to be able to maximize effort and impact of the work to establish the gender forum.

Both INASP and EAS shared a concern to ensure that the results of our work can be sustained beyond a project. One of INASP’s core values is ‘making change last’ and our approaches aim to “enable individuals and institutions to independently and sustainably work towards their desired changes in policy and practice, beyond the life of a project”. This meant that EAS and INASP worked collaboratively to set priorities and agree workplans and budgets and that we developed strategies for how the work would continue beyond the lifetime of the project.

The focus on designing for sustainability from the outset enabled us to deliberately plan activities to build progressively towards a longer-term goal rather than them being one-off interventions. Although the establishment of the gender forum, in response to the commitment made during the dialogue event in 2018, was initially developed as a project, it has now become part of a wider programme of gender activities at the EAS. The EGLF therefore now forms part of a strong long-term vision which will contribute to greater impact of its activities. An example of how this is already working in practice

### Ethiopian Academy of Sciences (EAS)

<https://eas-et.org/>

EAS was established in 2010 as a non-profit and non-governmental organisation dedicated to promoting a culture of scientific inquiry and creativity and the pursuit of excellence and scholarship in the sciences in Ethiopia.

<sup>7</sup> <https://blog.inasp.info/ethiopian-gender-forum-partone/>



is the fact that, the EAS gender focal person – a role that was financed for an initial period through GPEKE project funds – has since December 2021 been paid for through other funding.

## What we learnt

- **Country partner ownership is fundamental to sustainability and requires a foundational process.** We were able to build this foundation and ownership through the national dialogue event where problems and needs were jointly identified by the participants and a shared vision that was nationally resonant was created. This vision was then subsequently owned by multiple stakeholders in Ethiopia's research and knowledge system as well as co-owned by EAS and INASP as partners.
- **Strong relationships are key - both at individual and institutional level.** The strong individual connection between the Executive Director of EAS and INASP played an important role in fostering a strong partnership between INASP and EAS at an organisational level. This in turn enabled the partnership to stay strong during the entire collaboration despite significant staff turnover at both organisations.

## Next steps

The overall goal of the Ethiopian Gender Learning Forum is to contribute to reducing gender disparity in the Ethiopian research and knowledge system by ensuring that both women and men can become productive students, researchers, innovators, and entrepreneurs. Ultimately this will be of benefit to the development of the nation.

Following their participation in EGLF workshops and meetings, universities and research institutes have undertaken a range of activities to address institutional gender inequities. This includes activities related to staff opportunities and training, student focused activities and more general gender awareness raising. Specific activities undertaken include:

- Conducting an institutional gender analysis
- Training in manuscript writing and systematic review for women academics
- Setting up research funding specifically for women academics
- Training in gender mainstreaming
- Training in reproductive health and academic skills for women students
- Conducting needs assessment of students at entry level

*"The impact has been [...] most female students have got the awareness to exercise their right and become successful in their study" (EGLF Gender Champion Workshop participant)*

*"The university community desire to work with Gender Mainstreaming Directorate is increased" (EGLF Gender Champion Workshop participant)*

As the forum seeks to achieve its vision of "fostering gender equity and equality in Ethiopia's knowledge system", in line with the strategic plan, focus over the coming years will be on:

- **Strengthening the organisational sustainability of the EGLF.** This will include increasing institutional reach and membership of the forum and diversifying funding to be able to achieve the overall goal.
- **Engaging more men in the forum.** Changing mindsets and affecting positive social norms and practices to address gender inequities cannot be effectively done without the engagement of men. A specific desired outcome of the work of the EGLF is that "more faculty men and women adopt attitudes, norms and practices that advance women's empowerment in higher education and research institutions". The forum is therefore actively working to increase the number of men involved.
- **Strengthening links with policy makers.** Advancing women's equitable participation in higher education and research relies in part on policy interventions. The EGLF will seek to

leverage its access to decision and policy makers through its link to EAS, including the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, Ministry of Planning and Development and other relevant federal and state bodies.

- **Strengthening partnership and collaboration.** Addressing research related gender inequities at national, institutional and grassroots level will require collaboration with actors across the system, both national and internationally. The EGLF is actively working to expand its collaboration with key strategic partners including with local and international women's organisations, research networks, civil society, and the private sector.

EAS and INASP are currently exploring how we can build on our partnership and the establishment of the Ethiopian Gender Learning Forum.

If you share our ambitions for a more equitable research and knowledge system, and see opportunities to collaborate, get in touch.

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