

## **Challenges Facing Women's Empowerment through Adult Education: The Case of Ethiopia's Integrated Functional Adult Education Program**

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### **Abstract**

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The study investigated the challenges involved in women's empowerment through adult education in Ethiopia, focusing specifically on the Integrated Functional Adult Education Program, employing social constructivist paradigm and qualitative case study design. Women who had graduated from the program, facilitators, and adult education experts participated in the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the first two women and one Integrate Functional Adult Education (IFAE) expert from the city administration. Chain sampling was used to select the remaining eleven women for interview and seven women for the focus group discussion. Two facilitators and one IFAE expert from the Sub City were selected through a comprehensive sampling technique. Data were gathered through interview, focus group discussions, and document review. The inductive approach to iterative steps was used to analyze and interpret the data. Analysis of the data shows that women learners' economic problems, lack of political attention, weak collaboration between bodies concerned, husbands' influence, and societal attitudes are challenges to their empowerment process.

### **Key words**

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empowerment, adult education, literacy, women, Ethiopia

## **Introduction**

Empowerment has understandably become one of the central themes of national and international development agendas and continues to gain traction in human development discourses globally. The concept of empowerment is open to various interpretations and conceptualizations. Kabeer (1999, p. 437) gives an inclusive conceptualization of empowerment that states it is a "process by which

those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability.” Specifically, women’s empowerment has become crucial to both national and international development processes. Women’s empowerment is a fundamental issue, not only as an end in itself but rather as a means to achieve other development goals (Kabeer, 2005). When successful, empowerment allows the majority-but-marginalized group (women) of every country’s population to gain greater control of their lives and to acquire the valuable resources and basic rights required to be able to participate meaningfully in the development process. According to the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2016), or UIL, women in many societies continued to be deprived of education. For example, in its third global report on adult learning and education, the UIL (2016) noted that globally, 757 million adults are unable to read and write, with an overwhelming majority (63%) being women. The picture for literacy rates for Africa, particularly adult women in sub-Saharan Africa, is even gloomier. In 2014, the UIL estimated that two out of every three women in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Arab States do not have basic literacy skills. The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) also reported in 2017 that of the world’s illiterate population, 27% live in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2017). This is also the case for Ethiopia. For example, according to the UIL’s (2014) report, 88% of poor women in Ethiopia are not literate.

Women’s empowerment is a complex issue, and requires fundamental human and material resources. Women continue to constitute the majority of the world’s illiterate populations. A range of circumstances faced by women, including lack of education, are the predominant problems of developing countries. Women’s access to education is insignificant in developing countries, which serves to aggravate illiteracy rates (Medel-Añonuevo & Bernhardt, 2011; Stromquist, 2013). Although the provision of education, particularly formal education, has risen in the last few decades, women’s participation in formal education in Africa compared to men is persistently lower (Habtu, 2001). According to Ethiopia’s Ministry of Education (MoE), poor access to formal education and women’s lower participation rates in existing formal education opportunities in Africa, especially in Ethiopia, has contributed to the deep-rooted problem of illiteracy (MoE, 2008). In Ethiopia, illiteracy, mostly in adult populations, is widespread and mainly affects women. In addition, women in Ethiopia not only lead in illiteracy, they are significantly disempowered in multiple arenas.

To change the above situation for adults, in particular women’s illiteracy and poor living standards, the Ethiopian government has enacted the Integrated

Functional Adult Education program (MoE, 2008). Other sources also corroborate the aims of Integrated Functional Adult Education [IFAE]:

The IFAE two-year programme for 15–60-year-olds provides mother-tongue reading, writing, and arithmetic skills development integrated with practical knowledge and skills, for example in relation to family health, hygiene, and sanitation. It is designed to make use of inputs from other development workers (agriculture, health, etc.) and builds on indigenous knowledge. It seeks to link numeracy and literacy skills to livelihoods and skills training in agriculture (including off-farm activities), health, civic and cultural education, etc. and requires delivery by various governmental and non-governmental service providers in multiple settings. (MoE, 2015, p. 86)

The program is intended to improve the living standards of the adult population by providing further emphasis on the education of women adults. Although the program has been empowering women through the provision of basic literacy skills, attitudes, and knowledge that are important for engaging in income-generating activities, the program is in grave danger.

### **Conceptual Framework of the Study**

The social-cultural, political, and economic variables that deter women from participation in education and achieving empowerment have received significant attention from a wide range of empirical researchers (e.g., Eldred, Robinson-Pant, Nabi, Chopra, Nussey, & Bown, 2014; Leve, 2009; Stromquist, 2000). They included a society's gender roles, beliefs, and culture as factors detrimental to women's involvement in education. Omolewa (2008) opined that the lack of resources available for the education of women, the colonial language, absence of trained facilitators, a lack of better learning materials, and the irrelevance of the learning content to the lives of learners are factors contributing to the ineffectiveness of women's education in Africa. Stromquist (2000) identified the sexual division of labor that assigns women many domestic tasks as a challenge to women's enrolment in adult education. Further, a lack of support systems for women, including child-care services, flexible class schedules and alternative class settings, instructional methodologies that expose women to harassment, and fatigue in adult edu-

cation centers are identified as challenges to women's participation in adult education and their empowerment (Eldred et al., 2014; Stromquist, 2000). These researchers have found a direct relationship between these factors and the effectiveness of women learning. Thus, taking these factors into consideration, this study aims to identify the challenges to women's journey toward empowerment through participation in educational opportunities.

Prins (2008) also identified other elements that hamper women's empowerment through education, including social problems like scarcity of work and political repression that leads to migration. Alam (2017) has investigated the barriers to women's participation in educational opportunities in Pakistan and acknowledged their domestic and family responsibilities as a major factor. Moreover, Prins (2008) asserted the positive relationship between healthy social and political contexts and the achievement of women's empowerment through education. Other studies identified challenges to the achievement of women's empowerment in adult education such as a lack of scientific and technological support, stagnant policies on adult education that leave programs underfunded, and a lack of advocacy to transform gender relationships (Stromquist, 2013). However, the factors that affect the likelihood of women's empowerment through the IF AE program have either not received due attention or not been investigated at all. To remedy this situation, this study explores the challenges that face the processes of women's empowerment through the IF AE program.

## Literature Review

Women's empowerment through adult education has faced challenges. According to Omolewa (2008), the provision of adult education in Africa to reduce illiteracy and empower segments of the adult population, including women, is failing because of a lack of efforts and resources, as well as an absence of trained human resources and quality learning materials. Although the provision of literacy programs is indispensable for women's empowerment, it has also been hindered by other factors. According to the NAES [National Adult Education Strategy] document, the provision of adult education in Ethiopia faces a variety of problems (MoE, 2008). The absence of support for continuous and sustainable provision of the program, the lack of efforts to enable all segments of the population to access literacy, and a lack of program planning are outlined in the NAES document. In implementing educational programs, including literacy programs aimed at women's empowerment, challenges have been proliferating, and particularly in

developing countries.

Most Ethiopian women are engaged in various low-level income-generating jobs in the informal sectors. In addition to their economic problems, women shoulder huge tasks and responsibilities within the family and society. For example, in the economic activities of developing countries, particularly in the agricultural sector, women do most of the work. According to Ojobo (2008), women in Africa contribute much to development but benefit less from the products. The insignificant extent to which women benefit from their own efforts results in less participation in literacy programs. In addition to this, in India, women's low participation in literacy programs affects their ability to control economic aspects of their lives, such as wage levels (Gul, 2015).

In the provision of adult education for women's empowerment, political support constitutes a significant contribution that would lead to reduced illiteracy and empower women. However, in developing countries, the political systems have sidelined adult education. Adult education is clearly ignored on a political level, in terms of both women's participation and empowerment, despite the presence of the problem of widespread illiteracy (Medel-Añonuevo & Bernhardt, 2011; Stromquist, 2013). Omolewa (2008) pointed out that lack of government supports and of coordination among the bodies concerned has obstructed women's participation in adult education programs. Adult education for illiterate populations requires a combined and coordinated response from multiple stakeholders in a given society. Adult education programs cannot be implemented by a single responsible body, nor can they be executed in a vacuum.

Furthermore, the participation of women in literacy programs has been challenged by their husband's influence and entrenched patriarchal ideologies. According to Kagitcibasi, Goksen, and Gulgoz (2005) and Gul (2015), in the provision of adult education and the empowerment process, the husband's role is significant. In developing countries, men are considered superior to women and often resist the process of women's empowerment through educational programs. Society's unhealthy attitude toward the concept of women's education is a major challenge to overcome in women's empowerment process. Any given society manifests different forms of power that can hinder or support various activities happening within it. Therefore, women's participation in adult literacy programs is determined by the individual society's beliefs and values in relation to education, and women's education in particular (Gul, 2015).

In the Ethiopian context, several studies have been conducted on aspects of the IFAE; these include the implementation of the IFAE, its practices, and the chal-

lenges it faces (Girmay, 2017), the IFAE's contributions to intercultural relations (Mulate, 2015), the obstacles faced by learners wishing to participate in the IFAE program (Bizuayehu, 2014), the extent to which IFAE learners sustain their literacy skills (Hailemikael, 2016) and IFAE roles in learners' social capital development (Chamebo, 2016). Tesfaye (2016) conducted a study entitled IFAE learners' perception about social and economic benefits in Addis Ababa, Akaki Kaliti sub-city. His study found that as learners have a positive attitude towards IFAE program benefits. Gelana (2014) assessed Ethiopia's progress towards attaining Integrated Functional Adult Literacy by reviewing international and national reports related specifically to IFAE alone. Her study aimed to investigate Ethiopia's effort in achieving the 4<sup>th</sup> EFA goal, reducing adult illiteracy by 50% in 2015, an aim Ethiopia is a long way from achieving, according to the study's conclusions.

Yemane (2014) investigated the practices and challenges of IFAE program implementation in Addis Ababa, Nifas Silk Lafto [NSL] Sub-City. His study concluded that the Woreda Adult Education Board (WAEB) in Nifas Silk Lafto Sub-city was not functional but that the Woreda Adult Education Technical Committee was functional and adequately discharging its responsibilities. The study found the most serious obstacle to IFAE program implementation in NSL Sub-city was lack of an adequate budget. Kabeta and Gebremeskel (2013) conducted a review study on the impact of gender roles on women's involvement in functional adult literacy using both international and national studies. They concluded that women who grew up with the same gender role expectations and behaviors as men are confident and develop a positive self-concept compared to growing up with roles and behaviors different from those of men.

Awgichew and Seyoum (2017) assessed the existing practices of the Integrated Functional Adult Literacy program in Eastern Ethiopia and the challenges it faces. They found that harmful traditional practices are being reduced, community participation in environmental conservation is growing, and the program improves societal life skills and the usage of new agricultural technologies. They found dysfunctional management structure, poor institutionalization, lack of financial packages, a lack of trained personnel, and low and inconsistent salaries for facilitators were the major factors hindering implementation of the program. Seyoum and Basha (2017) investigated "andragogical methods to sustain quality adult education in Ethiopia." Their aim was to scrutinize how active learning methods are implemented effectively in adult education programs. The study found that IFAE facilitators were not satisfactorily employing active learning methods.

Although the above researchers examined issues related to adult education and

IFAE in different contexts, none of them has investigated the issue of women's empowerment through the IFAE program. Some of the studies have investigated obstacles to learners' participation, but failed to analyze the challenges faced by women's empowerment. Therefore, exclusively, this study focused on issues hindering women's empowerment through the IFAE program.

## **Research Methods**

As the main aim of this study is to investigate the major obstacles to women's empowerment through the IFAE program, with the aim of ensuring the program's effectiveness in this regard, the researcher's worldview was shaped by a constructivist paradigm. Among the competing paradigms, the constructivist research paradigm asserts that the researcher should focus on the complexity of views (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016), rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories. In pursuing its goal, the research relies on the views of individual participants (Starman, 2013) and an understanding of the social phenomena primarily acquired by interpreting the perceptions of individuals of the issue being investigated (Woods, 2006).

The constructivist paradigm involves a qualitative approach, which was therefore employed for this study. According to Creswell (2007), a qualitative approach to research is a legitimate mode of inquiry in social and behavioral science studies and all the procedures in this study depend upon a qualitative research approach and interpretation. All empirical research, to meet its goals, employs one research design, implicitly if not explicitly (Yin, 2003). To accomplish the stated aim, a qualitative case study design was used, since it is advisable for researchers to interpret meaningful human actions and the interpretations that people present for themselves or others (Creswell, 2007). A case study is a special kind of qualitative design that investigates a contextualized contemporary phenomenon within specified boundaries (Merriam, 2009), for instance a program, an institution, a single community, an event, or a process (Dawson, 2002; Hatch, 2002; Yin, 2003).

According to Merriam (2009), a case could be an individual, a thing, an entity, any unit limited by boundaries. In the same vein, for Stake in 1995 (as cited in Yazan, 2015), a case is a specific, complex, functioning thing, more specifically an integrated system with a boundary, with working parts within it and a purpose. This research therefore focused on a particular case: the IFAE program. The participants in this research were women graduates, facilitators, and adult education experts from the IFAE program in Bahir Dar City, specifically the Belay Zeleke

Sub City. In this study, 12 women, who had graduated from IFAE program with good classroom participation records, were selected for interview via purposive and chain sampling techniques. Of the 12, the first one is selected purposively with the help of facilitators as a key informant. The other 11 women were selected using a snowball sampling technique. Two facilitators in the Sub City and two adult education experts, one expert from the Sub City and another expert from the Bahir Dar city administration, were included in the study. Two facilitators and one expert from the Sub City were selected for in-depth interview using a comprehensive sampling technique. One expert from the city administration was selected for in-depth interview using a purposive sampling technique. In addition, eight women were selected using two sampling techniques: Purposive sampling selected the first woman and snowball sampling was employed to select the others even participants for the focus group discussion.

The process of data collection was mainly carried out through interview and focus group discussions, while documents were also used to substantiate evidence for the main data collection strategies. In a qualitative case study, data collection should be extensive and can be done through interview, focus group discussions, and document analysis (Babbie, 2007; Creswell, 2007). According to Creswell (2012), analyzing qualitative data passes through six steps. In this study, to analyze the data collected from the aforementioned participants using the above instruments, his six steps to data analysis were used. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, strategies recommended by eminent qualitative researchers were used (e.g., Merriam, 2009). To enhance the credibility of the findings, data was triangulated using the multiple data sources to confirm emerging findings, and checks were performed by sending the participants a copy of their interview transcripts and asking them to verify the accuracy of the content, and of the peer reviews of the study findings, as they emerged.

### **Research Objectives**

Focusing on the main research issues in relation to women's education and empowerment, numerous empirical studies and reviews have been investigated, as indicated above. Most of those studies refer to other countries and few investigate the challenges of women's empowerment through integrated functional adult education in the context of Ethiopia. However, a number of studies carried out abroad like Omolewa (2008), Stromquist (2000), Kagitcibasi et al. (2005), Alam (2017), and Prins (2008), and even locally-oriented studies like those of Kabeta and



Gebremeskel (2013), Awgichew and Seyoum (2017), Seyoum and Basha (2017), Gelana (2014), and Bizuayehu (2014), have research issues related to adult education and women's educational opportunities.

The main objective of this study is therefore to explore the factors that affect women's empowerment in the IFAE program in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, and specifically to identify the obstacles to women learners' empowerment through that program. Moreover, the study also aims to provide future directions for stakeholders by suggesting policy and practice options for the program to reduce or eliminate those obstacles.

In summary, this research aims to answer the following questions:

- What obstacles hamper the process of women's empowerment through the Integrated Functional Adult Education program in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia?
- What policy and practice options are appropriate to address the obstacles that affect the process of women's empowerment in the Integrated Functional Adult Education program?

## **Findings**

### **Factors Hindering Women's Empowerment in the IFAE Program**

Women's empowerment through the IFAE program is obstructed in different ways. In this section of the study, the factors hindering their empowerment are presented and analyzed according to the themes developed from the data collected by focus group discussions, interviews, and document review. To this end, the sub-themes include women's economic problems and lack of time, weak political will, lack of support for and coordination of the program for women's empowerment, the influence of husbands, and the discouraging attitude of society to women's involvement in the program.

### **Women's Economic Problems and Lack of Time**

Women in Ethiopia, particularly in Bahir Dar City, face economic problems. Women in the study setting were hindered from participating in the IFAE program because of the demands of daily subsistence. The NAES document acknowledged the impoverished life situations of urban poor Ethiopian women. Similarly, the data collected in this study indicated the low-level economic status of women, a factor that permeates their lives to be difficult for them to take advantage of the opportunity to participate in the IFAE program. In the focus group discussion,

women stressed the “hand to mouth” way of life as a hindrance to their participation and consequently to empowerment. In the focus group discussion, they raised this among many issues:

Economic status is the main obstacle to benefiting from the IFAE program. I was working as a daily laborer at the construction works. For example, if I missed the Friday’s work, they would reduce my salary or might remove my name from the list of their employees. Because of this, I only ever attended Sunday’s class. As a result, I couldn’t get all the important things from the IFAE program. Alemie [42-year-old divorced woman, with two daughters]

My poverty hindered my participation in the program, or knowing more about everything in the program. I’ve been working as a fruit seller on the street. My focus is often on my income because unless I get some money, survival is difficult. Therefore, I prioritized my business [fruit selling] over the IFAE program. Tamire [40-year-old woman, divorced with three daughters]

In my experience, I see women’s economic problems as a headache in terms of participation in the program. Most of the learners attend the program on Sunday. They lead their lives in the context of huge economic problems. This influenced their pace of improvement and empowerment after they graduated from the program. Derese [four years’ experience facilitating IFAE in the Sub City]

In Bahir Dar City, the women participating in the IFAE program were from the lower levels of the economy. In Belay Zeleke Sub City, the situation of women’s lives also remains an obstacle to their attending the program. Often because of income problems, they had to withdraw from attending the program. Birara [Bahir Dar City Adult and Non-formal Education case team leader]

Moreover, women’s empowerment through this program was inhibited by the lack of time. Because of their economic problems, women devote most of their time to generating income. Women in the study setting faced work overload problems, another problem preventing them from attending the program for

empowerment. In an interview, Selenat [37 years old, widowed woman] mentioned lack of time as follows:

When I joined the program, I had a two-year-old child. In addition to this, I had to work to generate income. I was too busy to attend the program. I went there sporadically. Then I couldn't grasp all the contents of the program that were important to change my life. Now I'm forgetting some important skills I got from the program. For example, writing is becoming even more difficult in my daily life. Selenat [37 years old, widowed woman]

I'm always busy because I work outside my home to earn money. After I come back from outside, there are more chores within the house. Therefore, I was only able to attend the program every two weeks. Alemie

These comments highlighted their lack of time to attend the IF AE program. IF AE, like any kind of educational program, requires the participants' time. The women indicated that the IF AE program has to be accessible to the participants in a convenient place and at a convenient time.

### **Obsolete Political Attention and Lack of Support and Coordination**

In the national adult education strategy and the implementation guidelines, clear responsibilities are laid down for the government. More than this, for the implementation of any program, a positive political will is required. In the implementation of the IF AE to improve and better the situation of the female segment of the population, political will has a significant contribution to make in mobilizing resources to achieve empowerment. However, the participants in this study, particularly the adult education experts and facilitators, mentioned the absence of political will in the provision of the program. They described the political system of the Ethiopian government in general, as well as in the Sub City specifically, as not supportive of IF AE program implementation in its efforts to ameliorate women's abysmal lives.

Today's political system ignores the issue of the IF AE program. The issue of women is already being used for political consumption. The political system has always used the IF AE program for political propaganda rather than to bring about tangible changes. The issue of this program is off the

political table in Ethiopia. In addition to this, women's concerns have now moved away from the center to the periphery of Ethiopia's political table. For example, we experts always ask them [cadres] to give due attention to the implementation of this program but their response is silence. Especially in the last two or three years, the political attention given to this program is discouraging. Birara

The political system has turned its back on this program. In the annual or monthly directions of the government, which commands the political system, the issue of IFAE is deliberately ignored. Overwhelmingly, in the mentoring and evaluation of the work of the education sector, the issue of the IFAE program is forgotten. Even I, an adult education expert, have been engaged in other seasonal activities because of political decisions. Melaku [five years' experience as an adult education expert in the Sub City]

The experts' responses show that a lack of political will is the core problem facing the IFAE program. The participants noted the problems associated with the political system's "one-time" attention to this program. Lack of continues interest from the political system reduces the level of attention paid by different stakeholders, as well as the resources allotted by the government, and has a negative impact on the women's empowerment process after the graduate.

Furthermore, besides the above challenges, a lack of support from different individuals, groups, associations, and governmental and non-governmental organizations is another challenge facing the program's relevance for women's empowerment. The facilitators raised the absence of support from governmental organizations in running the program. The participants mentioned the lack of consistent budgetary support for the IFAE activities.

Attention from governmental organizations to women's issues is minimal. The IFAE's budget is one of the smallest budgets for all government activities. Sometimes even this small budget is transferred to another activity, which has been emphasized by the political agenda. Supports from other sectors are only paper promises and lip service. Derese

The only ones involved in the program are facilitators and women participants. Our participation alone never changes anything. The support should be concrete and is invaluable to women's empowerment. Unless

women's problems are solved, working to overcome the general problems of society is hopeless. However, this program received zero support from government sectors other than the education sector. Even from the education sector, the IFAE program receives insignificant support relative to other departments. In addition, after women have attended the IFAE program, nobody is concerned about their empowerment process or the necessary supports. Meseret [IFAE facilitator, four years' experience in the Sub City]

This program doesn't receive any support from other institutions except Bahir Dar University. The university has provided different training elements for the experts and facilitators starting in the last few years. The staff members of Bahir Dar University, Adult Education and Community Development Department, promised to support and provide ongoing andragogical training for city administration facilitators. However, other institutions do not have a track record of supporting the IFAE program for women's empowerment. Birara

This indicates the lack of support from different organizations, resulting in the weak implementation of the IFAE program. As a consequence of these support problems, the program's impact on society at large, and on women's lives in particular, is decreased. Their comments stress that to achieve women's empowerment through the IFAE program, the provision of sufficient support is pivotal.

Women participants condemned the absence of government attention to women's issues. The participants in the group who had received land complained about the lack of support for other relevant materials needed for agricultural work.

Compared to the youth, in the government's eyes we women are the forgotten segment of the population. Now the government's attention is on the youth. Shopping units and other business activities are provided for the youth, not for women. The government provided land only, which many young people in the Sub City do not want. Tiru [38 years old, married woman]

In addition to the above hindering factors, lack of coordination was mentioned as a prominent problem in the implementation of IFAE for women's empowerment in the Sub City. From the outset, the IFAE program was developed to be

implemented in coordination with specific sectors. The main government sectors include education, health, agriculture, and the small and micro-enterprises sector. In the personal interviews, the facilitators and adult education experts mentioned that coordination among sectors was already dead. The participants indicated the negative consequences of the absence of coordination among member sectors. For example, Melaku mentioned:

The nature of the program means it is shared by different government sectors. It was developed to be executed in collaboration and coordination with a number of sectors. Nevertheless, coordination is not as was intended in the program's implementation guides. When the program began, there was good coordination and collaboration among member sectors. Now coordination has already been interrupted because of the absence of political willingness and support from the government. Although education sector is responsible, the IF AE program is already lacking budget as well as attention. Therefore, this indirectly or directly affects women's capability to achieve empowerment.

I don't have experience of health education, agriculture, business, and entrepreneurship, etc. I often focused on reading, calculating, writing, and basic life skill training. Occasionally I had to facilitate issues related to different sectors that were included in the adult learners' textbooks though I haven't any kind of knowledge about health, agriculture, entrepreneurship, etc. unlike the experts from those sectors. If the coordination in facilitation were appropriately implemented, it would be more likely that women's empowerment could be achieved. Derese

The participants raised the issue that the program gets sidelined by other sectors. The adult education experts in particular mentioned the subtle sidelining of the program within the education sector. They mentioned education sector chief executives emphasizing formal education activities rather than adult education. Melaku stated, "in monitoring and evaluation meetings in our sector, executives are always silent about the IF AE program; if there is ample time, they always discuss it only for the purpose of simulation."

## **Awareness Problem Created Blind Eyes and Deaf Ears**

Awareness and consciousness are at the heart of any activities, which deal with human beings. In the provision of educational programs like the IFAE program, the participants' awareness and consciousness of the entire process and outcomes becomes a crucial factor in the success of the program. The IFAE program in the Sub City was delivered without sufficient avenues for creating awareness for participants and other members. Women participants in this study mentioned the problems of awareness at the beginning of their participation, especially regarding the relevance of the program. They noted that limited awareness was a problem for the participants that decreased the attention for the program and obstacles the program's contribution to better the lives of individuals and society as whole. In the focus group discussion, Bizunesh explained:

Before I enrolled, I had no awareness of the program's relevance. No one made us aware of the program's relevance. We did not know how it could benefit any aspects of our lives. If there were opportunity for awareness creation about the relevance of IFAE, our participation never faces challenge.

We have eyes and ears but we couldn't see and hear because of the absence of any awareness creation experiences before I start to attend the program about the relevance of IFAE. Most people are aware of the benefits of formal education programs, but not about the benefits of the IFAE program. Zewudie

The participants raised the problem of awareness as a hindering factor for their participation in adult education programs and other empowerment activities. They mentioned that a lack of awareness regarding IFAE not only prevailed among the women participants but also society as a whole. The study participants indicated that awareness creation must be the first and the major part in the provision of the IFAE program. IFAE facilitators and expert participants also highlighted the problems of providing awareness creation for learners.

## **Husbands Influence Women's Empowerment**

In the previous themes, program-related challenges that contributed to implementation problems and that eventually result in a failure to achieve women's

empowerment were analyzed. In this section, the influence of husbands and how it leads to women abstaining from participating in the IFAE program is discussed.

Women in developing countries experience harsh situations. In Ethiopia, women are oppressed by different groups within the population, with husbands being the chief of these oppressors. Women, especially those who are illiterate, experience segregation and trauma (Gul, 2015).

Husbands' patriarchal ideologies influence women's access to different resources and their rights to make decisions in family issues. The study participants, particularly facilitators, indicated that husbands influence women's attendance in the IFAE program. They explained that in terms of the women's performance and participation in IFAE as well as in income-generating activities, divorced or widowed women did better than married women. For instance, Meseret noted:

Women with husbands were relatively less likely attending the program and often missed classes. Even after they came to a class, they sometimes interrupted it to go back. When I asked them, they told me he [the husband] would come home from work soon, so they had to go. Some women's husbands influenced both their participation in the program and their work outside the home.

I think the husbands resisted wives' participation in the program. When I asked the reasons for irregular attendance, they gave some other reasons. However, I believe husbands can disrupt or prevent women's involvement in education just as they do in relation to whether she can work and earn outside the home. Derese

There is, however, evidence of some constructive support for women's participation in the IFAE program in order to enhance their decision-making in every aspect of their life, counterbalancing the perceived role of their husbands. In contrast with the above quote, some women mentioned their husbands' support in attending the program and for working outside the home to generate income. For instance, Enatnesh, in a focus group discussion, said:

When I started the program, he [her husband] tried to resist my attendance at the program. However, I was able to tell him about the relevance of the program. Now he supports my working outside the home. He has always helped me with problems or chores. In addition, he encourages me to



work outside home.

Therefore, the above illustration shows a husband as a tremendous support to women's empowerment. The above quote shows how an individual husband can be a supportive influence and thereby improve what a participant can gain from the IFAE program.

### **Society's Attitude: Discouraging Women's Empowerment**

In addition to the aforementioned factors hindering women's empowerment, in this section, society's view of women's participation in the IFAE program and empowerment, processes are highlighted based on the data collected from the women participants, facilitators, and adult education experts. To this end, the study participants focused on the fact that society has ignored or has negative attitudes toward women's education through the IFAE program. In addition, as well as its discouraging attitudes toward women who attend IFAE, society often has negative feelings regarding women's participation in different income-generating activities. For instance:

Society's attitude wasn't supportive of our participation. They think women are disobeying their husbands. When I went to the program, they saw my participation as a form of deviant behavior. Mastewal [47 years old, married woman]

Society has a negative attitude. They were always telling my husband not to allow me to go IFAE class. If he listened to society's advice, we would be divorced. They said to him, you aren't a husband. Theirs looking towards our participation were negative. Woudie

They [society] think education is getting a college degree! They would ask, "When are you going to get your degree?" They were joking about our participation. Zewudie

According to the respondents, society's opinion is one of the major factors hindering women's participation in the program. Society is the major agent for anything that happens in this context. The discouraging attitude of society at large limits women's interest in attending the program. Entrenched values, norms, and

beliefs that assume false myths as facts concur with society's discouraging attitudes and behaviors toward women's education.

Participants stated that, unlike the case of children's education, women's education is seen as a strange practice in an educational setting. From its infancy, the IF AE program faced a strong challenge from society's perspective. However, the participants noted, to increase women's participation in the short run and to achieve empowerment, such attitudes need to be changed.

Indeed, participants mentioned their anxiety regarding society's discouraging responses to activities relevant for empowerment. As analyzed in the previous section, women participating in the IF AE program do so to engage in different spheres in order to improve their lives, increase their family income, and develop society as a whole. In addition to the above challenges, society's reaction to women's empowerment is a determinant. In access to resources like land, women claim that they have faced resistance and negative attitudes from society at large. They argue that society has minimized the potential for women to participate in income-generating activities and make decisions on family and social issues.

Society, particularly men, is ashamed of us when we work on agricultural activities. They said to us "Oh farmers, how is your product?" just meaning to discourage our efforts. Some made very cynical comments about our rice cultivation i.e. they said to us "Why did you spend your money to raise frogs? They said we should save our time and money. Kasech [39 years old, divorced woman]

As soon as I started my business, selling wood by renting land on the main street of my village, it was summer and the weeks of fasting [from August 7 up to August 22 for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, Assumption of Mary, Dormition of the Mother of God]. Those who go to church told me it was a time for fasting, not a time to be on the street. Society's thinking has not welcomed our efforts to improve our lives. Woudie

I have worked daytime at the market through retailing cash crop products. In the afternoon I have worked by selling cooked foods like baqela [broad beans], eggs, gebto [lupin seeds], and potatoes, within and around places selling alcoholic beverages. Nevertheless, most of society views me as not being behaving appropriately. They discourage my efforts to make a living. Society can't think of me as a woman struggling with economic

problems. Selam

To empower women, through participation in the IFAE program, society's will, attitude, and degree of support plays a decisive role in the attempt to escape from subsistence poverty.

## Discussion

### Obstacles to Women's Empowerment through the IFAE Program

Women's empowerment is most important for women themselves, but is also important for the individuals, groups, and societies around them. In the achievement of empowerment, facilitating the involvement of women in educational programs is a significant challenge in developing countries (Bowen & Miller, 2018). In this study, women's empowerment is challenged by different factors in the study setting. Women's economic problems and lack of time are two obstacles to women's empowerment through the IFAE program. Overwhelmingly, women are the busy beings of this world, particularly in developing countries where they spend more of their time in both agricultural and household chores. The situation of women in this study is not different from those in other developing countries. Schuler, Islam, and Rottach (2010) and Robinson (2004) similarly noted that poverty influenced women's empowerment and their participation in literacy programs. Persistent poverty requires women to devote all their time to generating income. According to Gul (2015) in his study in India, the poor economic status of women remains the main obstacle to women's empowerment even when they participate in educational programs.

In Africa, women produce 80% of locally consumed foods but they are not the owners of the assets used to produce those goods, with possible negative effects on their participation in educational programs (Sell & Minot, 2018). In a life of persistent poverty, women often conceive of participation in educational programs as a mere waste of time. In this study, most of the women noted that spending time on daily activities took priority over attending the IFAE program because of the lack of sufficient income. Similarly, a study by Ojobo (2008) in Nigeria found that low-level economic conditions prevent women's participation in educational programs and their empowerment generally. Thubauville's (2014) ethnographic study in Ethiopia corroborated these findings, highlighting the busy lives of women in home and work. A study by Sell and Minot (2018) in Uganda found that poverty was the main factor affecting women's enrolment in educational programs as it

was they who shouldered breadwinning activities and household responsibilities rather than men.

The major obstacle to women's empowerment through the IF AE program is the lack of political will. In any circumstances, nothing is free from politics, so educational programs are directly and indirectly influenced by the ideologies within the political arenas. According to Robinson (2004), the idea of women's participation in literacy as means of achieving development is rarely heard from policymakers or political bodies. The study found that a lack of political commitment had become the major obstacle to women's empowerment. Political will plays the crucial role in women's empowerment through mobilizing the resources within the given context. Stromquist (2013) in her review highlighted political commitments as the main force in enhancing or discouraging women's empowerment through the provision of opportunities to attend educational programs, highlighting the negative impacts of weak political will on women's empowerment. It also results in less allocation of material and human resources pertinent to women's empowerment. This study clearly shows that women's empowerment through the IF AE program has been affected by a lack of political attention.

In adult education, learners' consciousness and awareness has been at the heart of its effectiveness. Unlike child learners, adult learners want to know the potential benefits and any other consequences of their participation. However, this study found that in its provisions, the program has not made sufficient efforts to raise women learners' consciousness about IF AE. Jarvis (2004) emphasized that adult learners are often eager to go to the classroom to learn rather than just to enroll. In adult education programs, a lack of awareness among women learners may lead to infrequent attendance (Abadzi, 2012). Therefore, women learners in the IF AE program became interested after they recognized the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that could be acquired.

This study also found lack of coordination and support in the provision of the IF AE program for women's empowerment remain hindering factors. In nature, women's empowerment is holistic and needs the collaboration of different bodies. However, the women's empowerment process has been obstructed by a lack of collaboration among the bodies concerned and a minimal budget. In spite of the nature of the educational program and women's empowerment in this study setting, the provision of the IF AE program is solely the responsibility of the education sector. Omolewa (2008) pointed out how adult education programs are sidelined by African government bodies by allocating minimal funds and placing the issue on the periphery of policymaking. Further, he noted instances of total op-

position to the provisions of adult education in African governments by taking examples from the eastern parts of Nigeria. In the study setting in particular and in Ethiopian general, adult education aimed at women's empowerment is subtly sidelined and placed on the periphery in terms of government priorities.

The male-dominated nature of households and communities limits women's opportunities to participate in public affairs and social services like education (Kabeer, 2016). Participants' husbands influence women's empowerment by challenging their participation in the IFAE program, thereby constituting an obstacle to the process of women's empowerment. In the same vein, studies by Gul (2015) in India, Kagitcibasi et al. (2005) in Turkey, and Ojobo (2008) in Nigeria similarly indicated how the route to women's empowerment is obstructed by husbands' influence. In particular, Kagitcibasi et al. (2005) found that husbands influence women's participation in work outside the home. Moreover, husbands' undermining attitudes and violent behavior toward their wives affects women's participation in education and empowerment (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016). In this study, the role played by husbands' influence was more subtle in terms of the women's empowerment process. The facilitators clearly understand the influence husbands have on women's involvement and, eventually, on the overall process of empowerment: The entrenched patriarchal ideologies govern the way husbands react to women's empowerment. Schuler et al.'s (2010) study also found that husband living in societies with a predominantly patriarchal ideology especially resisted women's empowerment processes.

To ensure women's empowerment through education a negative stereotype regarding women's abilities has to be reversed (Duflo, 2012). The society in which women live determines women's access to resources, their ability to make decisions, and their empowerment process. Its norms, values, and attitudes toward women's education have a critical role in hampering or enabling the empowerment process. This is often in a context in which women have learnt since childhood to internalize the inferior status ascribed to them by their society, thereby hampering their participation in educational opportunities and eventually preventing the process of their empowerment (Kabeer, 2016). The major obstacle identified by this study is society's traditional values and its views on women's education. Religious views and a lack of awareness of the relevance of the IFAE program in improving the lives of individuals and aiding sustainable national development persist as obstacles to the process of women's empowerment. In Latin America, for example, women suffer the most from discriminatory stereotypes and education for indigenous women is lagging behind that of other groups (Aikman, 2019). Similarly,

the study by Kagitcibasi et al. (2005) found that in Turkey societal cultures and customs hinder women's participation in literacy programs and working outside the home, thereby undermining progress toward empowerment.

Although the IFAE program provided skills and knowledge, different forces impair progress toward women's empowerment. Women's access to vital resources and their ability to make life decisions to achieve empowerment were hindered. Economic problems, lack of time, weak political commitment, a lack of support and collaboration, the influence of husbands, and society's discouraging attitude each and in combination challenged women's empowerment through the IFAE program, either subtly or explicitly.

## Conclusion

Women's empowerment is a crucial issue in the changing world, but faces different challenges. As we have seen, the process of women's empowerment through the IFAE program in Belay Zeleke Sub City was slowed down by women learners' economic problems, their lack of time, weak political will, lack of support and collaboration, the influence of husbands, and society's hidebound and traditional attitudes toward the program. This study revealed that women's empowerment via participation in the IFAE program was delayed by their poor economic status. In Ethiopia, the IFAE program was designed with a focus on poor urban women. As the result, the study participants were poor women in the Sub City. Their ongoing struggles with poverty in their lives contributed to irregular attendance at the program and consequents disempowerment. The study has shown that women are busy compared to men. In developing countries, women are preoccupied with chores within the home and engage in the informal sectors as the breadwinner for the family. In this study, women learners had been too busy to attend the IFAE program and to achieve empowerment. Therefore, a lack of time to attend the educational program perpetuates women's subordinate roles.

This study found that political will regarding the provision of the IFAE program for the empowerment of adults, particularly women, is not encouraging and that the issue of the IFAE program and women's empowerment has clearly moved from the center of the political agenda to the periphery and continues to be marginalized. Any political focus on the IFAE program is only as lip service for the purpose of propaganda. In spite of the advantages of the program, the issue of women's empowerment has purely been used as a political instrument. The study therefore, clearly highlights the absence of political will as a major obstacle to

women's empowerment through the IFAE program in the sub city.

Another obstacle to women's empowerment identified by this study is lack of support. In the Sub City, only facilitators, experts, and women adult learners are involved in the IFAE program. After women attend the program, support to actually empower the women is insignificant. Notwithstanding the nature of the IFAE program, the provision has been only come from the education sector, especially facilitators and adult education experts. For the implementation of the program, and to ensure progress toward women's empowerment, material and financial support from the bodies concerned has been insignificant. The IFAE program receives the smallest budget of all groups from the government and even this minuscule budget can be transferred to other activities considered more worthy of political and governmental attention.

The study also revealed husbands' influence as another discouraging factor in the women's empowerment process in the Sub City. In spite of the importance of women's empowerment in improving family circumstances, husbands resist women's participation in the IFAE program. Not just this, but husbands also hinder women's involvement in income-generating activities outside the home. Husbands undermine women's empowerment by monopolizing access to and control over resources and thereby restricting women's decisions in determining the lives they want to live. Therefore, though there can be instances where husbands are supportive and positive, in general they represent a major obstacle on the road to women's empowerment.

This study has highlighted society's discouraging attitude toward women's participation in IFAE and toward their involvement in income-generating activities, thereby disempowering them. For women's empowerment to be successful, a positive and encouraging attitude among society at large would be invaluable. In the Sub City, the social attitudes hampering progress toward women's empowerment emanate from traditional views and beliefs that are hostile to women's education. Indeed, the role played by social thinking and attitudes toward women's involvement in accessing and controlling resources, within the family and in society in general, is significant. Society assumes that women are incapable of managing resources, and that access to and control of these resources is only appropriate for husbands. In addition, the society has well-established taboos, which view women's involvement in decision-making and negotiations as deviant behavior. Therefore, the study showed that well-established social taboos also hinder women's empowerment through the IFAE program.

## Policy and Practice Implications

In Ethiopia, a variety of different precondition need to be existed for women to achieve empowerment through the IF AE program. Women learners' participation in the design and planning of the program, and the participation of women leaders and association executives and women academicians in the process of the program is required. Independent, responsible, and accountable, bodies should be assigned to support the program. Government support should be substantial and be provided in collaboration with different sectors, including NGOs, GOs, and civil society associations. An insensitive political mindset, society's backward attitudes, and negative beliefs regarding the relevance of women's education need to be changed. If the aim is to create an egalitarian society by eradicating gender inequality, methods need to be devised to connect the women's competence from the program with the labor market by upgrading the provision of technical skills and coordinating with employers to open opportunities for women who attended the IF AE program, for example by issuing a graduation certificate.

At this stage, the almost complete absence of political attention and lack of support from the government has placed the provision of the IF AE program in grave danger. Politicians and government should not sideline the issue of educating the adult population, especially women. Therefore, political well and sufficient government support to empower women through the IF AE program is the first requirement.



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