



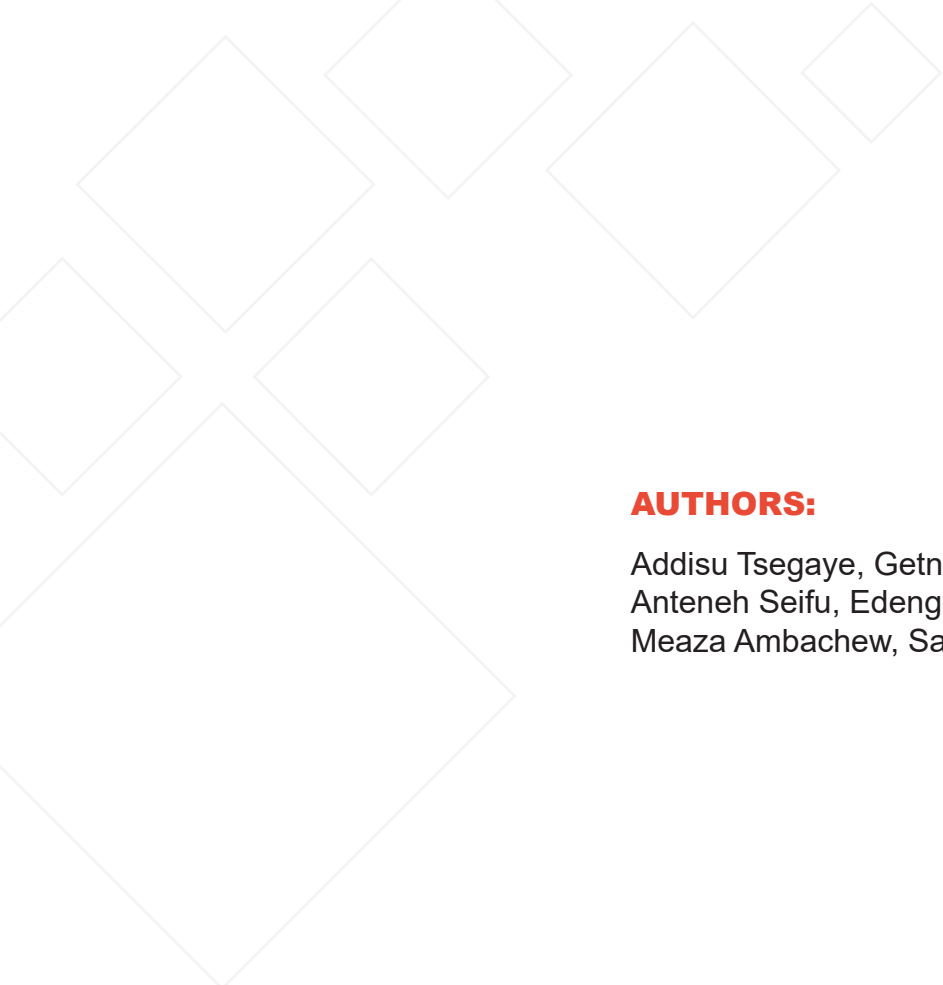
Organization for Social Sciences
Research in East and Southern Africa

In partnership with



Gendered Inequities In Ethiopia's Creative Sector

January, 2026



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Acronyms

CBOs	Civil Society Organizations
DCMS	Department for. Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.
ESSWA	Society of Ethiopian Sociologists, Social Workers, and Anthropologists
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IDI	Individual In-Depth Interview
KII	Key Informant Interview
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Executive Summary

The creative sector represents industries ranging from arts and culture to digital media and design, and plays vital in the global economy. In Ethiopia, limited investment and weak policy supports have stifled cultural heritage and creative potential, and prevented it from realizing its full contribution to economic growth and job creation. These challenges are, further, compounded by systemic gender inequality, which restricts women's entry, progression, and influence in creative sector. Creative women are underrepresented, frequently confined to low-paying roles that do not allow them participate in vital decision-making. They also face pervasive barriers related to discriminatory workplace practices and socio-cultural norms that undermine their full participation.

A critical evidence gap exists regarding the specific barriers that hinder women's participation in Ethiopia's creative economy. The "Behind the Scenes," a multi-county research project implemented across seven African nations: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal and Uganda, aimed to address this gap. In Ethiopia, the research is led by the Organization for Social Sciences Research in East and Southern Africa (OSSREA) and the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW). This report presents findings of the Behind the Scenes study conducted in Ethiopia between 2024 to 2025 in the capital city, Addis Ababa and selected regional cities: Adama (Oromia), Bahir Dar (Amhara), Hawassa (Sidama), and Wolkite (Central Ethiopia).

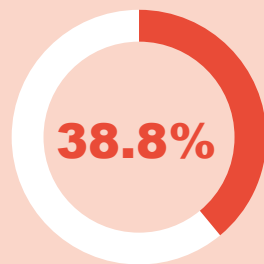
The research focuses on the intersecting challenges confronting young female creatives (aged between 18-35 years) and points to opportunities for change. Data were collected from 358 survey participants and 184 respondents through key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, focus groups, photovoice, and social mapping. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Findings indicate that while the creative sector is growing, particularly in Addis Ababa, women face significant challenges. These include stereotypes, stigma, the undervaluation of their work, harassment, gender-based discrimination, and underpayment, all compounded by a lack of protective policies. These barriers manifest at multiple levels, from the household or relational (micro) and community/workplace (meso) to the national (macro) context.

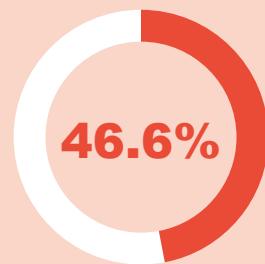


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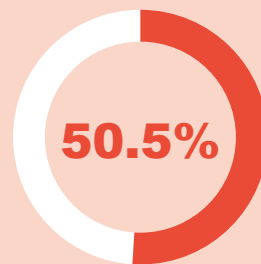
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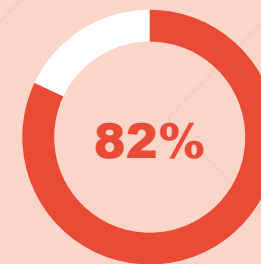
Survey data reveal that 38.8% of respondents perceive creative workspaces as male-dominated.



Discrimination is prevalent, with 46.6% reporting bias during interviews or bids related to gender or refusal of sexual advances.



50.5% of female creatives feel they are underpaid, an issue confirmed by qualitative data, though survey results did not show a statistical gender-based pay gap.



Despite these challenges, job satisfaction is high. About 82% of respondents find their work environment dignifying and fulfilling, while 77% report overall job satisfaction, and 71% feel included in collaborative projects.

Survey data reveal that 38.8% of respondents perceive creative workspaces as male-dominated. Discrimination is prevalent, with 46.6% reporting bias during interviews or bids related to gender or refusal of sexual advances. Harassment is a significant issue; 87% of respondents reported experiencing comments on their physical appearance within the last 12 months, with 52.5% stating that these issues are not addressed due to a lack of anti-harassment policies. Furthermore, 50.5% of female creatives feel they are underpaid, an issue confirmed by qualitative data, though survey results did not show a statistical gender-based pay gap.

Despite these challenges, job satisfaction is high. About 82% of respondents find their work environment dignifying and fulfilling, while 77% report overall job satisfaction, and 71% feel included in collaborative projects. This fulfillment stems from women's creative expression itself, rather than from institutional support.

The research concludes that unlocking the creative sector's potential for economic and social change hinges on addressing significant barriers inhibiting the full participation of young female creatives. This requires a multi-level approach, with targeted interventions at the micro, meso, and macro levels tailored to different stages of a woman's career.

1. Introduction

The global creative economy is widely recognized as a powerful driver for economic development, innovation, and cultural exchange. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the creative industries are among the most rapidly growing sectors worldwide, with the capacity to generate annual revenue and provide employment for millions of young people globally.¹²

In 2023, the global exports of creative goods reached \$677 billion, while the exports of creative services reached \$1.5 trillion.³

Developing countries have a strong foundation for their creative industries due to their rich traditions of art, music, and cultural heritage. However, the sector's significant socio-economic value is obscured by a critical scarcity of data, and stark inequalities among countries.¹ This inequality is evident in the global export of creative services, where values are dominated by developed economies, while developing nations such as China, India, and Singapore are recently gaining a stronger foothold in the export of creative services.³ In Africa, global export of creative services is constrained by its heavy reliance on commodity exports.⁴ Within this broader African context, Ethiopia remains a good example of untapped creative potential.

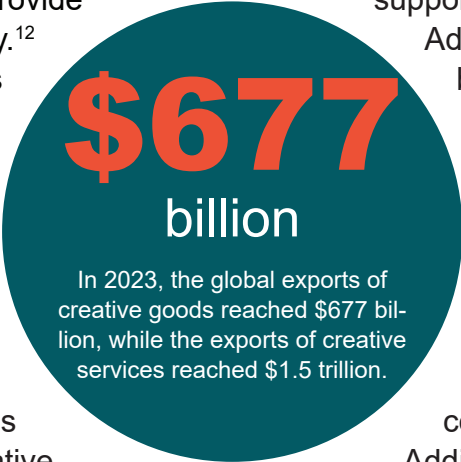
With its rich cultural heritage and one of Africa's largest youth populations, Ethiopia is uniquely positioned to capitalize on its creative sector. This rapidly growing area

has immense potential to shape the national economy.⁵ It can significantly contribute to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) while also strengthening national identity through products that leverage indigenous knowledge and skills.⁶

However, this potential is constrained by systemic challenges, including the sector's inadequate governance, insufficient policy support, and a lack of effective marketing strategies.

Additionally, translating this potential into tangible benefits will require curbing systemic barriers that limit equitable participation. Foremost among these is pervasive gender inequality, which both undermines social justice and also constrains the sector's overall productivity and growth by excluding a significant portion of its talent pool.

To better understand the extent and impact of gender inequality on Ethiopia's creative sector, we conducted a study across five key sites in Ethiopia: Addis Ababa, Amhara, Central Ethiopia, Oromia, and Sidama regions. This study is part of the "Behind the Scenes" project, an initiative to understand young female creatives and gender-based inequities in the creative sector in seven African countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, and Uganda. The project aims to generate and disseminate evidence on the gendered barriers and inequities that prevent young women from fully benefiting from, realizing their potential, and participating in the country's creative sector on their own terms, as well as opportunities in the sector. The research ultimately seeks to promote evidence-driven actions that advance gender equality and foster inclusive prosperity within this sector.



\$677
billion

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2. Background

The concept of the “creative industries” has been defined in various ways. A classic definition by the United Kingdom’s Department of Culture, Media and Sport (1998) describes them as activities rooted in “individual creativity, skill and talent” with a “potential for wealth and job creation.”⁷

While the DCMS definition served as a foundation, its primary focus on economic value overlooks the broader cultural significance of the sector, a limitation later addressed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) definition. UNESCO provided a more comprehensive framework based on the “cultural cycle,” which integrates everything from cultural heritage and visual arts to audio-visual media and design.⁵ More recently, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) provides a definition that acknowledges the intersection of economic, cultural and technology drivers involved in modern creative industry.

Accordingly, UNCTAD defines creative industry as a sector that encompasses creating, producing, and distributing goods and services that use creativity and intellectual capital as primary inputs. This includes diverse activities such as advertising, architecture, arts, design, music and movie production, publishing, and video games.¹

For the purposes of this project, the creative sector is understood to encompass key areas from these broader definitions, including music, art, movies, and performances, as well as work in film, television, and other electronic media. These specific sub-sectors are of particular interest as they represent a high-value economic sector, innovation, and cultural exchange in Africa.⁸

Currently, Africa’s creative industry generates \$4.2 billion annually; however, additional investment can create 20 million jobs and \$20 billion in annual revenue.⁹ Investing in the creative sector can further contribute to the equitable distribution of wealth by supporting local economies and expanding business opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises.¹⁰ Despite the immense potential, efforts to develop, promote, and fund the creative sector in Africa have been limited.¹¹ As a result, creative sectors across the African continent are characterized by informality^{1,12}, with Ethiopia being no exception.

Ethiopia has a rich history of performing arts and cultural expressions^{13,14,15}, although the level of development and visibility of the sectors do not reflect the immense potential and historic legacy.¹⁶

For example, the history of theater in Ethiopia dates back to the Axumite period in the third century, while the origins of Ethiopian music



\$4.2
billion

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are closely tied to the advent of Christianity in the country. In the sixth century, Saint Yared invented a unique pentatonic musical notation system, known as *Kignit*, which is still used in Ethiopia today.¹⁷

While traditional art forms are a vital part of Ethiopia's heritage, modern creative industries are adopting emerging technologies and business models, thereby helping diversify and sustain creative resources. Young creatives are using digital platforms, mainly social media, to showcase their creativity by blending historical and cultural heritage with modern forms of expression, representing an economic opportunity for them.

In 2012, Ethiopia's "copyright industries" ¹⁹ generated \$1.3 billion, which accounted for 4.73% of the national GDP.²⁰

A decade later this data remains the recent official estimate. Lack of up dated institutional data reveal a critical gap of information which significantly obscure the scale of growth of creative sector in Ethiopia. This gap affects potential investment and targeted policy reforms required to strengthen infrastructure, support creative clusters, and improve access to finance.²¹

In 2016, the Ethiopian government issued a National Cultural Policy²² that prioritizes culture as offering significant economic

potential, with essential strategies outlined to support investment and foster support for cultural creatives. Furthermore, the government has acceded to the African Union's recommendations for member states to allocate 1% of their national budget to the cultural sector. However, implementation has fallen short of this standard. Furthermore, the lack of intersectoral policy integration and absence of formalized outbound market channels serve as the major bottlenecks within Ethiopia's creative sector landscape.²⁴ A diverse body of literature exists on various creative sub-sectors although their primary focus is on specific creative sub-sectors.^{25,26,27}

This independent treatment of the creative sector does not provide sufficient insight into the common challenges facing the Ethiopian creative industry. Although independent examination of creative sub-sectors is critical for understanding their specific contexts, integrative approaches are needed to capture the overlapping barriers and shared structural issues that affect women and other marginalized groups across the creative industry.

Despite women accounting for nearly half of Ethiopia's population and labor force ²⁸, gender gap exists in specialized sectors. As noted in the Ethiopian Economics Association's working paper, women's participation in economic



\$1.3
billion

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activities including creative sectors is dominated by their male counterparts. They also disproportionately work in precarious and underpaying roles and often experience discrimination, harassment, and stereotyping that constrains their participation and career progression.³⁰ With a Gender Inequality Index value of 0.497, Ethiopia ranks 131 out of 172 countries in the UNDP 2023 index.³¹

These manifestations of gender-based inequalities persist despite the country's efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment through policy frameworks and international commitments. For instance, the country ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 and committed to the Beijing Platform for Action and its subsequent iterations, launched at the Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995. Additional commitments include the Maputo Protocol in 2004 and National Women's Policy in 1993.³²

Though evidence about female creatives in Ethiopia is limited, the few studies that do exist suggest that women in the creative sectors face different challenges. For example, women in theater have historically been subjected to discrimination and marginalization that is rooted in socio-cultural norms and institutional practices.³³ Today, the movie industry is a popular creative sub-sector directly or indirectly employing over 31,000 people in Ethiopia.³⁴

However, the industry continues to perpetuate gender inequality. Based on a study of Amharic movies,



31,000

Today, the movie industry is a popular creative sub-sector directly or indirectly employing over 31,000 people in Ethiopia.

Gebeyehu and Ladsarie's analysis of the gendered representation of movie characters found that women often play supportive and subordinate roles, while men frequently portray the main characters.³⁵ Other reports^{36,37} also indicate that creative sectors in Ethiopia do not provide conducive environments for women to pursue their creativity. Women artists in Ethiopia navigate a male-dominated art market, where educational and social backgrounds influence success. They are often compelled to balance aesthetic goals with economic needs, using strategies to sustain their creative vision while ensuring financial viability.³⁸

Overall, there is a dearth of data on the creative sector in Ethiopia. Existing studies have emphasized topics such as policy frameworks,³⁹ mapping creative ecosystems,⁴⁰ the role of arts in peacebuilding⁴¹ and the promotion of human rights and democracy,⁴² and the job creation potential of the arts.⁴³

There is a critical lack of gender-disaggregated data in the existing body of literature. This "gender-blind" approach overlooks the specific systemic inequalities that constrain the potential of female creatives. Therefore, multidisciplinary research that goes beyond representation is needed to examine how gender shapes access, recognition, and career trajectories within Ethiopia's creative sectors. This research attempts to fill this gap by generating evidence on the experiences and perceptions of different ways women face challenges in creative sectors in Ethiopia.

3. Objective of the Research Project

3.1. General Objective

This study aimed to generate evidence on the gendered barriers, inequities, and opportunities that influence young women in Ethiopia with respect to fully benefiting from, realizing their potential, and participating on their own terms in the country's creative sector. The long-term goal is to promote evidence-driven actions that advance gender equality and foster inclusive prosperity within this sector.

3.2. Specific Objectives

- Generate evidence on the nature, dynamics, and implications of gender-based inequities faced by young female creatives in Ethiopia,
- Understand young women's challenges, aspirations, and creative journeys within the sector,
- Highlight the gender-related lived realities of women in the sector, and
- Recommend evidence-driven actions and policy interventions for achieving greater gender equity and inclusion.

4. Study Design

The research adopted cross-sectional design, using mixed-methods that includes survey as well as participatory qualitative data collection techniques. The survey was essential to establish the prevalence of gender issues across diverse creative fields in the country.

To uncover the lived experiences behind these numbers,⁴⁴ qualitative methods, including key informant interviews (KIIs), in-depth interviews (IDIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs), were used to gather contextual insights from a wide range of stakeholders. Finally, participatory approaches including photovoice, social listening, creative representation and storytelling were integrated to empower participants to represent their own realities in their own terms.

Thus, a cross-sectional survey design was used to collect socio-demographic data, specific work experiences, skills, earnings, perceptions, career expectations, and experiences of gender inequity and gender-based challenges. The survey research was conducted in Addis Ababa and four other purposively selected sites (Adama, Bahir Dar, Hawassa, and Wolkite).

Participants included actresses, artists, artisans, online/digital content producers, YouTubers, TikTokers, Instagrammers, bloggers, vloggers, photographers, and authors. Participants

were recruited through multiple-point snowballing with significant emphasis on ensuring sample diversity and the inclusion of under-represented participants (such as less popular creatives, rural-based creatives, creatives with disability, and local language creatives).

A qualitative research design was employed, along with a survey method, to understand the individual and group experiences of female creatives. Accordingly, we conducted KIs with a diverse group of participants, including national officials, owners of creative enterprises, and individuals (male and female) representing various creative sectors. Additionally, we conducted IDIs with industry stakeholders to gain further insights.

To capture collective perspectives, seven FGDs were conducted with young female creatives, each comprising five to seven participants in the different sites.

The methods aimed to explore participants' experiences and perspectives on the types, expressions, and dynamics of gender-based disparities in the sectors where they work, as well as their notions and views on what constitutes dignified and fulfilling work in their specific industries, settings, and countries.

Data was collected on creatives' aspirations, journeys, and pathways in the industry, as well as the gender-



7

To capture collective perspectives, seven FGDs were conducted with young female creatives, each comprising five to seven participants in the different sites.

related challenges they face, how they navigate them, and the impact on their work. The interviews and FGDs were conducted in Amharic (in all regions) and Afan Oromo in Oromia region for those who did not speak Amharic.

A range of participatory methods supplemented survey and qualitative research, including photovoice, storytelling, creative mapping, social listening, and creative representations.

All participatory techniques were conducted in Addis Ababa with purposively recruited study participants.

First, we conducted photovoice with creatives engaged in various fields, including TikTok, music, theater, architecture, graphic design, advertising and marketing, publishing and printed media, and gastronomy.

Through the photovoice method, we attempted to capture creative individuals' perspectives and representations of gender inequality and barriers in relation to their work by photographing scenes that, for them, highlight gender inequities and their impacts on their lives as creatives.

Second, to gain a deeper understanding of how female creatives make sense of their real life, we used the storytelling method. This method helped us understand the creative journey of females and how it contributes to the unfolding of gender inequality.

Study Sites

This study was conducted in one city administration and four regional states in Ethiopia, namely Addis Ababa, Amhara, Central Ethiopia, Oromia, and Sidama (see Figure 1). While Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, is often considered a hub of the creative sector in the country (mainly due to the relatively high presence of opportunities), other regional capitals also have immense potential, with universities that offer training in creative fields. In light of this, the first phase of data collection took place in Addis, followed by the second round of data collection in the remaining regions.

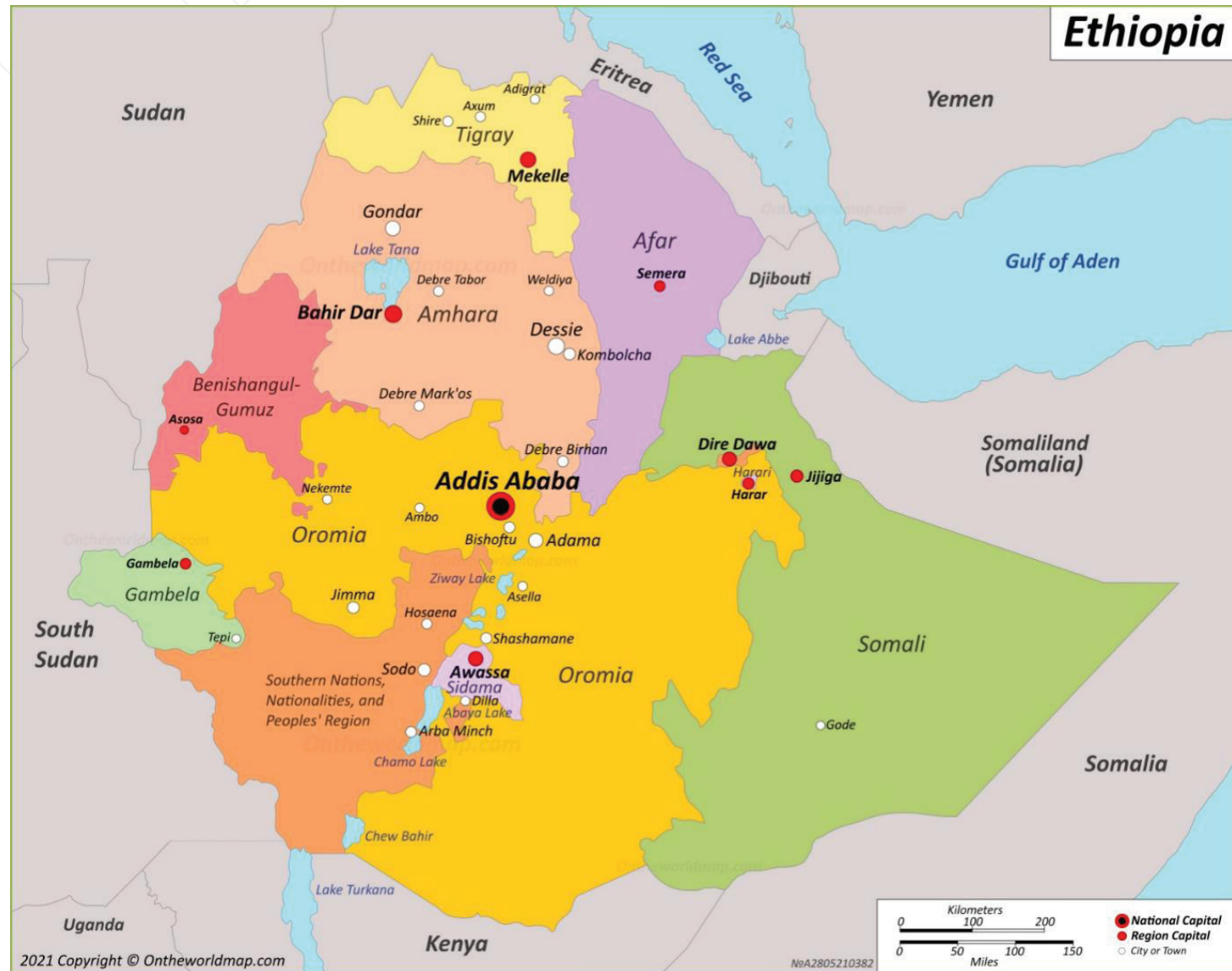


Figure 1: Map of Ethiopia with Study Sites

4.1. Study Population and Sample

The study population comprised female creatives aged 18–35, along with stakeholders directly involved in the creative arts, including private training institutes and government entities with relevant connections to the creative arts. We involved female creatives in the survey to explore their insights into the challenges and opportunities they face while pursuing creative arts.

4.2. Samples

Study participants were recruited through different strategies. Participants in qualitative research were selected through purposive and snowballing sampling, depending on their roles in the sector. In addition, we recruited survey participants through multi-point snowball sampling drawn from core creative sub-sectors based on the United Kingdom's Department of Culture Media and Sport classification of the industry. We deliberately incorporated a diverse array of sectors, including less popular creatives, rural-based creatives, creatives with disabilities, and local language creatives to ensure the inclusion of marginalized segments of the population. This included four female creatives with disabilities: spanning fields such as dance, music, journalism, and fashion design.

To further promote ethnic diversity, we engaged several creative women who harness local languages like Afan Oromo,

Sidama, and Guragigna as powerful mediums for their work, thereby amplifying voices that are often underrepresented in mainstream narratives dominated by Amharic language and highlighting the cultural richness embedded in linguistic diversity.

Additionally, we prioritized the representation of rural creatives by recruiting women from non-urban areas, including two dedicated members of a handcraft producers' association, whose insights into traditional artisanship and community-based innovation provided a vital counterpoint to urban-centric viewpoints, ensuring our sample reflected the geographic and socioeconomic breadth of creative practices across the region.

For the qualitative component, purposive and snowball sampling were used to select 184 participants: 77 key informants, 38 in-depth interviewees, and 69 discussants, who participated in 11 focus group discussions. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which occurs when additional data collection no longer yields new themes or insights relevant to the research questions, and ensures that the data collected are sufficient to support robust analysis and conclusions.⁴⁵

Survey research involved 358 young female creatives (aged 18-35 years) recruited through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was employed because of its



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effectiveness in accessing “hidden” or “hard-to-reach” populations.⁴⁶

In the context of the Ethiopian creative sector, where formal registries are often incomplete and many creatives operate in informal, conventional, random sampling is unfeasible. Therefore, snowball sampling is important to engage this young female creatives, who lack formal sampling frame.⁴⁷

Given that the proportion of young women creatives exposed to the adverse impact of gender norms in the sector in the study countries is currently unknown, we used the following formula to determine sample size:

$$\text{Sample Size} = \frac{Z^2 P(1-P)}{e^2}$$

Where: $z=1.96$ (95% confidence level); $P=0.5$ (expected proportion) and $e= 0.05$ (margin of error)

Additionally, 66 individuals recruited through purposive sampling participated in participatory methods: 52 in mapping, seven in photovoice, four in social listening, and three in storytelling.

4.3. Data Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed using

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Measures such as frequencies, percentages, and means were generated to identify key trends and patterns within the data. This approach provided a quantitative overview of demographic characteristics, workforce participation, perceptions of payment, discrimination, and other relevant variables among study participants, which enabled systematic interpretation of the survey results

For qualitative data analysis, all audio recordings from interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. These transcripts underwent thematic and content analysis using qualitative data analysis Miner software, a process designed to identify, code, and categorize recurring patterns, themes, and key concepts within the data. This method enabled rich, contextual understanding of nuanced barriers and opportunities in Ethiopia’s creative industry.

4.5. Ethical Clearance

The study received ethical clearance (ESSWA/AA/026/2024) from the Institutional Review Board of the Society of Ethiopian Sociologists, Social Workers, and Anthropologists (ESSWA), the national professional body responsible for evaluating research involving human participants in the social sciences.



66

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358

Survey research involved 358 young female creatives (aged 18-35 years) recruited through snowball sampling.

5. Findings

5.1. Socio-demographic Background of Participants

The survey participants consisted of 358 female participants. The age of survey participants ranged between 18 and 35 years, with a mean age of ~28 years. As can be seen in Figure 2, most respondents are clustered between the age of 25 and 30 years.

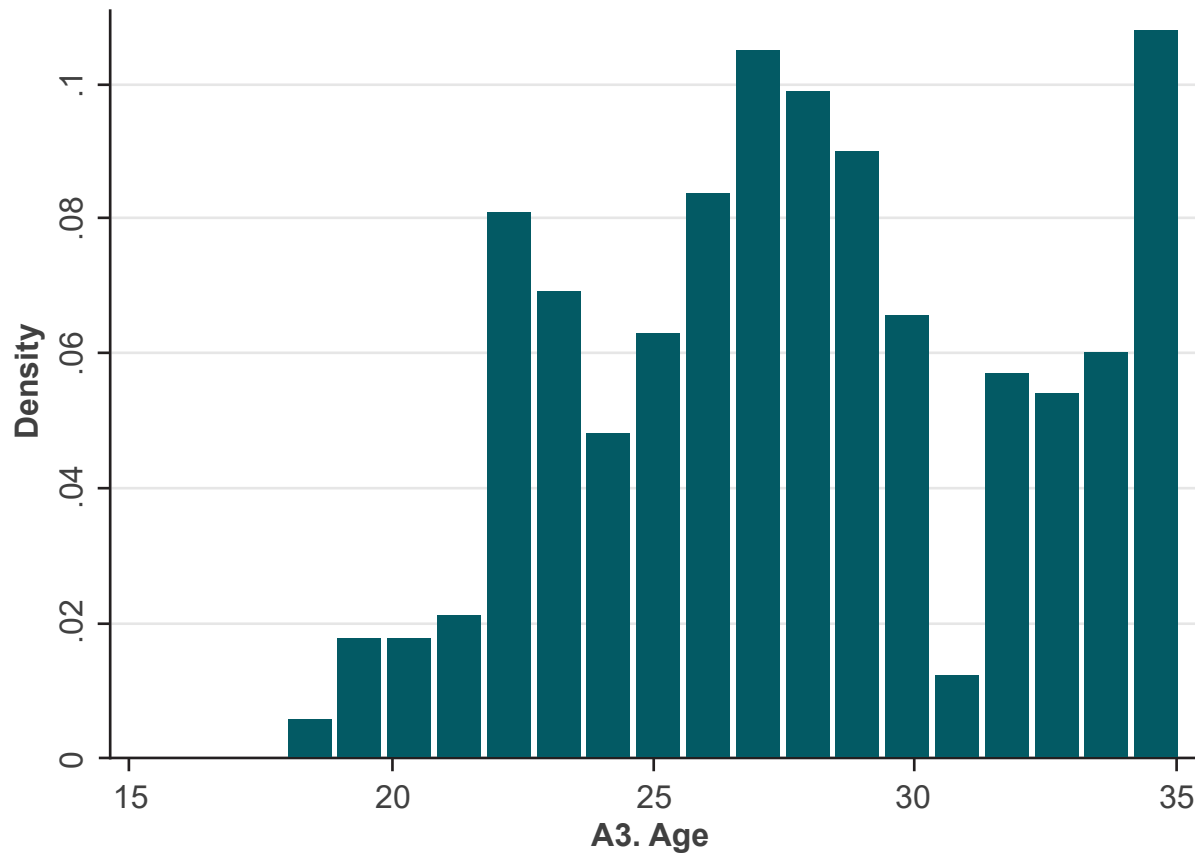


Figure 2: Age Distribution of Survey Respondents

Level of education

Survey participants' level of education ranges from not having completed any level of education (not formally educated) to post-graduate level, with the majority (53.1%) holding a bachelor's degree, followed by certificate or diploma holders (18.4%).

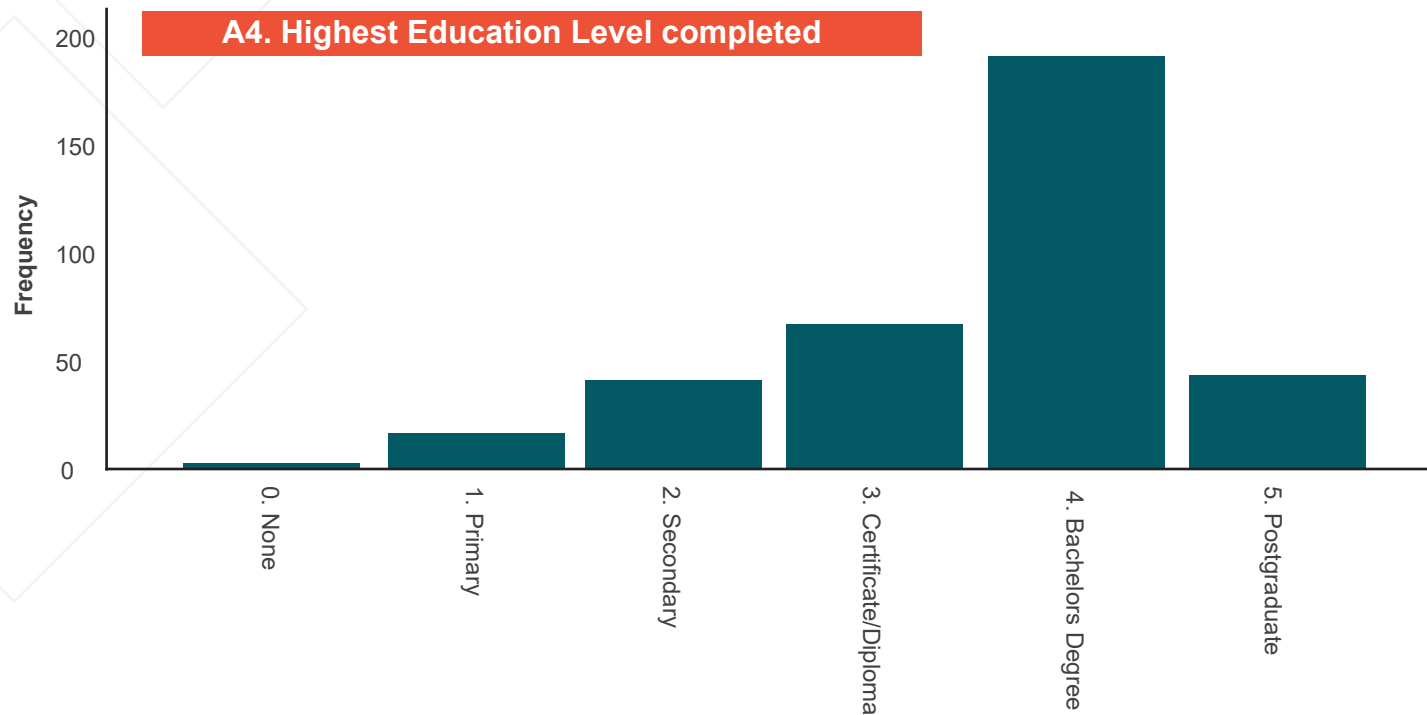


Figure 3: Distribution of Respondents Based on their Level of Education Completed

Training in the creative sector

While 28.5% of survey respondents do not have education or professional training in the creative sector, the majority (70.9%) indicated that they are trained or have professional training related to the creative sector. Accordingly, most of them have different kinds of training ranging from short-term (six months) to formal training.

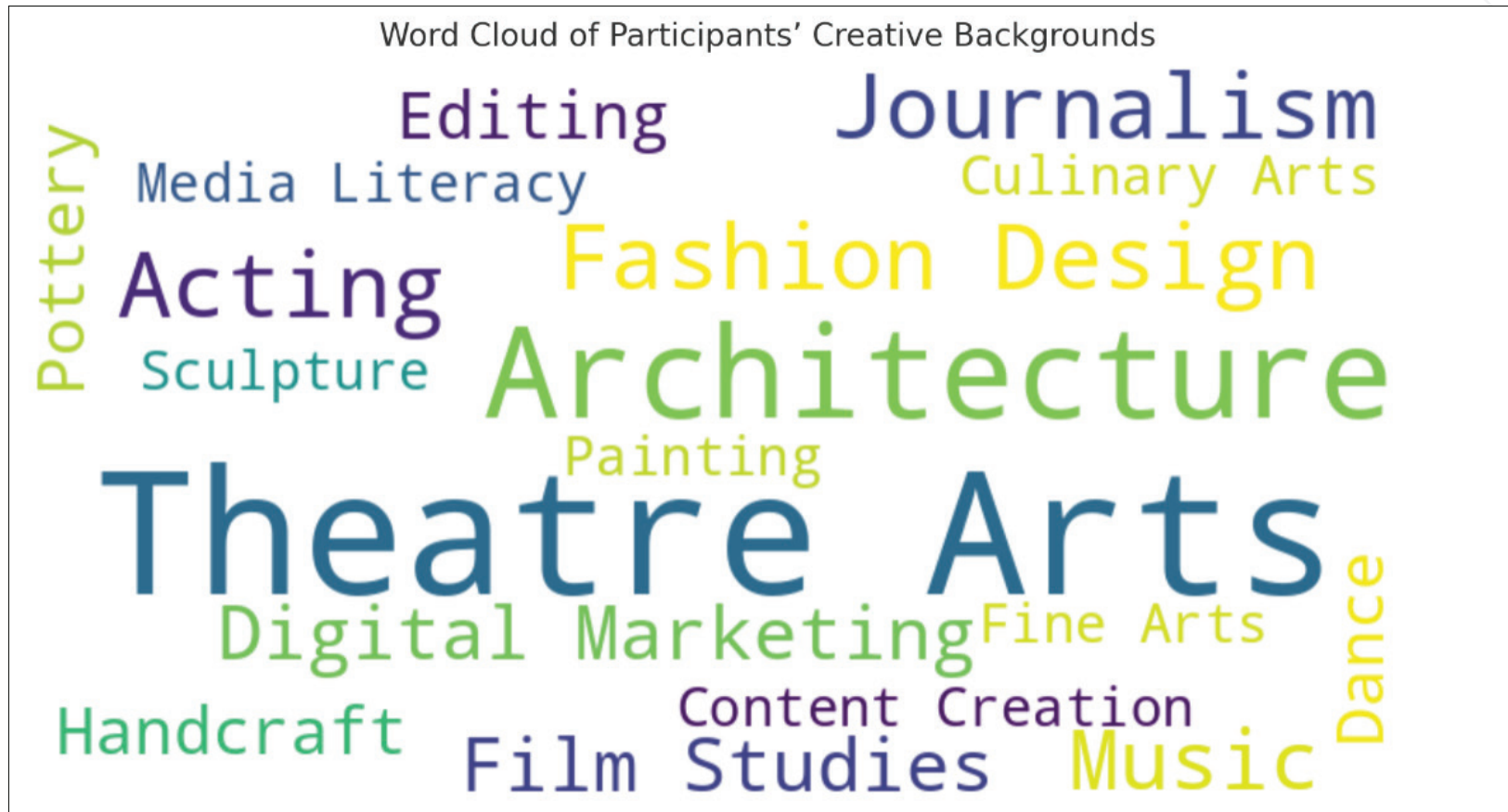


Figure 4: Study Participants' Creative Training Fields

Marital status

Survey results show that most respondents (62%) are single/never married, followed by those who are married or in a cohabitating relationship. Widows represent the minority, with 0.8% of the total respondents.

A5. Marital Status

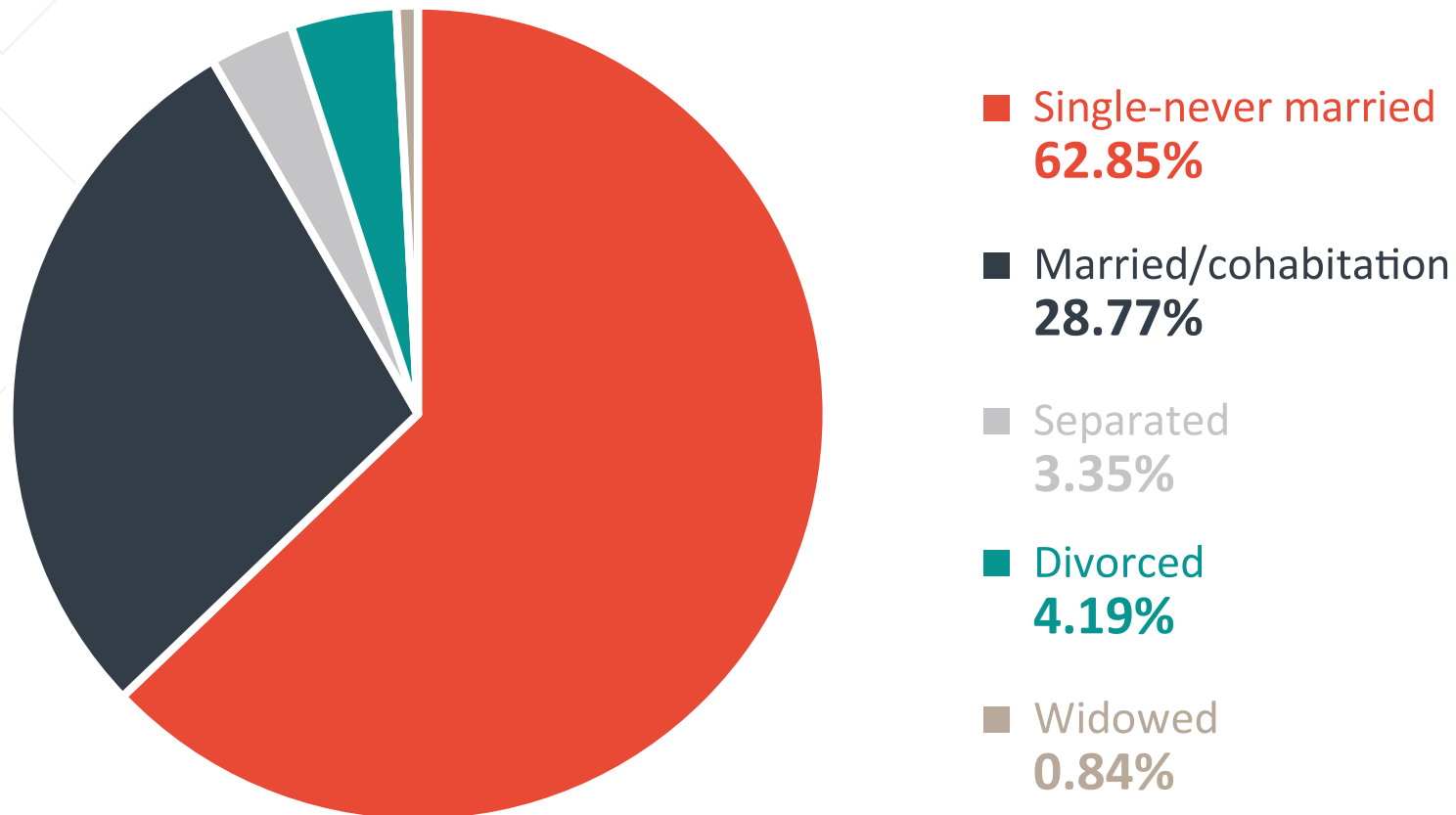


Figure 5: Marital Status of Survey Respondents

Number of children and care responsibilities

The majority (67.6%) of respondents indicated that they do not have children, while 32.1% reported having one or more children. Among those who reported having children, 48.7% have one child, and 28.7% have two children. Regarding childcare responsibilities, babysitter/nanny was mentioned as the most frequent arrangement, mentioned by nearly 34% of respondents, followed by “I take my child/ren to where I work” by 19% and “children are at school” (27% of respondents).

5.2. Perceptions and Observations on the Overall State of the Workspace Environment in the Creative Sector

The creative arts landscape in Ethiopia is expanding and increasingly accepted. It was reported that art clubs, galleries, and training institutes are proliferating, although they are largely concentrated in Addis Ababa. While this increase is associated with greater female participation in urban centers, inequality persists at regional and sub-regional levels, where opportunities remain scarce.

We can say it is a little bit better now for women to participate. But there are still problems for women to participate as much as men, especially in the rural area. Things might be different in the city. People can go to amateur clubs and develop their talent. (Female FGD Central Ethiopia (CE), 32)

Despite their limitations, facilities in regional cities are attracting female creatives and helping to shift negative perceptions regarding women's participation in the arts.



48.7%

Among those who reported having children, 48.7% have one child, and 28.7% have two children.

In this art center, we have been providing training in creative writing, acting, cultural dance, and vocal and instrumental music every summer. To your surprise, most of the trainees are girls, which indicates that perceptions are changing, and parents or mothers are now sending their daughters to participate. (Female, KII, Amhara (AM))

Beyond formal institutions, the promotion of indigenous cultural arts is playing a pivotal role in validating female creativity at regional levels. In the Sidama region, for example, cultural dance groups like Hore and Faro are recognized as vital promoters of local culture, with female participation considered essential to making the dance “enjoyable.” A key informant from the regional Culture and Tourism Office explained how these traditions inherently promote gender equality:

[...] we have the Youth Development Associations (YDA) and Drama Group, which has been established for over 30 years. There is also a cultural group that features various types of dances. For example, one dance is called Faro, and another is Hore. Hore is a game played by unmarried/youth women in a circle, where they complement each other. Faro, on the other hand, involves both unmarried/youth, young men and women. When Faro is played, it is organized in such a way that both genders participate equally; for instance, six young men play alongside six young women [...]. (KII 02, Sidama Region)

Similarly, in Amhara region, it was reported that indigenous girls’ festivals are becoming increasingly recognized for promoting culture and females’ creativity:

There are girls’ festivals with different names depending on the location. In Wag Hemra, it is called “Shadey”; in Lalibela, it is “Ashendye”; and around Raya, it is known as “Solel.” Although these festivals are rooted in culture, the girls incorporate their own creative ideas into the celebrations. (KII 01, Amhara region)



Beyond formal institutions, the promotion of indigenous cultural arts is playing a pivotal role in validating female creativity at regional levels.

Time of Work

Survey results show that 70.4% of the respondents are engaged in full-time creative work, while the remaining 28.8% work part-time. Cross tab analysis reveals that time of work differs based on marital status, number of children a female creative has, and level of education. Female creatives who have one child account for the largest number of creatives working full-time.

Figure 6 shows that employment status (full-time or part-time) varies significantly by age category among creatives in the sample. Full-time work, for example, is more often pursued by creatives between the ages of 25 to 30, while a higher proportion of part-time work appears in the younger (18–24) and older (31–35) categories. The distribution of full-time and part-time work significantly associated with age group is indicated in the Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 12.9082$ with $p = 0.002$.

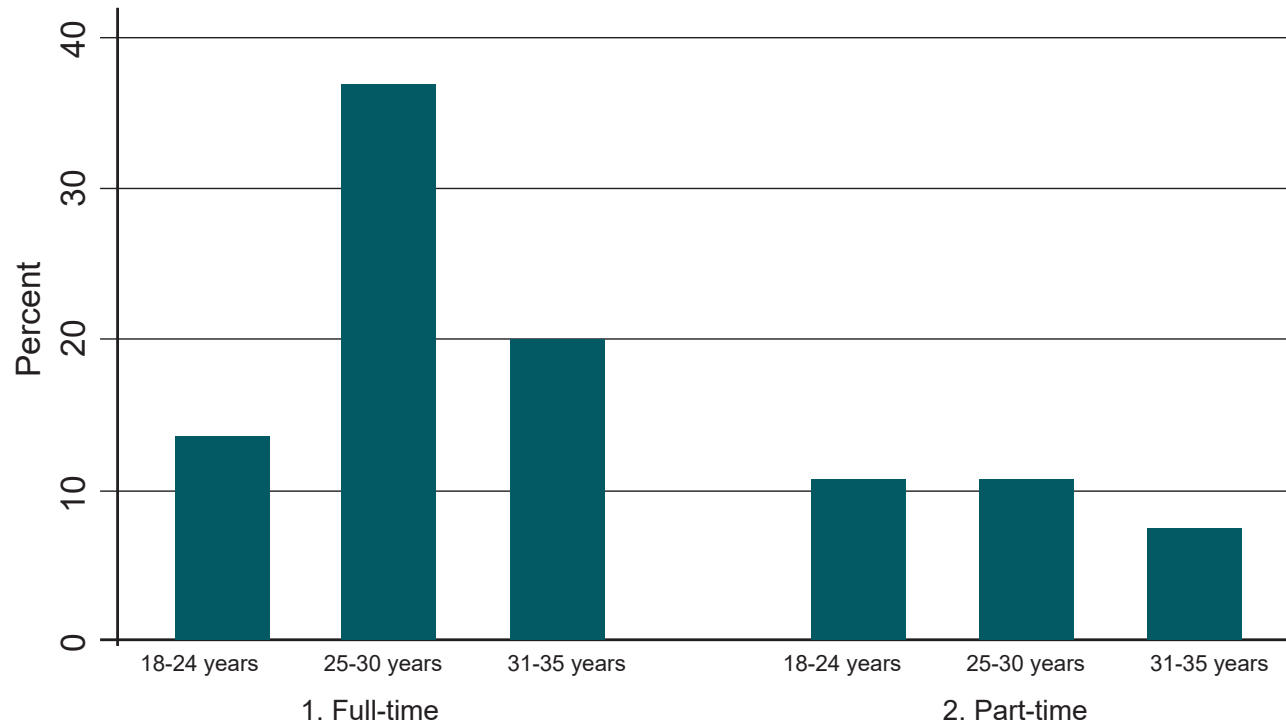


Figure 6. Number of Full-Time & Part-Time Female Creatives by Age Category

Use of Social Media

Survey results show that 92.5% respondents use different social media platforms. The most popular include Telegram (21.9%), followed by Facebook (19.4%) and TikTok 17.5%). Half of the respondents (50.6%) indicated that they use social media as their creative work platforms or space, while 41.6% of respondents use social media for recreational purposes.

Full-time creatives were more likely to use social media as their major platform for creative works (47.2 %) compared to part-timers (35.9%). Statistical analysis using the Chi-square test reveals a significant association between work time and social media use ($\chi^2=19.321$, $p=0.001$), though a measure of association result shows a small to moderate relationship (Cramer's $V=0.164$).

Qualitative data also show the importance of social media for creative arts, especially for visibility purposes and access to opportunities.

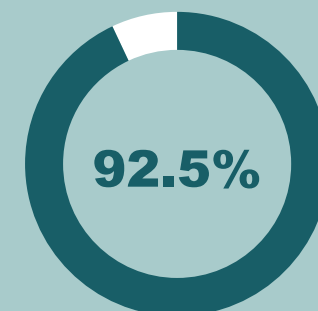
*[...] young people are getting the opportunities to be selected by different band[s] once they are known through the social media.
(Male KII Oromia (OR), 40)*

However, the use of social media is linked to harassment and undesirable behaviors. One respondent even believed that social media in Ethiopia has brought about a discouraging “new normal”:

[...] we are reaching a stage where insulting is normal as long as it helps you make money. Now on TikTok, people are getting money by insulting each other [...] (IDI Addis Ababa (AA), 35)

Gender composition of the workspace (male or female)

The majority of survey respondents (86%) reported that their work environment involves co-workers. Among those with co-workers, 45.13% perceived their workspace as male-dominated, compared to 32.14% who viewed it as female-dominated and 22.73% who described it as gender-balanced.



Survey results show that 92.5% respondents use different social media platforms.



Telegram **1.9%**



Facebook **19.4%**



TikTok **17.5%**

5.3. Workspace Challenges

The creative sector has yet to reach its full potential, particularly with respect to women's representation, due to multi-layered challenges. The sector is hindered by societal stigma, systemic discrimination, and significant gender-based inequality of opportunity. These issues are compounded by a pervasive lack of support at all levels, inadequate infrastructure, and limited recognition, which collectively slow the development of the industry. The following quote captures the shared concerns and sentiments of creatives in Ethiopia:

I do not think that the creative sector is embraced by the people of our country. The creative industry has many challenges. Society itself does not give it much attention. Only a few people are involved in promoting and supporting it. The profession, too, is not widely practiced because it lacks proper infrastructure, and most people do not value it. Creativity, it seems, has become more about money. It appears to have lost its value because of this. (Female, IDI, AM, 34)

Gender inequality and pervasive negative societal perceptions is an emblematic challenge of creative industry. Although general attitudes toward women's participation have improved, women in creative fields still confront substantial sociocultural barriers.

Challenges around entrenched sociocultural norms are more pronounced in certain sub-sectors, such as dance, where stringent community attitudes, stereotypes, and discouragement from family and partners are common. For example, female dancers reported being considered “spoiled” and labeled with the derogatory Amharic term *Chefari* (to refer to a dancer perceived as morally



Figure 7: A Photovoice about a Female Producer in a Male-dominated Film Production Setting

inappropriate or transgressive within local cultural norms). As one participant stated, *“Some people think we are only dancers, and our job is a joke.”*

This societal devaluation filters down to the family level. Unmarried women reported being prohibited from pursuing creative work by their parents, who dismiss art with questions like, “Is this even a job now?” and label them as “aimless wanderers.” Married participants reported their partners’ resistance, which is often linked to concerns over sexualization of women’s roles in male-dominated workspaces:

Just because you are on stage, you will look like a slut, you will look like you are out looking for a man, and your husband won’t be happy at home because he does not want you to work because it is a place where there are a lot of men (Female FGD OR, 24).

These specific barriers in the form of resistance by parents or a spouse reflect a deeper, systemic issue. Ultimately, these challenges stem from a fundamental disbelief in women’s capabilities and success. As explained by one interviewee:

In the past, some of the problems were not taking women seriously, not thinking women are capable of original works and thinking women are there just to support men (Female IDI CE, 32).

A male KII informant from Addis Ababa similarly observed, *“In the creative sector, women have amazing creativity and potential, yet their artwork often does not receive recognition.”*

Another respondent pointed out the implicit higher standard expected of women:

[...] when one male reaches a certain level of success, it is not questioned by others, but when the success is by the female one, there is another question to follow, a second level screening of the thing. People just start to search for who is behind that successful woman, so, it is just as I told you earlier [...] There is no one who thinks that I reached this level by myself, assuming that there is somebody else supporting me. (IDI AA, 28)



Married participants reported their partners’ resistance, which is often linked to concerns over sexualization of women’s roles in male-dominated workspaces.

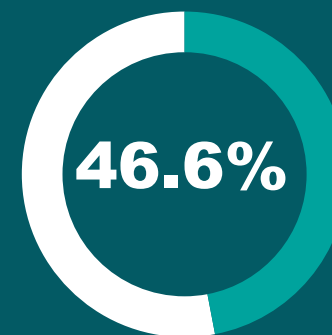
Other informants also noted that women's creativity is stigmatized by social norms perpetuated by families, communities, and society at large. This negative perception manifests in two ways: moral (labeling participation as "indecent" or a "spoiled identity"), or patriarchal, implied through doubts about women's abilities. One informant even faced such stereotypes from her own colleagues:

When I worked in modeling, people spread rumors. Even my colleagues used to claim that I had had affairs with bosses [...] When I joined Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN), they accused me of having an affair with the director. At Urji Band, they said I had slept with five people: the examiner, head of the bureau, band leader, and so on. (KII OR, 34)

These embedded discriminatory social and cultural norms likely are a factor in a tendency to overlook women as potential contributors to larger projects in the creative sector, as noted by one informant from Amhara region:

[...] women may be excluded from large-scale projects, such as massive mosaic artworks or grand sculptures, even though they are capable of handling such tasks. (KII AM, 30)

Though discrimination within the workspaces is a challenge for female creatives who participated in the study, with 46.6% of respondents reporting that they faced gender-based discrimination at their workspace, some promising trends emerged. Nearly similar proportion (43.9%) of women believed that they were *not* treated differently because of their gender, and 39.9% of respondents indicated that people they work with did not exclude them from tasks. In addition, 52.5% of respondents believed that adequate policies and practices are in place that can effectively prevent gender discrimination in the creative sector.



Though discrimination within the workspaces is a challenge for female creatives who participated in the study, with 46.6% of respondents reporting that they faced gender-based discrimination at their workspace, some promising trends emerged.

Around 46.6% of respondents reported that they felt uncomfortable or experienced harassment or microaggressions based on their gender while working as a creative professional. A slightly higher proportion of respondents (47.2%) indicated that they have not experienced such discomfort and harassment.

Survey findings show that 71% of respondents felt included and valued during the collaborative projects, compared to just 14% who indicated that they did not feel included or valued.

Many women reported discrimination with respect to remuneration. Half of the survey respondents (50.5%) believe that they have been underpaid for their creativity because of their gender, compared to 32.4% who believe that they have not been underpaid. Approximately 22% of respondents reported that they are paid less than colleagues of another gender for the same creative work, while 64% disagree or strongly disagree about underpayment compared to coworker of another gender. The proportion of survey respondents who reported underpayment is higher among those under the age of 25, with 80% of the respondents indicated that they have experienced pay inequality compared to 75.2% respondents aged 25 and above.

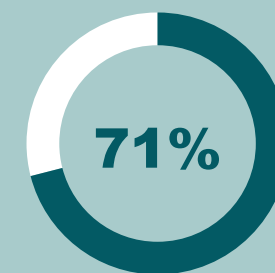
Many respondents (45.8%) expressed concern regarding the absence of policies and procedures addressing gender-based pay disparities within the creative industries; specifically, 14% strongly agree and 31.8% agree. Conversely, 21.5% of respondents disagreed with this concern, while 32.4% remained neutral.

Qualitative data reinforce findings with respect to dissatisfaction around pay discrepancies between male and female creatives who have the same roles. The following interviewee, a 23-year-old painter, shared her experience:

I have personally faced gender-based discrimination, particularly when competing for jobs or projects. I remember one instance when a potential employer hesitated to hire me, questioning whether I should be paid the same as a male artist despite my experience and skills. These biases make it harder for women to secure equal opportunities and fair compensation [...]. (Female, IDI AA, 23)



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Survey findings show that 71% of respondents felt included and valued during the collaborative projects, compared to just 14% who indicated that they did not feel included or valued.

5.4. Career Expectations of Young Women in the Creatives Sector

The majority of survey respondents (88.8%) are committed to a long-term career in the creative industry, and 78.8% of survey respondents feel they are thriving in their career paths.

When asked about whether they were given equal opportunities for career advancement as male colleagues, 53% agree or strongly agree they were given such opportunities, while 38% disagree or strongly disagree. The remaining 8.7% were uncertain about it. In terms of satisfaction with career progression and opportunities as female creatives, 55.3% expressed satisfaction while 39.7% reported dissatisfaction, and 5% remained neutral.

Findings from photovoice and KII interviews revealed that progression in some creative subsectors are gender-sensitive. For example, while there are relatively large numbers of female theater players and film actresses, only a few women manage to move up the hierarchy to become successful producers and script writers. While this is largely attributed to the prevailing mistrust in the capacity of women at workplaces often dominated by males, the undervaluation of female creatives' capacity is deeply embedded in societal gender norms (see Section 5.3 for more in-depth discussion of this issue).

One key informant opined that women may have an easier time than men in entering the creative sector, but was more noncommittal about how women may fare beyond the entry-level stage:

I think the one advantage of being a woman is that if they can show a little bit of an effort, the industry is willing to help them. I do not think men have this advantage. For example, if I write a script and my male co-worker wrote a script, and if we both started looking for a producer, I think I might be a little bit luckier than him. What is expected of her after that is another question but if she can show something for herself, the industry will help her. It might take time for her to prove herself. But once she passed all that, I think it is easier at the top. (Female KII Central Ethiopia, 35)



When asked about whether they were given equal opportunities for career advancement as male colleagues, 53% agree or strongly agree they were given such opportunities, while 38% disagree or strongly disagree.

Other qualitative findings showed that some respondents are less confident about women's ability to enter the industry, pointing out challenges ranging from family-related perceptions about creative works to limited opportunities and facilities catering to talents in the creative sector, and workplace arrangements. Many participants indicated that career progression for women creatives depends less on performance than ceding to men's demands for sexual favors.

According to a 27-year-old dance group member interviewee from Adama town, *males in the dance subsector "sometimes...lure females into relationships under the name of clips and modeling."* In addition, career progression is reportedly negatively affected by young creatives' increasing engagement in substance abuse such as chewing khat (a stimulant leaf), or lack of productivity due to women's multiple professional and reproductive roles.

5.5. Experience of Harassment in the Workspace

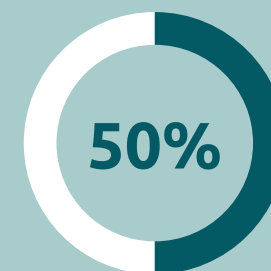
This section presents the prevalence and nature of harassment experienced by creative females in their work environment. It focuses on various forms of inappropriate behavior and gender-based discrimination female creatives face.

Across nearly all categories, fewer than 50% of the respondents reported having never encountered different forms of harassment. In addition, reports of regular exposure to harassment ranged from 5% to 20%.

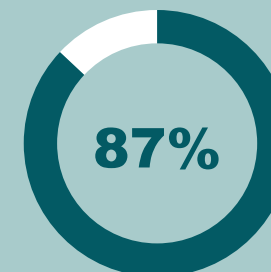
These findings are further supported by qualitative accounts, which highlight harassment as a common feature of female creatives' everyday professional experiences.

Uncomfortable comments

The experience of harassment often starts with uncomfortable comments on physical appearance, private life, and use of nicknames carrying sexual connotations. A majority (87%) of survey respondents reported that they have received comments on their physical appearance which made them uncomfortable. Respondents said that these comments happened sometimes (46.5%) or regularly (40.5%). In addition, 46.4% of



Across nearly all categories, fewer than 50% of the respondents reported having never encountered different forms of harassment. In addition, reports of regular exposure to harassment ranged from 5% to 20%.



A majority (87%) of survey respondents reported that they have received comments on their physical appearance which made them uncomfortable.

respondents said they sometimes received comments about their private life, such as marital status, while 25.7% reported experiencing such comments regularly. About 48.9% experienced being referred to by sexual nicknames sometimes or regularly. Uncomfortable comments are common across different creative fields. Creatives in traditional cultural expressions reported the highest frequency (88.8%), followed closely by those working in advertising, marketing, and design (86.5%).

Sexualized comments, jokes, and communication

Female creatives were also subjected to sexualized comments, jokes, and gestures. Jokes of sexual nature were reported by 73.5% of respondents, with 48.6% reporting that this happens sometimes and 24.9% saying it happens regularly. Comments on sexual life were less frequent but still notable. Most respondents (64.8%) indicated that they never experienced comments on sexual life. In contrast, around 35% of respondents reported that they received comments on their sexual life with, 26.5% reported they experienced them sometimes, and 8.7% regularly. Furthermore, 56.4% of respondents reported being subjected to obscene gestures or sounds sometimes or regularly.



88.8%

Uncomfortable comments are common across different creative fields. Creatives in traditional cultural expressions reported the highest frequency (88.8%), followed closely by those working in advertising, marketing, and design (86.5%).



56.4%

of respondents reported being subjected to obscene gestures or sounds sometimes or regularly.

Sexual proposition and actions

Study participants reported experience of being touched sometimes on intimate body parts (38.3%), even when this was not relevant to or needed for the work they were undertaking.

Over half (57.7%) indicated this unnecessary touch happens sometimes or regularly. Similarly, a photovoice taken at a theater house reveals that female theater players experience uncomfortable touches by workplace male colleagues and directors.

The following photo (Image 1) was taken at one of the theater houses in Addis Ababa and shows an everyday harassment female theater players face at their workplace. A photovoice research participant provided the following photograph which captures an unsettling scene where a young woman appears visibly uncomfortable as another individual gets too close to her. The participant noted: “Both the man and woman are holding scripts. He is a director who is casting her and it is rehearsal. But the man does not respect her personal space; he is trying to touch her while she is totally uncomfortable with his action. She is not in a situation to tell him to stop what he is doing because of power imbalance. The photo is intentionally black and white, to emphasize the feelings and message it conveys rather than other aspects of it”. (Female photovoice, AA).



Our survey results also show that 45% of respondents reported sexual propositions or pressure to have sex. Singles/never married female creatives accounted for the largest (66.4%) group experiencing sexual proposition, followed by married females (22.9 %). Single/never married women also account for the most *regular* targets of sexual propositions, with 69% reporting this. ,

Another important finding is the incidence of sexual propositions reported by creatives who are mothers, regardless of the number of children they have. From the total mothers who reported sexual propositions, the most victims were females who have one child (58%), followed by females who have two children (25.6%).

Forced sexual propositions and actions

Most respondents (78.3%) indicated that they never experienced forced sexual propositions and actions, while 21.7% respondents did: 17% sometimes and 4.7% regularly. Qualitative findings show that sexual propositions and actions are common in creative arts spaces. One informant feels that sexual exploitation is damaging to female creatives, stating that “Being pressured to do something against one’s will devalue a person’s dignity, leading to trauma that impacts their creative work.” (Female, KII, AM)

Denial of work, genderized tasks and recent experience of harassment

About 43.7% of respondents indicated that they knew female creatives in Ethiopia who have been denied a job or a bid they applied for because they refused to have sex with those offering the job. When it comes to their own experience, 40.8% of the respondents indicated that they were denied work because of their gender. Of these, about 32.1% reported regular denial of work because of their gender. Denial of work tends to be higher among females



78.3%

Most respondents (78.3%) indicated that they never experienced forced sexual propositions and actions, while 21.7% respondents did: 17% sometimes and 4.7% regularly.



43.7%

About 43.7% of respondents indicated that they knew female creatives in Ethiopia who have been denied a job or a bid they applied for because they refused to have sex with those offering the job.

who completed secondary school or higher levels of education. Bachelor's degree holders constituted the largest group who experience work denial, accounting for 56.4% out of 64.5% of women reporting this. This was followed by certificate/diploma holders, 18.5% of whom reported denial of work because of their gender.

Approximately 62% of respondents reported that they were given tasks unrelated to their position, such as moving furniture, cleaning up, and making coffee in the workplace, because they are women. Around 42.7% respondents said this happens sometimes. Female creatives reported experiences of frequent harassment within the past year. They even indicated that they have faced more than one of various kinds of harassment, including comments on their appearance or their bodies. It was also found that the most frequent harassment in the last 12 months has been comments on their appearance, as reported by 82.1%. Next was suggestions on how to behave or act because they are women, reported by 72.1% of women, and suggestive sexual jokes told directly to women or said in their presence, experienced by 66.5% of respondents.

5.6. Gender Equity and Gender-based Challenges

This subsection discusses gender equity and the gender-based challenges faced by female creatives, as reflected in their awareness of others who have experienced discrimination, including systematic or organized discrimination during job interviews or opportunities.

Findings from the survey show that female creatives face significant challenges not only themselves but are also aware of the same among their peers. They indicated that they face gender discrimination during job interviews and applications for bids. Generally, 42.5% respondents reported experiencing discrimination as creatives, while 49.7% reported not experiencing discrimination as creatives. The remaining 7.3% were neutral.

Our qualitative data revealed that female creatives in Ethiopia face widespread, intersectional gender-based challenges. These challenges emanate from systematic and socio-economic injustices reflected in workplace relationships, community and societal attitudes, and institutional neglect of female creatives. The findings also showed that these challenges hinder female creatives' participation, career progression, and psychological well-being. The following quotes depict the multifaceted gendered challenges female creatives face which place them at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts.



56.4%

Bachelor's degree holders constituted the largest group who experience work denial, accounting for 56.4% out of 64.5% of women reporting this. This was followed by certificate/diploma holders, 18.5% of whom reported denial of work because of their gender.



62%

Approximately 62% of respondents reported that they were given tasks unrelated to their position, such as moving furniture, cleaning up, and making coffee in the workplace, because they are women.

[We] face many [more] challenges than men. One is time. Women have social, family, and career responsibilities. Men's responsibilities lay on their job. Other engagements are less on men. So, they can focus their mind, thought, and time on their work. (Female IDI CE, 28)

For female artists, the challenges are often layered. It begins at home. If she is married, a partner might resent her talent out of jealousy. If unmarried, parents may discourage her pursuits, claiming it is a waste of time. Beyond the household, female artists frequently face societal stigma, such as being labeled indecent [for defying traditional gender roles]. In addition, femaleness instead of talent is what is often prioritized. (Female IDI OR, 34)

Another recurring issue that emerged in qualitative findings is related to women's challenges of work-family balance. Many study participants indicated that female creatives juggle their professional and domestic roles, while males have the luxury to focus on their professional work. One reason there are few women writers in Ethiopia is their "responsibilities with multiple roles," says one key informant interviewee. Another informant also indicated that marriage and maternity are key challenges that women in the dance subsector face:

While women may be granted maternity leave, upon returning to work, you often find your role has been taken over by someone else. They exclude you after maternity. I experienced this neglect firsthand after giving birth to my daughter. Therefore, there is a tendency to neglect following maternity leave [...]. Maternity significantly reduces the motivation to continue in art. Sometimes, I feel all the motivation I had before giving birth has vanished. As I mentioned earlier, many female artists have left the sector, and many of those who are currently active plan to leave once they get married. (Female IDI Oromia 27)



While women may be granted maternity leave, upon returning to work, you often find your role has been taken over by someone else. They exclude you after maternity.

Ever experienced discrimination at a job interview or an opportunity

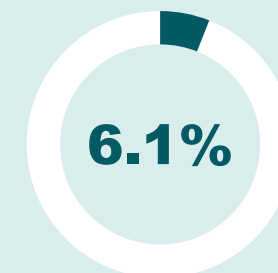
Study participants reported experiencing discrimination during job interviews or job opportunities. They said that they were asked questions that are irrelevant to the job, such as marital status (61.5%), plans to get married (34.6%), and the number of children they have (29.6%).

In addition, 56.6% of respondents indicated that they have had their job applications or project bids rejected due to a range of reasons, some of which are explicitly discriminatory. The most commonly stated reasons were lack of experience (27.6%), gender (26.6%), and too high salary expectations (21.2%). Other reasons mentioned include language, favoritism, and refusal to have sex.

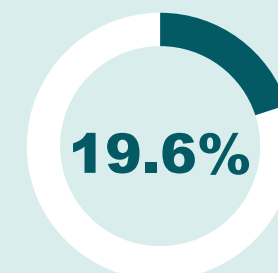
Know others who have faced discrimination

When asked if they knew any creative females in Ethiopia whose job or bid had been rejected, 19.6% of the surveyed participants reported that they did not know of any such cases. However, many respondents stated multiple reasons for denial and noted the intersecting discrimination female creatives face. The most common reason they gave was related to refusal to have sex with those offering the job, reported by 19.8 % of respondents. Another 14.8% respondents mentioned family care responsibilities in relation to the discrimination female creatives face in the job or bidding process.

The study participants mentioned gender as an important factor that independently or in combination with other factors influenced female creatives' denial of jobs and bids. Survey results show that 19.8% of respondents identified gender as an independent reason for job denial. Additionally, 6.1% respondents mentioned gender in combination with refusal to have sex as a reason for female creatives being denied jobs or bids. Furthermore, 4.5 % respondents cited gender combined with age as a reason for job rejection among female creatives. Finally, 5% of respondents indicated that gender, age, and refusal of sex together contributed to the discrimination faced by female creatives in job opportunities and bids. Other reasons identified include lack of skills and experience, disability, language barrier, and religious views.



6.1% respondents mentioned gender in combination with refusal to have sex as a reason for female creatives being denied jobs or bids. Furthermore, 4.5 % respondents cited gender combined with age as a reason for job rejection among female creatives.



When asked if they knew any creative females in Ethiopia whose job or bid had been rejected, 19.6% of the surveyed participants reported that they did not know of any such cases.

Systemic or organized discrimination

Multilayered discriminatory practices and systemic exclusionary criteria embedded in recruitment and selection procedures perpetuate gender inequity in female creatives' participation. The fact that 21.2% of respondents did not know why someone they know was rejected from opportunities suggests the presence of hidden discriminatory behaviors and actions within the industry.

In-depth interviews also revealed significant systemic discrimination female creatives face that leads to underutilization of their creative potential. Some of the systemic and structural discriminatory practices did not target women *per se*, but the creative sector in general, indirectly resulting in the neglect of women's contribution and participation. As revealed in these two interviews, much of the discrimination is in the form of limited opportunities:

There are countless women with the potential and willingness to work, but they lack access to practical opportunities. (Female IDI Addis Ababa, 34)

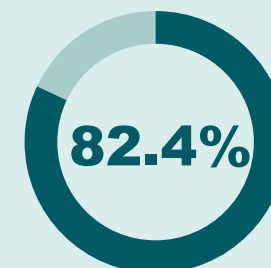
A lack of mentorship, industry networks, and institutional support makes it harder for young women to grow in their fields. (Female IDI Amhara, 31)

5.7. Dignifying and Fulfilling Work

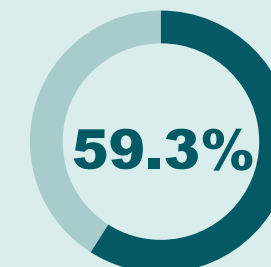
This section presents study participants' perceptions and experience of dignifying and fulfilling work. Study participants consider dignifying and fulfilling work to comprise ethical employment that provides economic independence, self-respect, and personal satisfaction.

Perception and experience of dignified work

As can be seen in Figure 9, most respondents (83%) perceive their work environment as dignifying, characterized by feelings of safety, inclusion, and positive interpersonal relations. About 59.3% agree or strongly agree that they feel safe at work, and 68.5% disagree or strongly disagree that they do not get along with peers. Furthermore, 63.9% disagree or strongly disagree that they face persistent criticism.



Most respondents (82.4%) perceive their work environment as dignifying, characterized by feelings of safety, inclusion, and positive interpersonal relations.



About 59.3% agree or strongly agree that they feel safe at work, and 68.5% disagree or strongly disagree that they do not get along with peers.

However, some respondents reported experiences of marginalization that undermine dignity. Nearly a quarter of respondents (24.8%) feel excluded from decision-making processes and 21.8% agree or strongly agree that their opinions are ignored. Additionally, 16.5% acknowledge that colleagues have made unfounded gender-related allegations against them, including accusations of sleeping with men to get positions, jobs, or roles.

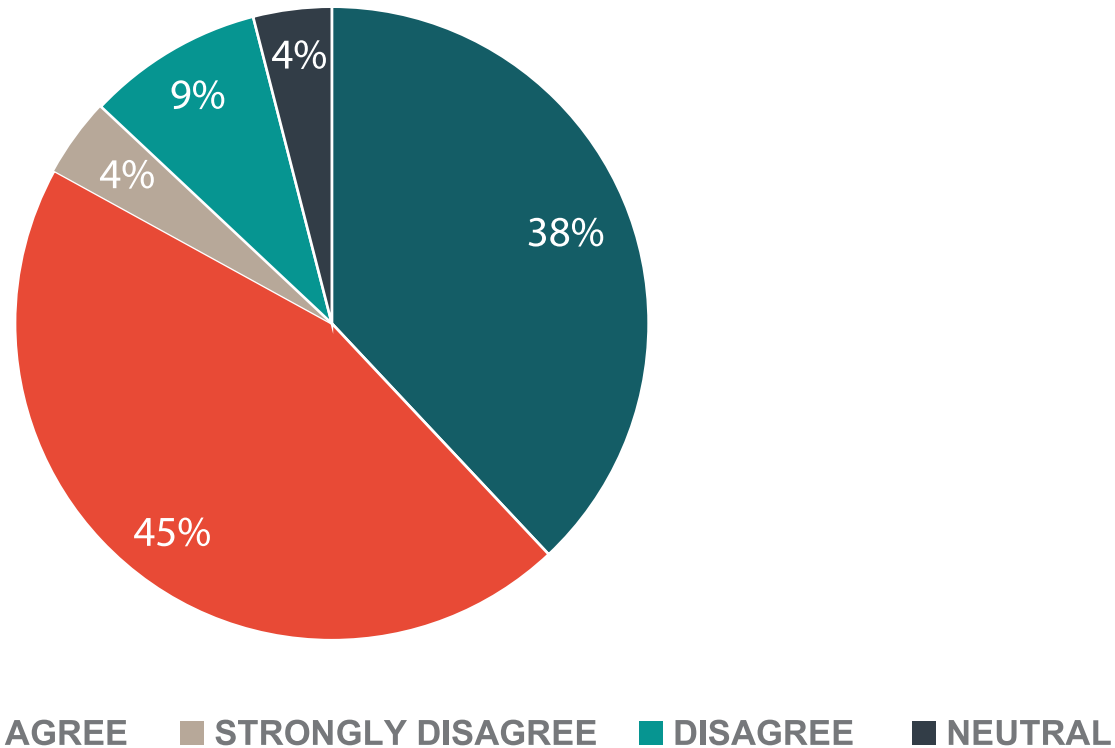


Figure 9: Women who Perceive their Creative Work is Treated with Dignity

Qualitative findings indicate a strong belief among participants that all honest work is inherently dignifying. A central theme was the importance of “economic independence,” which was perceived as a key source of personal dignity and a means of avoiding dependence on others. This can be seen in the testimonial of a participant in a storytelling session who explained that her creative work provided dignity using the phrase “*Yesew fit atayibetim*,” which translates to “it spares you from having to ask others for help or credit.” She said:

I like this job because it allows me to be financially independent. I do not have to beg others or rely on credit when I need money. I can produce and finish a clay product within a week, and every Saturday I earn income from selling my work. Unlike a civil servant who waits a whole month for a payroll, I receive money weekly. At that time, this job was the best solution to my financial problems, so I believed it was a better alternative than continuing my education. (Clayworker, Addis Ababa, 27).

Another participant emphasized that any work, whether it is manual labor or white collar, is dignifying as long as it is honest work:

Every job has its own value and contribution, and engaging in any honest work brings pride and self-respect. It helps to generate income and support family. (Female IDI Central Ethiopia, 35)

However, participants feel that dignity is not just about financial gain. It is a multifaceted concept shaped by a combination of ethical, personal, and social factors. A key ethical element they identified was being valued for one’s talent, not for irrelevant traits. As one interviewee explained, when women are cast in films for sexual favors or when compensation is insufficient to live on, their dignity is undermined:

The gender issues we discussed, such as being cast in a movie based on physical appearance or for sexual favors, can undermine female creatives’ dignity and fulfillment in their profession. When a woman enters the field not for her abilities and talent but for such reasons, it diminishes her sense of worth. Additionally, if the compensation from



The gender issues we discussed, such as being cast in a movie based on physical appearance or for sexual favors, can undermine female creatives’ dignity and fulfillment in their profession.

this work is insufficient to sustain a living, it is again a barrier from being dignified and fulfilled. (Female IDI, Amhara, 02)

Beyond economic gain and financial autonomy, women also value intrinsic fulfillment. Participants described dignified work as something they “believe in and love,” where passion and satisfaction matter more than a mere paycheck. This perspective was summarized as follows:

A dignified job is one that we believe in and love. It is not just about earning money but about finding fulfillment and satisfaction in our work. For younger creatives, this is similar; they seek work that they love and enjoy, which goes beyond merely spending time for a paycheck.

Ultimately, the findings indicate that respect is found to be both self-initiated and societally sanctioned. Many informants stressed that female creatives must respect their own work, which in turn triggers societal respect and dignity for their profession. However, others noted that overall, white collar professions are favored over manual or creative labor. These sentiments are reflected in the following quotes:

All professions are respected. For a given job to be respected by the community, first, we should respect our job/profession. When we first respect it, the societal respect will follow. (Female FGD Addis Ababa, 18)

Dignified work for me indicates something that I do with interest, trust, and passion. To the community, dignified work is when their daughter is involved in the banking industry, the medical profession, or something that compels her to wear suits. For me, it is something that makes her respected, doesn't humiliate her womanhood, and supports her financially by giving her stability in her mind, it could be termed as dignified work. (Female FGD Addis Ababa, 20)



Many informants stressed that female creatives must respect their own work, which in turn triggers societal respect and dignity for their profession. However, others noted that overall, white collar professions are favored over manual or creative labor.

Perception and experience of fulfilling work

Results from survey data show that 72% of female respondents agree or strongly agree that their creative work environment is fulfilling (See Figure 10). They expressed their experience of fulfilling work in relation to satisfaction, opportunities for professional growth, helpful feedback, and valuing of strengths. A majority (76.5%) of respondents agree or strongly agree that they are satisfied with their work as creatives. In addition, 59.2% agree or strongly agree that they have opportunities for professional growth aligned with their career goals. Most respondents (81.9%) agree or strongly agree that they receive feedback that helps improve their work. More than 81% agree or strongly agree that their unique strengths and talents are valued by colleagues, and 73.5% feel supported in fulfilling their responsibilities. The sense of meaning and satisfaction derived from their work remains strong. However, some (21.8 %) reported that their opinions are ignored, or that they face unfounded allegations by colleagues (16.5%), while 26% agree or strongly agree that their opinions are ignored in their work on account of their gender

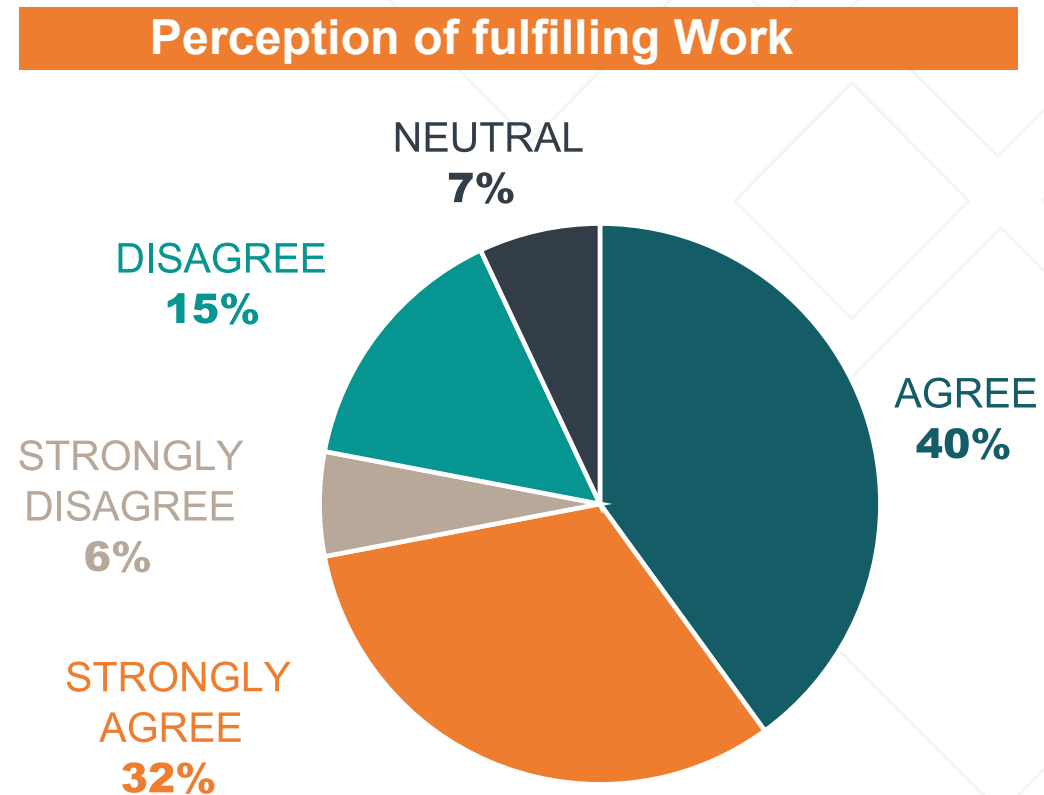


Figure 10: Respondents' Perceptions and Experience of Their Fulfilling Work

Study participants defined “fulfilling” work in qualitative and participatory methods. For one informant, for example, *“Fulfilling work is when you feel satisfaction or happiness after spending your day at work”* (Female KII Central Ethiopia, 35). Results from storytelling also revealed the importance of creative work for personal fulfilment. A 29-year-old informant, in her story titled “From Gotera to Greatness: My Journey to Finding My Voice,” tells how her creative work in media has changed her from a life marred by personal and family troubles to greatness and fulfilment. Before pursuing a career in creative art, the storyteller had gone through challenging times trying to find a dependable job to support herself and her pensioned and widowed father. However, one crucial occasion changed her life: A friend of hers told her about “Yegna Project,” an entertainment competition. After being selected for the project, numerous opportunities have begun to emerge. She said,

It was an opportune moment for my dream to come true! I spent over two years with Yegna, and my stay was incredible – exciting, fulfilling, and a real stepping stone towards achieving my dreams. While working for the Yegna Project, I also took a short course in journalism, which later helped me land a job at Arts TV, one of the leading TV stations in the country. I spent about one and a half years there, gaining invaluable experience and building my network.

Our photovoice method also revealed important insights from female creatives on how the creative journey helps women experience fulfilment, even in situations where they may grapple with challenges to balance work and family. A musician photovoice participant used her picture as a testimony to female creatives, who struggle with work-family balance, yet determined to maintain their dignity. She explains:

“Regarding the representation of fulfilling and dignified work in the photo, a mother who sits on the ground, kneeling and caring for her baby, when she does this, she is thinking of her audience whom she will perform her music for, so whatever she sacrifices, it is for the dignity and satisfaction she could get after her performance. The kneeling, the dedication, and the effort she puts into the details will make her confident. So afterwards, she will gain respect for her performance, and every sacrifice will be worth it. It might be the applause and awards for her creative work. However, the picture also highlights the need for support. The woman maintains her identity as a creator while caring for her baby.”

“

While working for the Yegna Project, I also took a short course in journalism, which later helped me land a job at Arts TV, one of the leading TV stations in the country. I spent about one and a half years there, gaining invaluable experience and building my network.



Figure 11: A Female Creative Trying to Balance Work and Family Roles

In addition, qualitative findings show that numerous institutional challenges could limit the fulfilment of creatives' work. IDI respondents stated that the government's limited support, bureaucratic hurdles, insufficient infrastructure, limited funding, and absence of opportunities or platforms limit the prospect of growth and development. The informants indicated that women face even greater challenges, as they often lack practical opportunities, access to information, and professional networks.

There are countless women with the potential and willingness to work, but they lack access to practical opportunities. Female IDI Addis Ababa,34)

A lack of mentorship, industry networks, and institutional support makes it more challenging for young women to advance in their fields. (Female IDI Amhara,31)

Perception on workplace safety (in %)

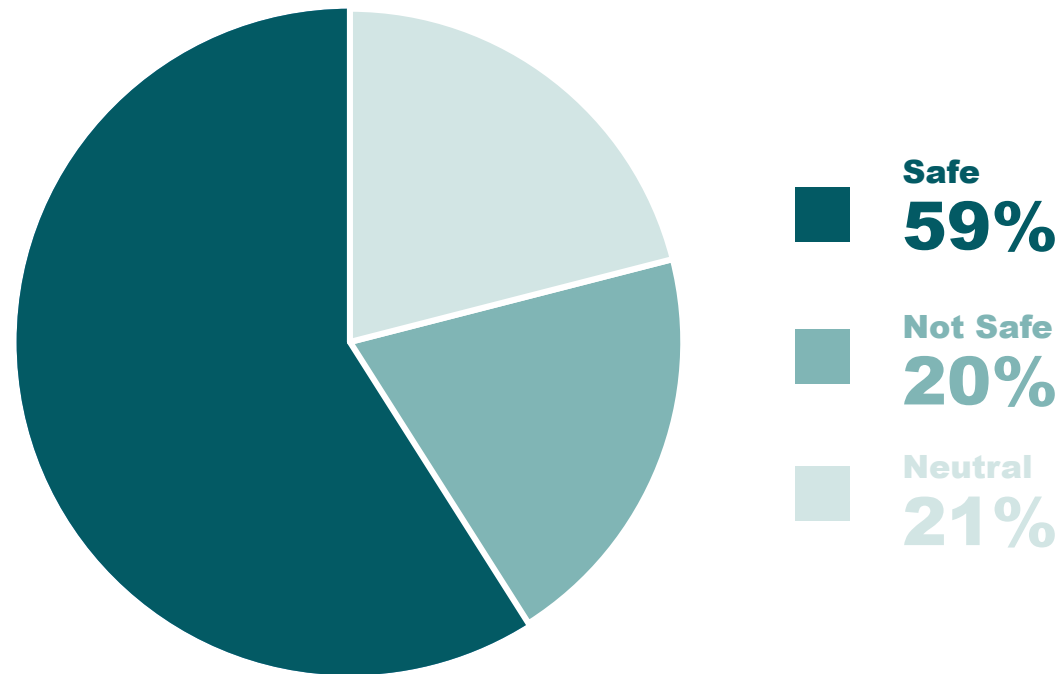


Figure 12: Participants' Perception of Workspace Safety

Similarly, the neglect of fashion design in public universities was found to be a systemic failure to promote the creative arts, which could have produced female creatives in the field. One informant noted significant limitations in fashion design training options:

At the university level, Bahir Dar University is the only institution that offers a comprehensive fashion design program. Even in Addis Ababa, the fashion courses are short and not as in-depth as those offered at the university. (Female KII Amhara, 32)

The experience of one in-depth interviewee from Bahir Dar illustrates how fulfillment can be realized, but getting there is rarely straightforward. Despite facing intersectional problems emanating from living in a regional city surrounded by conflict and limited opportunities and mobility, political pressure, and the barriers she encounters as a woman, she finds satisfaction in the impact she is making on young female creatives in her community:

What brings me some comfort is that I am training children and youth, which gives me a sense of fulfillment. I take pride in passing on knowledge and skills to the younger generation. For example, the leading actress in “Fikir Eske Mekabir” was a trainee from our center, and that truly made me happy. (Female IDI Amhara, 29)

Safe workspaces

We found that most respondents (212, or 59%) agree that they feel safe in the workspace (see Figure 14). This was broken down with 79 (22.1%) who “strongly agree” and 133 (37.2%) who “agree.” However, about 20% of respondents (combining strongly disagree and disagree) do not feel safe, while a similar percentage of respondents (20.9%) are neutral about their safety.

¹ Fiqir Iske Meqabir (literally “Love Unto the Grave”) Fiqir Iske Meqabir (literally “Love Unto the Grave”) by the late Ethiopian novelist, Haddis Alemayehu, depicts human relationships in feudal Ethiopia and is a bold criticism of the system.



59%

We found that most respondents (212, or 59%) agree that they feel safe in the workspace



20%

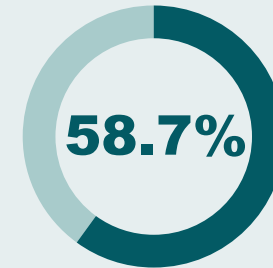
About 20% of respondents (combining strongly disagree and disagree) do not feel safe.

Qualitative findings, however, reveal that female creatives, especially new female creatives, often encounter unsafe working relationships with colleagues, particularly those in higher positions. Most of the threats they face pertain to sexual exploitation. The following KII interviewee mentioned that demands from men discourage female creatives from working in the sector:

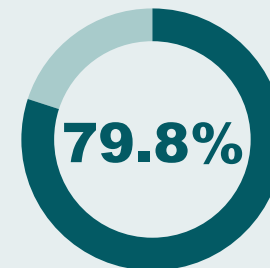
Many directors/producers ask women unnecessary questions to make them work on promotions; they tell them it will not be possible to be involved in theatre, movies, and films if they do not spend time with them. There are situations when performing arts sectors are feared, retreated, and hated due to the fear of sexual assaults. (Female, KKI Addis Ababa, 34)

Inclusion in workspaces

Most respondents (210, or (58.7%), “strongly disagreed” and “disagreed” with the statement that they felt excluded from decision-making processes in the creative workspace. In comparison, 89 respondents (24.8%) “agreed” and “strongly agreed” with the statement that they felt excluded from decision-making (See Figure 13). The remaining 15.9% of respondents were neutral. In addition, our survey result shows that many respondents agree (51.7%) or strongly agree (19.3%) that they feel included and valued during collaborative projects.

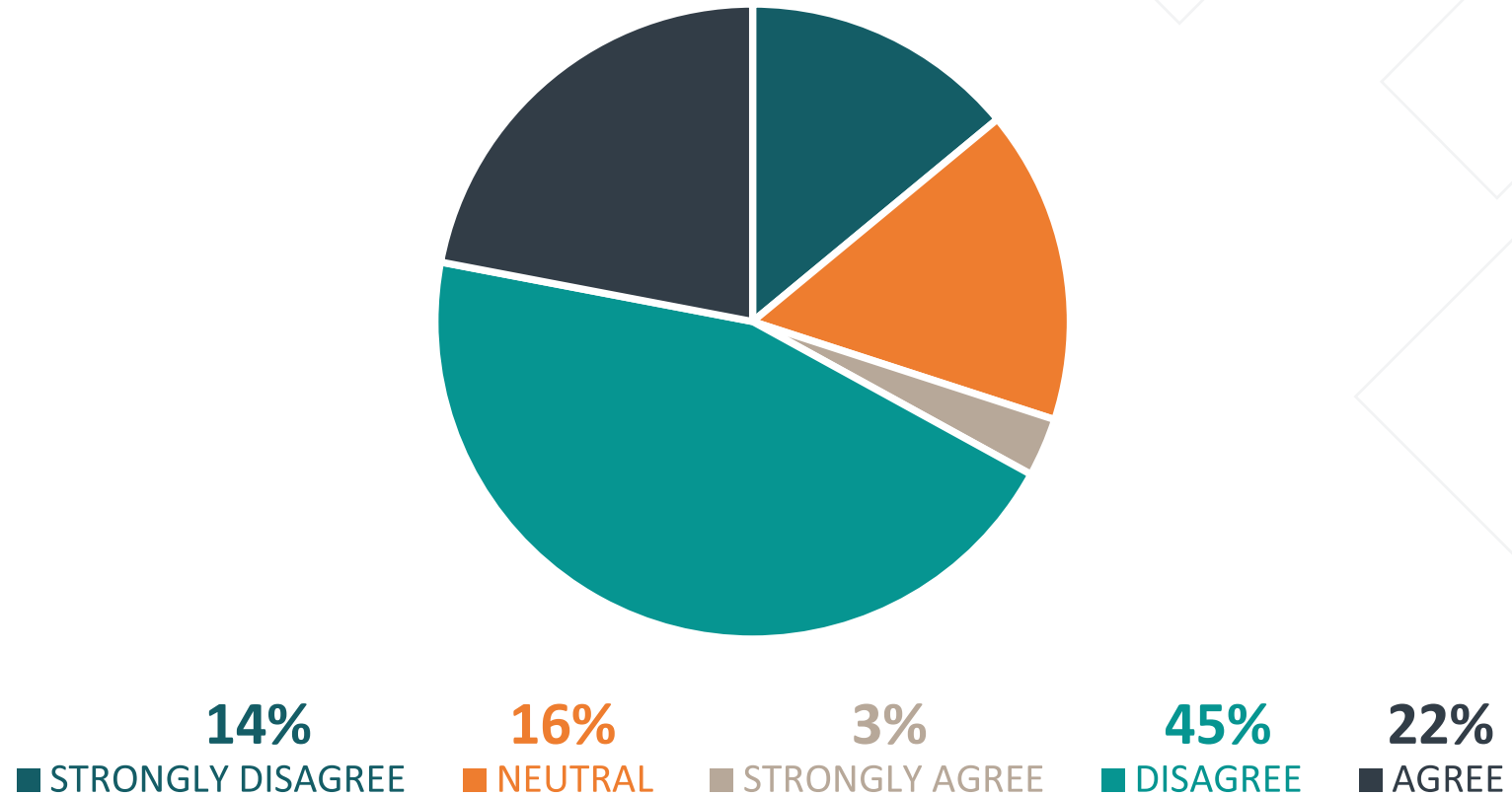


Most respondents (210, or (58.7%), “strongly disagreed” and “disagreed” with the statement that they felt excluded from decision-making processes in the creative workspace.



Crosstab analysis reveals that respondents who report their workspaces are mostly women feel more included and valued during collaborative projects (79.8%)

Figure 13: Participants' Perception of Inclusion in Creative Workspaces



Crosstab analysis reveals that respondents who report their workspaces are mostly women feel more included and valued during collaborative projects (79.8%) compared to those who report their workspace is primarily men (74.9%) and gender balanced 68.6%.

6. Discussion

6.1 Emerging Issues in the Creative Industry

The findings show that female creatives in Ethiopia endure a complex and contradictory creative landscape that exhibits signs of progress amid systemic and socio-cultural challenges.

i. Signs of progress

Despite numerous barriers, the creative sector is showing signs of positive development. Female creatives are achieving economic empowerment and agency by navigating social stigma and stereotypes at all levels, including from family and partners, to pursue their creative work. Some of them show progression and independence, and some have established their own companies and, in turn, created opportunities for the next generation of artists. This progress is fueled by self-development and innovation, as many creatives are self-taught or apply skills from outside formal training to succeed in the absence of robust institutional support.

Several factors are enabling this progress. Social media has emerged as a critical platform for visibility and opportunity, as it allows creatives to circumvent traditional gatekeepers. Coupled with this are gradually changing perceptions about women's abilities and a powerful trend of using art as a tool for resistance against the challenges they face.

ii. The core contradiction: A hostile yet satisfying workplace

The most striking finding is the contradiction within the workplace environment. On one hand, female creatives face a pervasive culture of harassment and discrimination, enduring uncomfortable and sexualized comments about their appearance and private life. Many reported facing severe forms of sexual harassment, from inappropriate gestures to unwanted physical touching and forced sexual propositions. Gender discrimination is systemic, with many respondents being assigned tasks unrelated to their roles and knowing colleagues who were denied jobs for refusing sexual advances. Discrimination during job interviews is widespread. It involves inappropriate questions about marital status and family planning.



Wespite numerous barriers, the creative sector is showing signs of positive development. Female creatives are achieving economic empowerment and agency by navigating social stigma and stereotypes at all levels, including from family and partners, to pursue their creative work.

On the other hand, many female creatives report high levels of job satisfaction and dignity. A large majority describe their work environment as dignified, safe, inclusive, and providing positive relationships among workplace colleagues. Most report feeling safe and valued, and many express general satisfactions with their jobs. They recognize opportunities for professional growth and appreciation for their unique talents. Those in female-dominated workplaces reported slightly higher feelings of inclusion and being valued compared to those in male-dominated spaces.

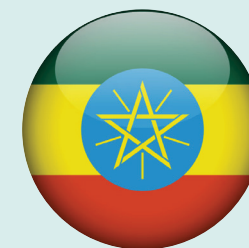
iii. Overarching structural challenges: Geography and mobility

Behind workplace tensions are broader structural challenges that limit opportunity. A significant geographic inequality exists between Addis Ababa and regional cities. As one informant from Bahir Dar explained, creatives outside the capital face limited opportunities, a lack of professional networks, and security issues. This creates a *de facto* gender-based disadvantage: While male counterparts can relocate to Addis Ababa for better prospects, many women are unable to make that move due to family responsibilities and safety concerns, which further leads to a sense of untapped potential and being “left behind.”

6.2. Creative Subsector: Situations, Perceptions and Key Challenges

Ethiopia has immense potential in the creative sector. The expansion of art clubs, cultural centers, and increased participation by young creatives has played a significant role, and the industry is showing signs of growth. Moreover, growing social media engagement and innovative business models have revitalized Ethiopia’s rich creative potential and contributed significantly to positive developments within the industry. According to Selam Ethiopia, the growth observed in the music sector reflects a synergy between “cultural roots and the digital revolution.” At the same time, Ethiopia’s creative sector is still widely considered a nascent industry. Our findings suggest that many creative subsectors lack the capacity to compete effectively both regionally and globally. For example, the film industry in Ethiopia is unable to compete with similar industries, such as Nigeria’s Nollywood and the global giant Hollywood in the United States.

Ethiopia’s lack of competitiveness in the creative industry is linked to structural limitations. First, limited formal training programs, experience sharing opportunities, and platforms to showcase talents have affected its competitiveness. This is particularly pronounced at the regional level. While the creative industries are present across various regions of Ethiopia, opportunities and infrastructure are concentrated in Addis Ababa. Study participants in regional cities noted that this neglect of regional

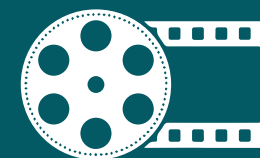


Ethiopia has immense potential in the creative sector. The expansion of art clubs, cultural centers, and increased participation by young creatives has played a significant role, and the industry is showing signs of growth.

and rural potential creatives results in uneven development and inequitable contributions within the sector in the country. Our findings on the lack of formal training opportunities as a critical challenge to the sector's progress align with a previous study that shows how the lack of formal training has significantly affected the growth of the filming industry in Ethiopia.⁴⁸ In addition, policy gaps have contributed to the underutilization of the sector's potential and limited global exposure. This has been the major limitation in the film sector despite the adoption of the Film Policy in 2017. According to the British Council's report,⁴⁹ the policy, among others, lacks a clear strategy for participation in the international or African market.

The creative sector in Africa has potential for women to earn a livelihood and express themselves, challenge societal norms, and promote empowerment.⁵⁰ However, our findings highlight that gender inequities in the creative sector in Ethiopia are compounded by prevalent socio-cultural norms and systemic marginalization ranging from household to national levels. Our findings suggest that female creatives' contributions in the creative industry are often undervalued, and that they are denied adequate support at all levels of society. Further, a persistent negative societal perception and stereotypes discourage female creatives from pursuing creative arts. For example, creative roles such as dancing were often stigmatized, and female dancers and performers reported facing stereotypes and being labeled as "indecent." Such stigma affects not only how others perceive these women, but also how they view themselves, leading to self-stigma and reluctance to disclose their profession. While females who reported stigma and stereotypes in our study were traditional dancers, a study from another location reports the social stigma of females' exotic dancing. Chalkley (2005) found that female exotic dancers are stigmatized for doing "dirty work."⁵¹

Workplace challenges and gender-based discrimination present female creatives with additional challenges. The creative workspace is male-dominated, though the degree of male dominance varies by subsector. Fields such as creative writing, painting, and film production, particularly in leadership roles, have fewer women, whereas theater, dance, and modeling see higher female representation. This reflects broader social norms that question women's abilities and undervalue their contributions in some sectors. Study participants disclosed how the workplace perpetuates discrimination of female creatives by linking opportunities with sexual favors and by putting in place practices that apparently exclude them from big projects. Despite these challenges, survey data show that women feel safe, respected, and valued in their workplaces, which are often dominated by male work colleagues, even though they reported feeling safer working with female colleagues.



Fields such as creative writing, painting, and film production, particularly in leadership roles, have fewer women, whereas theater, dance, and modeling see higher female representation.

6.3. Time of Work

The data indicate that most female creatives work full-time, but their participation varies depending on age, marital status, and the number of children they have. While respondents with one child are likely to work full-time, respondents with two or more children tend to work part-time. This could be explained by various factors, such as the need for greater flexibility, childcare responsibilities, or financial dynamics within a household that change with family size. This reflects broader trends in creative industries where women, primarily those with greater family care responsibilities, are more likely to work part-time or exit the workforce as family demands increase.^{52,53} Flexible and precarious working conditions in the creative sector can also exacerbate this challenge for mothers with multiple children.⁵⁴

Education is another key factor for women's work time. Our study found that women with a bachelor's degree are the largest group among both full-time and part-time female creatives. This suggests that a higher level of education helps women enter and remain in the creative sector by providing them with necessary skills and qualifications. However, even among highly educated women, family responsibilities, particularly the need for childcare, can limit their ability to sustain full-time work. Studies show that while education increases women's access to creative professions, it does not evade barriers related to caregiving or traditional expectations surrounding women's roles in the family and workplace.⁵⁵

6.4. Use of Social Media

Social media is an essential tool for women in creative work, particularly for full-time workers looking to enhance their visibility, build connections, and find opportunities. This aligns with Duffy's concept of "aspirational labor," where success on creative platforms depends on extensive, often unseen, work to build an online persona and audience, all in pursuit of future rewards.⁵⁶ Similar dynamics are seen among precarious creative workers⁵⁷, who use social media for community and self-promotion while navigating a volatile gig economy that demands constant self-branding.⁵⁸ Our findings show that social media serves as a lifeline for creative women whose opportunities are constrained by lack of support, rural urban inequality and conflict. Previous study indicate that social media is a lifeline to generate funding and capital for creative work, to directly reach their clients and fans and promote their products and skills.⁶⁰



Our findings show that social media serves as a lifeline for creative women whose opportunities are constrained by lack of support, rural urban inequality and conflict.

6.5. Challenges at Three Levels: Analytical View of Gendered Barriers to the Creative Sector in Ethiopia

The landscape of the creative sector in Ethiopia is promising, yet underutilized. This nascent industry is not only contributing below its potential to the national economy but also continues to marginalize women's participation and benefit. Although it is reported that half of the Ethiopian population is women, the representation of women in creative sectors is dominated by men. In addition, women's participation in the creative industry is affected by micro (household and interpersonal relationships), meso (community and organizational-level processes and logics), and macro challenges (structural and policy-level factors).

i. micro-level challenges

The immediate challenges to women creatives in Ethiopia emanate from the influence of household-level relationships, including parents (for single young creatives), and partners for married women creatives. Among married female creatives, the impact of their husbands on their decisions is substantial, to the point where many consider quitting their jobs. This influence results from husbands' sexualization of females' participation in a male-dominated workspace, further compelling females to feel discouraged and undervalued. This finding on the influence of parents and husbands reflects the patriarchal family structure that characterizes Ethiopian society. Studies show that these structures limit women's agency, as husbands exert control over their wives' participation in the labor market.⁵⁹ Our research also found that the prevalence of parental influence on creative females stems from the view that female creatives' engagement in the creative arts is a transgression of cultural norms. This conservative view of parents toward female creatives reflects a broader societal expectation that women's primary roles are to undertake domestic chores such as caregiving and homemaking responsibilities.

The saying "women's work is never done" clearly reflects the experience of creative women who face unique, gender-specific challenges related to balancing work and family. Their domestic responsibilities often interfere with their professional duties, such as childcare. This is consistent with research that shows how domestic responsibilities, primarily childcare, interfere with professional roles for Ethiopian women, thereby contributing to difficulties in maintaining a work-family balance.⁶⁰ Conflicting demands between care responsibility and professional responsibility limited females in some creatives sectors and led them to consider withdrawing from the latter. Other studies also show how demands on female creatives in both productive and reproductive roles contributed to gender inequality in the creative sector. For example, Dent's article,⁶¹ "Feeling devalued: the creative industries, motherhood, gender and class inequality"



The landscape of the creative sector in Ethiopia is promising, yet underutilized. This nascent industry is not only contributing below its potential to the national economy but also continues to marginalize women's participation and benefit.

shows how childcare responsibility influenced withdrawal and underrepresentation of women creatives in the industry. However, generic equality policies often overlook the specific gendered challenges women face, creating another barrier for creative women (discussed in more detail in the “macro level challenges” section).

ii. meso-level challenges

Female creatives also face challenges at meso level (community and workspaces). Community-level challenges are related to the undervaluation of their work and the undermining of their capabilities. These norms are indirect and, unlike family and partners, do not explicitly restrict creative individuals from pursuing creative arts. However, through stereotypes, stigma, and labeling, community barriers create a hostile environment for women to practice creative art. These normative processes serve as symbolic violence⁶², “more subtle form of domination than physical or direct violence, but equally powerful in the reproduction and perpetuation of social inequalities⁶³. Unlike direct constraints such as household restrictions, community-level barriers operate through subtle normative pressures that shape behavior without explicit prohibition. Young female creatives consequently tend to internalize societal devaluation of their abilities and contributions, harboring shame about their identities as creatives. Pervasive community norms can also foster the perception that some creative subsectors are only suitable for men, further suppressing women’s creative ambitions and calling into question the dignity of creative work. These attitudes restrict opportunities and perpetuate stigma, thereby making it difficult for artists to pursue their passions with pride and recognition. Gendered moral judgments and embedded patriarchal ideologies legitimize women’s exclusion and marginalization in creative sectors.

Creative workspaces are also found to be dominated by males. Women face discrimination during interviews and are expected to provide support in auxiliary roles instead of assuming responsibilities that require the application of their skills and talents. They are excluded from decision-making or assigned menial, gendered tasks such as making coffee or cleaning. These discriminatory practices restrict women’s entry into and sustained contribution to the creative subsector. This finding is in line with a study⁶⁴ which shows that among 469 registered members of the Ethiopian Authors’ Association, women accounted for only 17%. Similarly, in public theater houses, women constitute just 38% in Oromia and 24% in other regions, though they comprise nearly half (49.6 %) in Addis Ababa. The study also found that, outside Addis Ababa, women are predominantly in supportive roles such as makeup and administrative support and are absent in key creative positions like playwrights and directors. These organizational practices not only reinforce occupational segregation but also restrict women’s upward mobility and contribute to persistent inequality in the sector.⁶⁵



Creative workspaces are also found to be dominated by males.

Women face discrimination during interviews and are expected to provide support in auxiliary roles instead of assuming responsibilities that require the application of their skills and talents.

In addition, harassment in creative workplaces was found to be prevalent. Harassment took many forms, from inappropriate comments about appearance, marital status, and sexual life to sexual propositions, unwanted touching, and coercion. Furthermore, the prioritization of females' bodies, beauty, and physique over talent was reported in some creative subsectors. This finding aligns with a study which found that the portrayal of creative professionals as predominantly masculine subjects hinders women from engaging and flourishing in the creative industries.⁶⁶ Another striking pattern is how sexual harassment is chronic, including of married women and mothers. This finding aligns with broader evidence from Ethiopian workplaces, where sexual harassment is a serious concern. A systematic review and meta-analysis of workplace sexual violence in Ethiopia found a 33% prevalence of sexual harassment among various workplaces, including the high rates among female university staff (49%) and sex workers (28%).⁶⁷ Yet the context of female's sexual harassment in creative sectors remains rarely explored in Ethiopia.

Sexual harassment was not only widespread, but also persistent and normalized, as it cut across various creative fields. Women working in theater, film, dance, and even traditional crafts recounted how harassment is embedded in workplace culture. This was also found in a qualitative study on the hospitality workplace in Bahir Dar in Ethiopia,⁶⁸ where harassment victims reported not knowing if they were facing harassment, as they treated it as just a normal part of the hospitality job.⁶⁹ Similarly, another study noted how the ritual of “the party life”—social networking activities such as coffee meet-ups, meals, and clubbing—in the fashion industry exposes young models to sexual harassment in everyday life.⁷⁰ Studies in many African countries show the significant prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace, the majority of which are never reported due to fear of retaliation and organizational apathy. About 50% of sexual harassment incidents women face in Africa took place in their workplace, and 70% of these cases were not reported.⁷¹ Our findings indicate that the tolerance of harassment is influenced by fear of stigma and cultural norms that discourage open discussion. This was reflected in our qualitative data, where many participants refrained from discussing their own experiences and instead referred to harassment faced by others. Furthermore, many women tolerate these challenges because their work provides financial independence, societal respect, opportunities for supporting families, and confidence, which are vital to their dignity (although other participants also believed dignity stems from self-respect and professional integrity). This suggests that some workplace difficulties are accepted in exchange for meeting critical economic and social needs.

Different studies show how socio-economic, structural, and workplace situations perpetuate silence or normalization of female harassment. One study indicates that normalization tends to be common in precarious, competitive work environments with inadequate regulation and a clear protection system. Amid these structural



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shortcomings, females consider tolerance as the only strategy for survival³⁵ and social mobility in a highly competitive industry.³⁴ A comprehensive analysis of why harassment is tolerated in the creative industry reveals reasons such as competition for work, industry culture, gender power inequality, and reliance on informal networks.³⁵

iii. macro-level challenges

Most survey respondents do not perceive that they are paid differently because of their gender, despite believing that underpayment is a significant concern in the creative sector.⁷² The analysis of Ethiopian labor force data showed that women earn less than men across the wage distribution through occupational segregation, where women are crowded into lower-paying jobs, particularly in female-dominated occupations. This occupational clustering contributes to what is known as the “sticky floor” effect, where women disproportionately remain in low-wage and low-mobility positions. This further limit their earnings and career progress despite appearing to face no explicit pay discrimination.⁷³ This unquestioned occupational segregation by gender can help explain how gender-based barriers persist in more subtle forms without overt recognition of a pay gap.

Structural challenges stem from the government’s limited support for the creative sector. Additionally, the lack of comprehensive policy frameworks to address gender barriers contribute to the gender pay gap. Insufficient policies and programs also hinder the creation of an enabling environment for skill development, empowerment, investment in regional infrastructure, and training at public universities. The Government of Ethiopia adopted a cultural policy in 2016. The policy, among other objectives, aims to transform Ethiopian cultural resources into a creative cultural industry through the use of technology, produce skilled human resources, and build institutional capacity in the cultural sector. The policy has also outlined strategies required for cultural industries under sub-articles 2.2.⁷⁴ However, the policy has not outlined strategies to include and support women, who are marginalized in the cultural and creative sectors. Despite policy pledges, Ethiopia’s public funding in the cultural sector is inadequate. According to Selam Ethiopia, in the 2022/23 fiscal year, Ethiopia allocated only 0.0847% of its national budget to the cultural industry, which is below the 1% benchmark recommended by the African Union, of which Ethiopia is a member state.⁷⁵

Ethiopia has endured years of internal conflict and redirected its national budget to fund war and post war rehabilitation.^{76,77} The conflict in Tigray has led to huge military spending, and diverted national budget funding away from social services and creative sectors.⁷⁸ Conflict is underway in Amhara and Oromia Regions, and simmering tension still exists in Tigray. Thus, conflict is impacting creative work through diminished budget allocation, restricting mobility, and limiting opportunities for showcasing creative works.



Most survey respondents do not perceive that they are paid differently because of their gender, despite believing that underpayment is a significant concern in the creative sector.

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the creative sector in Ethiopia is situated at a pivotal crossroads: energy for transformation but hampered by gendered barriers and systemic inequities. Young female creatives continue to navigate a landscape marked by intersecting challenges emanating from relational, community, workplace, socio-cultural, and structural barriers.

A critical takeaway is the paradoxical coexistence of empowerment and marginalization in the experiences of creative women. On one hand, many describe a sense of professional fulfilment, pride, and creative autonomy, citing the joy of pursuing their artistic vision and contributing meaningfully to their communities. On the other hand, these positive experiences are muted by gender-based harassment, selective inclusion in opportunities, and the undervaluation of their work. This dual reality is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a manifestation of deeply rooted social and systemic patterns shaped by gender norms, policy blind spots, and an uneven distribution of resources and infrastructure in the creative sector. The fact that women can feel that they are simultaneously thriving and marginalized underscores the complexity of their professional landscape, where progress is tangible but persistently constrained by structural inequities that remain largely unaddressed.

Women's ability to access leadership, fair compensation, and creative autonomy remains tenuous, particularly given the persistent undervaluation of creative work, the prioritization of beauty over talent, lack of family-work balance, and the scarcity of supportive institutional frameworks.

Finally, the research highlights that the creative sector's development and its capacity to contribute meaningfully to economic and social change will require addressing the significant barriers inhibiting the full participation and advancement of young women.



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8. Recommendations

Existing challenges female creatives face are multifaceted and intersectional operating at micro, meso, and macro levels. As a result, effective interventions must be designed to address these interconnected challenges at the three stages. The following recommendations present policy, operational and awareness related interventions to be undertaken by different actors placed at different positions:

First, The Government of Ethiopia must address the structural challenges of policy gaps, inadequate funding, and systemic inequality. Although national cultural and film policies are in place, relevant ministries such as the Ministry of Culture and Sports and the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs should consult with Parliament to amend strategies and directives that implement gender equity targets in the creative sector. To address pervasive harassment reinforced by the absence of clear legal resources, Parliament should enact specific legislation that legally defines sexual harassment and discrimination in the context of creative workplaces and outlines the establishment of an independent, fast-track tribunal for complaints. The law should mandate all creative entities to have anti-harassment policy, monitoring system and provide protection against retaliation of victims who expose harassment. Although progress has been made in recent years to integrate gender considerations into Ethiopia's key creative policies, only about half of these policies currently include a meaningful gender focus (see Appendix 1). Moreover, in many cases, gender sensitivity within the country's creative sector policies is limited to simply acknowledging the need to increase women's participation in creative industries, without outlining concrete strategies or actions.

In addition, female creatives face economic precarity while pursuing their work. This problem requires intersectoral collaboration. For example, the Ministry of Finance, in collaboration with financial and development partners, should establish seed funding and grants for female-led creative enterprises and regional creative hubs. The government must allocate a percentage of the national cultural budget (targeting the 1% AU benchmark) to this fund, with a transparent application process prioritizing projects in regional cities and those addressing economic, digital, and sociocultural barriers.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education can address the critical gaps in formal training and geographic inequality by transforming public universities into regional creative hubs, where female creatives can pursue their talents. While creative training currently exists in various institutions, universities possess



1%

The government must allocate a percentage of the national cultural budget (targeting the 1% AU benchmark) to this fund, with a transparent application process prioritizing projects in regional cities and those addressing economic, digital, and sociocultural barriers.

the resources required to scale up existing initiatives. As part of their community service mandate, these universities can establish creative incubation centers that nurture emerging female creatives by capitalizing on local potential. In addition, these university-based hubs can directly tackle the shortage of formal training and bridge the opportunity gap for female creatives outside Addis Ababa by introducing gender-responsive creative entrepreneurship modules and offering certificate based short-term training opportunities.

While government actions can address the underlying sources of these challenges. However, its measures cannot be effective without the adequate involvement of meso-level actors. These include stakeholders in creative industries, creative associations and employers. These actors are crucial for addressing the hostile workplace culture, including gender-based discrimination, harassment, and occupational segregation. All leading creative associations, such as the Ethiopian Authors' Association and the Filmmakers' Association, should develop and enforce a standardized Code of Conduct on harassment and discrimination. The associations should also provide training to their members and produce reports on complaints and resolutions. They should also establish a mentorship program that brings together emerging female creatives and female leaders in the creative sector to share experiences in decision-making roles such as directing, producing, and playwriting. This program should include sponsorship, where senior leaders actively advocate for the career advancement of their mentees, thereby connecting them to opportunities that would otherwise be inaccessible.

Finally, community groups and civil society organizations (CSOs) can help address meso and micro level socio-cultural barriers and stigma faced by female creatives. CSOs and partners should use mainstream and social media and feature successful female creatives to challenge stereotypes and combat stigma. By featuring successful female creatives, they can showcase the dignity and economic contribution of creative work, they can raise awareness that changes community and family perceptions. It is an important measure to address pressure from household and partners and the lack of agency experienced by creative females.



community groups and civil society organizations (CSOs) can help address meso and micro level socio-cultural barriers and stigma faced by female creatives. CSOs and partners should use mainstream and social media and feature successful female creatives to challenge stereotypes and combat stigma.

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Appendix 1. Some Key Creative Sector Policies in Ethiopia

Legal/Policy Document	Core objectives	Gender considerations
Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage Proclamation, No. 209/2000	- Promote scientific registration and supervision of cultural heritage. - Protect cultural heritage against human-caused and natural disasters. - Leverage the benefits of cultural heritage for socio-economic development.	No gender considerations
Federal Republic of Ethiopia National Youth Policy, 2004	Facilitate the active participation of youth in economic, social, and cultural activities.	Incorporates a focus on women and girls, including pastoralists, individuals living with HIV/AIDS, the physically and mentally disabled, victims of social injustices, and orphaned youth.
Copyright and Neighboring Rights Protection Proclamation No. 410/2004	- Provide legal protection for the rights of authors and creators. - Foster an environment that is conducive to creativity, innovation, and the production of cultural and educational materials. - Protect and promote cultural heritage through copyright safeguards.	No gender considerations
Trademark Registration and Protection Proclamation No. 501/2006	Regulate trademarks to protect creators' rights and promote fair competition.	No gender considerations
The National Information and Communication technology (ICT) Policy and Strategy (2016)	- Develop, modernize, and expand telecommunications infrastructure and services. - Establish an information infrastructure. - Promote the effective use of the national radio frequency spectrum.	Asserts the need for equitable and affordable access to ICT among youth and women.
National Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy, 2010	Promote the development and application of science, technology, and innovation.	Highlights the need for action to increase women's and girls' participation in science and technology.

Legal/Policy Document	Core objectives	Gender considerations
Federal Micro and Small Enterprises (MSE) Development Agency Establishment Council of Ministers Regulation No 201/2011	- Assist and coordinate institutions that provide support to MSE development, with a view to making the sector competitive and sustainable. - Create job opportunities and maintain equitable distribution of wealth by increasing the incomes of society engaged in the MSE sector.	No gender considerations
Micro and Small Enterprise Act, 2016	Promote and support micro, small, and medium enterprises, including creative businesses.	Includes provisions to support women and youth-owned businesses.
Federal Republic of Ethiopia Proclamation on Advertisement (2012)	- Contribute to healthy market competition. - Define the rights and obligations of advertising agents, advertisement disseminators, and advertisers.	No gender considerations
Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Protection Amendment Proclamation, No. 872/2014	Provide legal protection that is compatible with the ever-growing development of copyright and neighboring rights.	No gender considerations
Growth and Transformation Plan II (2015-2020)	- Promote cultural and creative industries for economic growth and national identity. - Enhance the role of culture and tourism in socio-economic development. - Protect and preserve cultural heritage as a driver for tourism and creative activities.	Emphasizes the equitable participation of women and youth in creative work, and includes a focus on addressing gendered challenges in accessing resources and opportunities.
Cultural Policy of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, 2016	- Study, document, protect, and preserve the cultural heritage of Ethiopia's nations and nationalities. - Transform cultural resources into creative industries using modern technology. - Establish a statistical data system for the cultural sector.	No gender considerations

Legal/Policy Document	Core objectives	Gender considerations
Ethiopian Film Policy of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, 2017	Facilitate the role of films in building political, economic, and social benefits for the country.	No gender considerations
Information Communications Technology Policy of Ethiopia (2019)	- Develop the global competitiveness of the local ICT industry and facilitate its role as an engine of growth. - Promote ICT use in key sectors, including agriculture, industry, and services. - Transform Ethiopia into a knowledge- and information-based society and economy.	Includes a focus on addressing gender inequality by empowering women and girls through capacity building in ICT.
National Arts and Culture Strategy (2020)	Enhance and promote artistic creativity and cultural expression.	No gender considerations
Ethiopian Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy and Strategy 2020	Provide technical and vocational education and training to all citizens in a way that is demand-driven, high quality, and relevant.	- Recognizes the need to ensure that females have equitable access to TVET programs. - Emphasizes the need for a supportive environment for female students in TVET institutions. - Focuses on training and empowering female instructors to serve as role models for female students to enroll in TVET programs.
National Film Policy, 2021	Facilitate investment in the film industry and foster local talent.	Includes a focus on the need for inclusive opportunities for women, as well as youth and marginalized groups.
Digital Ethiopia Strategy 2025	- Promote inclusive prosperity by leveraging digital tools and technologies. - Integrate ICT into creative sectors to stimulate innovation and job creation. - Align digital transformation with Ethiopia's national development goals.	Emphasizes achieving gender inclusivity in digital initiatives, closing the gender gap with respect to access to digital resources and skills, and promoting women's representation in creative technology ecosystems.

