

Mapping the policy landscape for women's economic empowerment in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is one of Africa's fastest growing economies, and women's labour force participation has been growing along with it. Women account for a large percentage of garment workers and are making gains in ICT manufacturing. However, they remain overrepresented in lower-skilled jobs, with the gender gap widest in high-skilled jobs or traditionally male-dominated sub-sectors like engineering.

COVID-19 further challenges the recent gains made by women.

The impacts of the pandemic response cut across all areas of women's health and wellbeing—constraining their access to health services and education, and undermining their livelihoods, while increasing their burden of care and domestic labour.

What policies and programs can advance women's economic empowerment (WEE) in Ethiopia? This brief captures the main findings of a scoping paper that highlights policies, plans, and initiatives related to WEE. It identifies entry points where further research may strengthen policies, and stakeholders who may champion some of the work going forward. The authors, who have expert knowledge of the policy landscape, conducted a rapid assessment through a systematic review of literature.

Research can play a crucial role in bridging WEE gaps by focusing on:



Women's increased time poverty and unpaid care work



Social protection and childcare



Labour market segregation



Gendered social norms and gender-based violence that undermine women's advancement



Women's status in Ethiopia

Despite the country's recent progress in addressing gender inequalities, and its impressive strides in women's political representation, women remain disadvantaged by underdevelopment in the health sector, by the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, and by disparities in educational attainment and economic opportunities. While wages, incomes, and investment in human capital are low overall, labour force participation is higher among men, with female participation at 74.2% compared to 86.5% for men. However, women are disproportionately found in lower skilled roles: they make up less than one-third of skilled workers (32.6%) and just over one-quarter of managers and senior officials (26.5%).

Significantly, women are less likely than men to be paid for their work, and they are underrepresented in labour unions and sectoral associations, which undermines their collective bargaining. In small-scale manufacturing, 58% of female workers are unpaid family workers. Women make up roughly 40% percent of workers in agriculture, which accounts for 35.8% of Ethiopia's GDP. Yet over half of all women engaged in agriculture receive no payment, and those who are paid earn less than men.

Women make up only 16.5% of the country's entrepreneurs. They are hampered by their limited access to finance, business networks, and development services; lack of business management and entrepreneurship skills; and challenges in balancing business with household and family responsibilities. Household responsibilities are holding

women back in the labour market. Unpaid care work, while essential to the economy, disproportionately falls to women and often goes uncounted and unrecognized. The lack of maternity leave and access to child care remains a major constraint for women entering the workforce.

Key policies and plans relevant to WEE

Ethiopia's reform-minded government is fostering an enabling environment for advancing gender equality and WEE. The appointment of a woman president and nearly gender-balanced cabinet in 2018, and the current review of the 1993 National Women's Policy, signal commitment to achieving political and economic gains for women.

Ethiopia has implemented a wide range of women's inclusion policies, laws, and strategies that contribute to WEE and address gender inequalities. Gender is mainstreamed within key national development plans such as the Growth and Transformation Plan, and sector-specific plans for health, education, and industry—reinforced by gender-responsive budgeting and the development of institutional structures for coordinating and monitoring gender mainstreaming. Women's empowerment and gender equality are also integrated within the National Human Rights Action Plan. To strengthen accountability, the government requires all government institutions to address women's issues in policies, laws, and development programs and projects.

A series of labour law reforms have gradually expanded the scope of women's rights in the workplace, including

addressing occupational discrimination and the gender pay gap, extending maternity leave, and curbing workplace sexual harassment and violence. A labour inspection system has been established which asserts the implementation of women's rights in both private and public sectors covered by the law. Ethiopia's 2013-2025 Industrial Strategy prioritizes labour-intensive, women-dominated sectors, ushering more women into full-time paid jobs. It aims to bring more women not only into low-skilled jobs but also medium- and high-skilled ones.

The Mainstreaming Gender in the Agriculture Sector strategy provides a road map for achieving gender equality in agriculture and rural development. Expanding access to modern technologies, including climate-smart technologies, is one of the major interventions for increasing the agricultural productivity of rural women. The Women's Development and Change Strategy 2017 focuses on enhancing the economic, political, and social participation of women in pastoralist and semi-pastoralist areas. Ethiopia has also implemented a land administration system that addresses women's marginalization from land holding through a certification scheme that allows them to own land either jointly with their spouse or on their own.

Although national policies and plans show a strong commitment to promoting gender equality, there is little data available on gender indicators. Quantitative data providing concrete evidence on gender relations in terms of gender roles, access to assets and resources, and time use are essential for the development of appropriate and effective economic and social policies at a national level. The government has committed to carrying out a national time-use survey on unpaid care and domestic work that will inform the planning, budgeting and implementation of public services that can reduce and redistribute the burden of care.

WEE programs

The authors identified 25 programs and projects relevant to WEE, of which 19 had sufficient relevance and/or documentation to merit review. The majority focus on rural women, and increasing women's access to credit, capital, and financial services. The analysis of program effectiveness is limited by a dearth of evaluations and inconsistent use of the term "empowerment" in those carried out to date.

Three core government-led, multi-donor programs in the agriculture sector have a WEE component—the Agricultural Growth Program (AGP), the Sustainable Land Management Program (SLMP), and the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP)—which together contribute to achieving national targets for agricultural growth. The PSNP, one of the largest national social safety net programs in Africa, benefits some eight million people a year. It heavily targets women and has a gender strategy that includes child care, nutrition awareness, and maternity assistance. The SLMP targets smallholder farmers and has involved more than 300,000 beneficiaries (of which 41% were women) in income-generating activities. A gender audit was recently completed on the AGP, whose primary beneficiaries include small- and medium-scale farmers, including those in common interest groups, primary cooperatives, and irrigation water user associations.

Many programs that aim to empower women work through existing networks—either savings and credit organizations (SACCOs) related to registered coops, or community self-help groups. Evaluation of the multi-donor government-led Joint Programme on Rural Women's Economic Empowerment, which works through SACCOs, revealed improvements in women's control and management of household food reserves and their use of technologies and farm inputs. Furthermore, it enabled vulnerable rural women to influence decisions affecting their lives at the household level and to participate in decision-making within rural institutions. They were able to earn their own income, create assets, and change household living standards.

In relation to unpaid care work, two Ethiopian Women Development and Change Packages (2006 and 2017) have focused on increasing technology in rural areas to save women time spent on domestic chores. Yet, women's unpaid labour burden remains a huge impediment to their economic empowerment.

Overall, the author's find that WEE policy implementation has been impeded by several constraints, including:



A historical lack of political will and suppression of the nascent women's movement



Poor coordination across agencies and service sectors



A lack of data and studies on policy effectiveness



Failure to address gender norms



A lack of inclusive policy development processes

Research entry points

Given the current spirit of reform, and political will to address gender equality, there are many opportunities where research can add value to the WEE landscape in Ethiopia. The mapping process found that action research with policy makers can play a crucial role by emphasizing increased time poverty related to unpaid care work, job market segregation, the lack of adequate social protection and child care, gender-based violence, and social norms. The authors suggest a series of specific research questions related to women's economic advancement, power and agency, intersectionality and synergies, and operational features of WEE-related programs.

Unpaid care work and labour market segregation are ripe for research. The planned national time-use survey may help to make the value of unpaid care and domestic work more visible, but it remains to be seen whether this data will translate into effective policies that reduce women's time poverty. There is an opportunity to help bridge this gap between evidence and implementation. More focus on the participation of men and boys in unpaid labour and in advocating for women's empowerment is also needed. Promoting a fair redistribution of care and household work is crucial to ensuring women advance in education, employment, and other key spheres.

Tackling cultural assumptions and gender norms will also be essential to addressing labour market segregation, which persists in spite of a range of progressive policy reforms.

Major weaknesses identified in program evaluations to date:



A failure to undertake gender analysis



Failure to look beyond women's participation to more substantive signs of empowerment



The exclusion of men from gender equality work



A lack of clarity on how to measure WEE



*The **Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) East Africa** initiative seeks to spur transformative change to advance gender equality in the world of work. It is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Building on the success of the multi-funder GrOW program, GrOW East Africa aims to enhance gender equality and the economic empowerment of marginalized women in five countries of focus: Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Uganda. It will foster new in-country knowledge, innovations, and solutions to inform policies and programs addressing unpaid care work, sex segregation in labour markets, and women's employment. Activities will be spearheaded in partnership with in-country practitioners, governments, and researchers.*

Scoping papers were commissioned for each of these countries to form a baseline that will allow for monitoring progress in implementing GrOW East Africa. The paper "Policy mapping: Women's economic empowerment in Ethiopia", which this brief draws from, was prepared by [Includovate](#).

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