

Evidence Brief

GENDER INEQUITIES IN ETHIOPIA'S CREATIVE SECTOR

Key Evidence from BtS Research and
Gender-Lensed Mapping Report.



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Authors

Esther Omoyele, Nakayovu Sumayya, Getnet Tadele, Garedew Yilma

2.0 Executive summary

This evidence brief derives from a study of young women creatives across major urban centres in Ethiopia, highlighting their role as keepers of the country's rich heritage while detailing the persistent gendered constraints shaping their careers. While the creative sector is a growing source of job opportunities and innovation, young women face systemic discrimination, under-representation in leadership, and pervasive harassment. Survey data reveals that 38.8% of respondents perceive creative workspaces as male-dominated, and 46.6% report experiencing gender-based discrimination. Significant barriers include the double burden of unpaid care work, partner restrictions, and social stigma that labels creative work as "immoral". Furthermore, 52.5% of respondents noted a lack of anti-harassment policies, and a concentration of opportunities in Addis Ababa limits the progression of regional creatives. These inequities compromise women's agency and economic development while hindering the sector's overall growth. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated, multi-level action across government, industry associations, and civil society. Recommended interventions include adopting gender-responsive policies, enforcing anti-harassment frameworks, investing in regional creative hubs, and expanding digital literacy programmes to ensure a safe and equitable creative economy.

The Behind Scenes Ethiopia Study: Young women and gender-based inequities in Africa's creative sector (BtS Ethiopia study) highlights increased

“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)

participation of Ethiopia's largest youth population across various creative domains, from visual arts, music, art and crafts, performing arts, and digital content creation to traditional cultural expressions, leveraging digital technologies and hence increasing youth engagement. However, evidence from this study and the *Gender-Lensed Mapping of the Creative Sector* in Ethiopia shows a gap in women's representation with various challenges that have restricted their access to opportunities within the creative industries. Both reports show the inherent structural inequities, regional inequalities, systematic discrimination, and gendered social norms that influence women's engagement in the sector and their economic outcomes. These obstacles, evident at micro, meso, and macro levels, act as a barrier to young female creatives' journeys to flourish in the sector.



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3.0 Introduction

In Ethiopia, the creative sector is a vital engine for socioeconomic development, innovation, and inclusive growth, serving as a primary source of employment for the nation's large youth population. In 2012, the country's "copyright industries" generated \$1.3 billion, accounting for 4.73% of the National GDP, with the potential to quadruple by 2030. Young women play a central role in this evolution, increasingly leveraging digital technologies to engage in domains such as music, fashion, digital content creation, and traditional crafts. Despite this potential, the sector remains characterised by deep-rooted structural inequities and gendered social norms that restrict women's access to opportunities and leadership roles.

This evidence brief highlights key evidence from the Behind-the-Scenes Ethiopia study and the Gender-Lensed Mapping of the Creative Sector, conducted by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation and the Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA). The research examined the lived experiences and challenges of 358 survey participants and 128 qualitative respondents across Addis Ababa, Adama, Bahir Dar, Hawassa, and Wolkite. Music, film and television, fashion and design, performing arts, visual arts, crafts, publishing, photography, cuisine, advertising, digital media, gaming and animation, and cultural heritage/tourism were among the many industries from which study participants were drawn.

The BtS Ethiopia studies show prevalent challenges faced by young female creatives in Ethiopia's creative sector, which include under-representation in decision-making roles, socio-cultural barriers, workplace discrimination, harassment, limited opportunities, etc. The Gender-Lensed Mapping study in particular shows gender gaps in various creative domains regarding representation and leadership roles, access to training opportunities, markets, professional and digital skills, etc.

Both studies highlighted how gender inequities in Ethiopia's creative sector compromise not only women's participation, agency, and their economic development but also the overall development of the sector. Both studies were ethically conducted using well-trained youth researchers who were meaningfully engaged and captured young female creatives' voices and other key actors in Ethiopia's creative ecosystem, using different quantitative, qualitative, and participatory methodologies. This evidence brief aims to inform policy reforms and offer actionable recommendations to enhance the meaningful participation of young female creatives in the creative sector.

“When I worked in modelling, people spread rumours. 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)

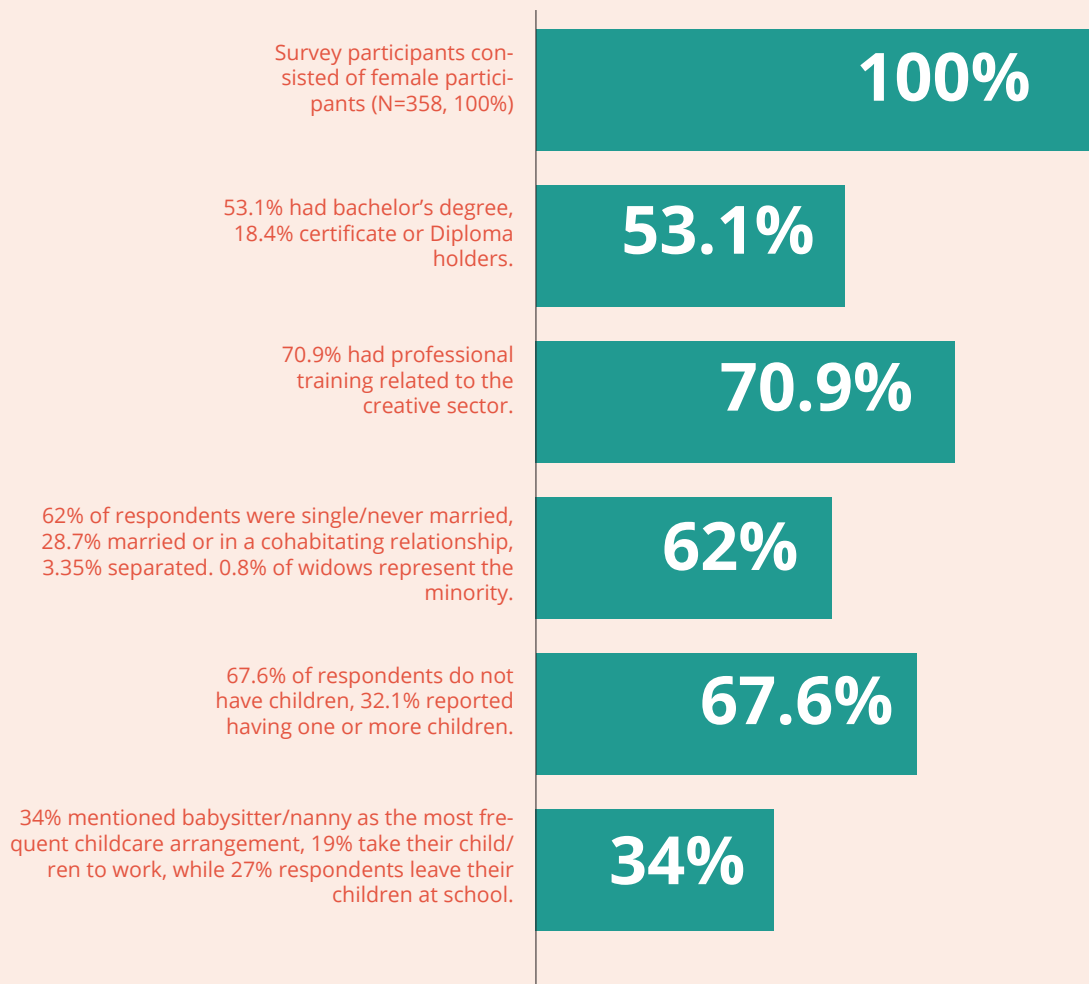


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Characteristics of Interviewed Women Creatives



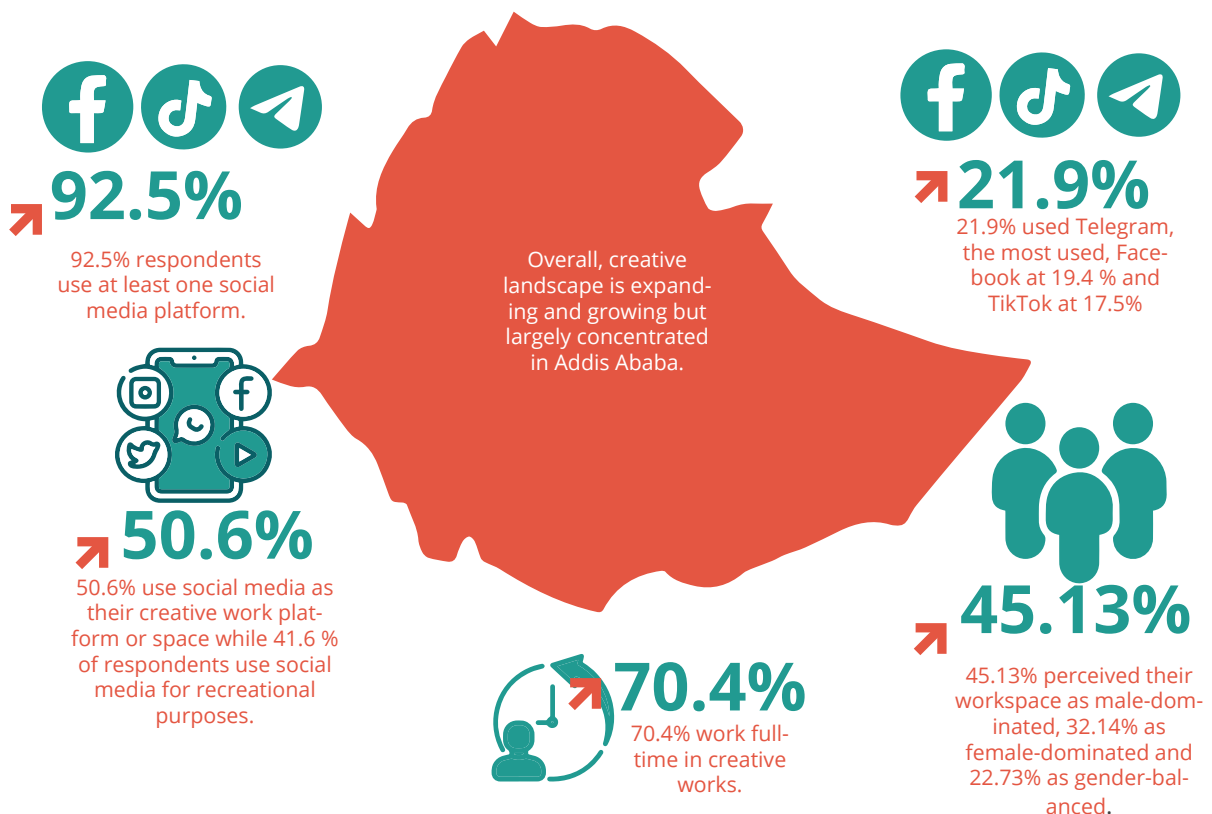
18-35

Young female creatives ranged between 18 and 35 years, with a mean age of 28 years.

“ [...] 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)

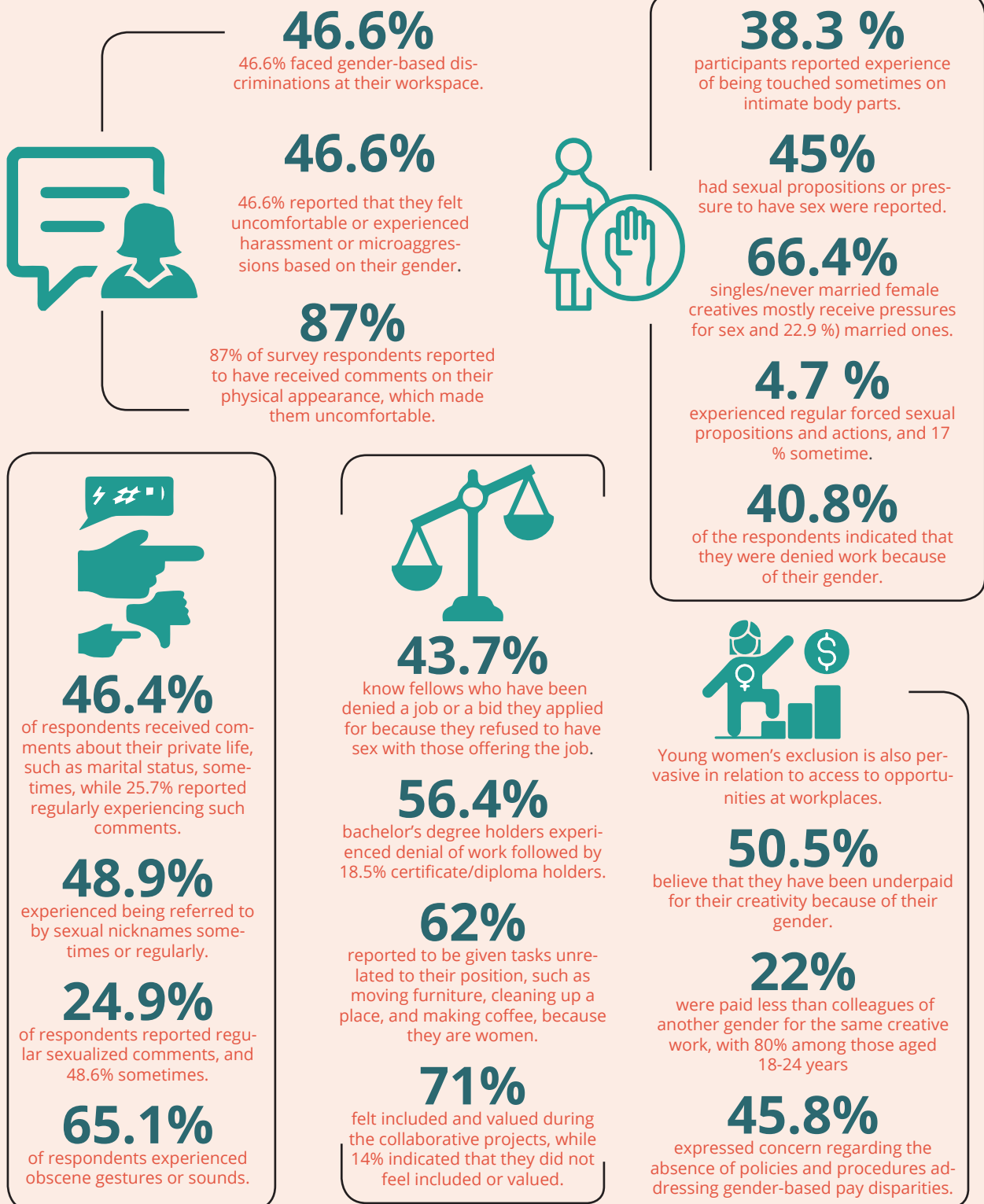
4.0 Emerging evidence

Perceptions on the state of the workspace environment



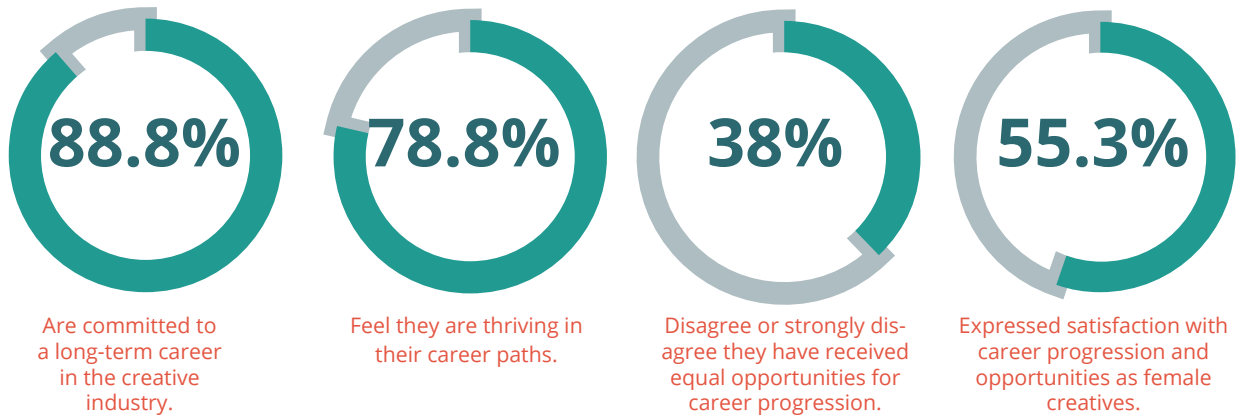
“ [...]we are reaching a stage where insulting is normal if it helps you make money. Now on TIKTOK, people are getting money by insulting each other [...] (IDI AA,35)

Workspace Challenges

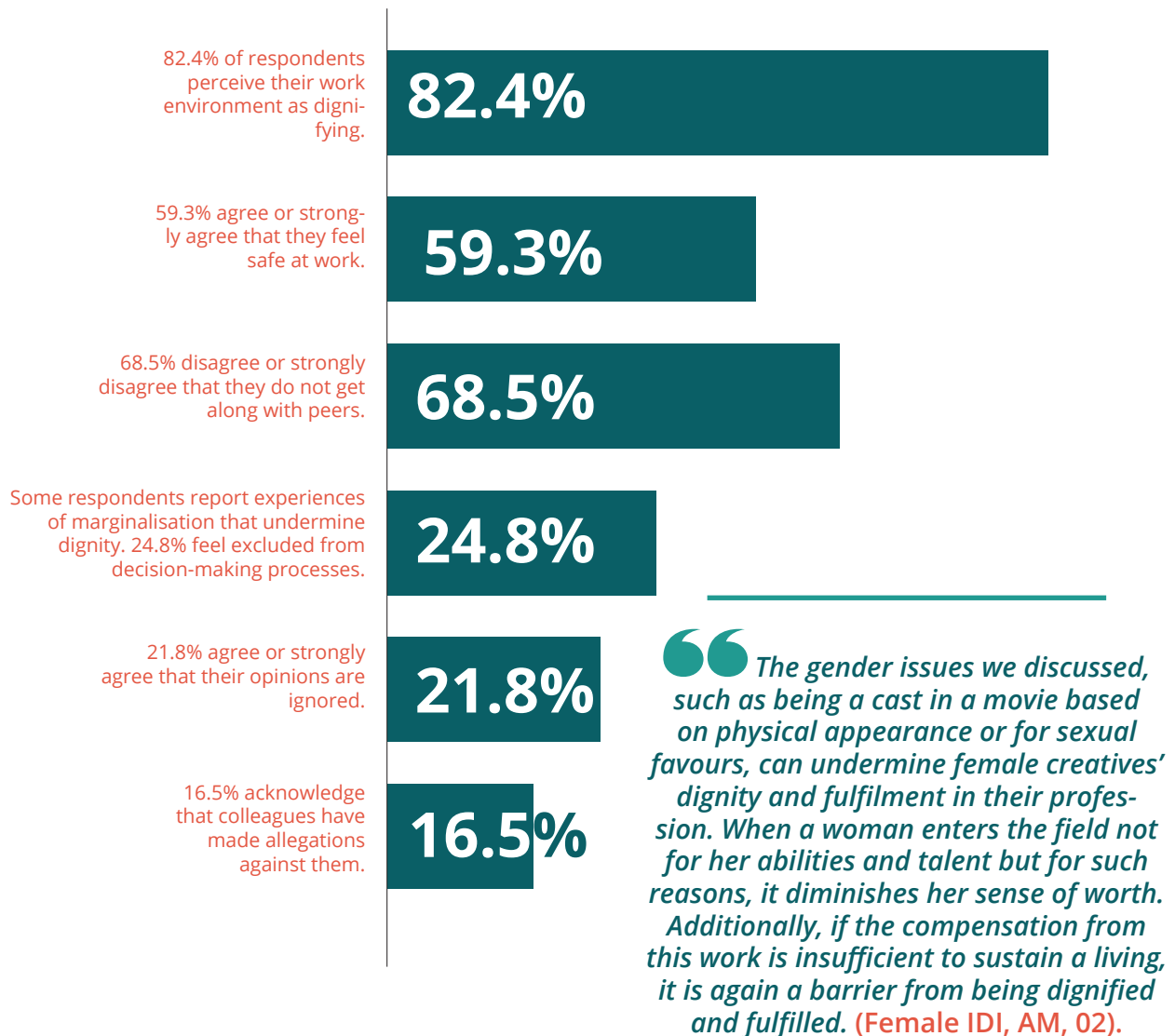


“ I have personally faced gender-based discrimination, particularly when competing for jobs or projects. I remember one instance when a potential employer hesitated to hire me, questioning whether I should be paid the same as a male artist despite my experience and skills. These biases make it harder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

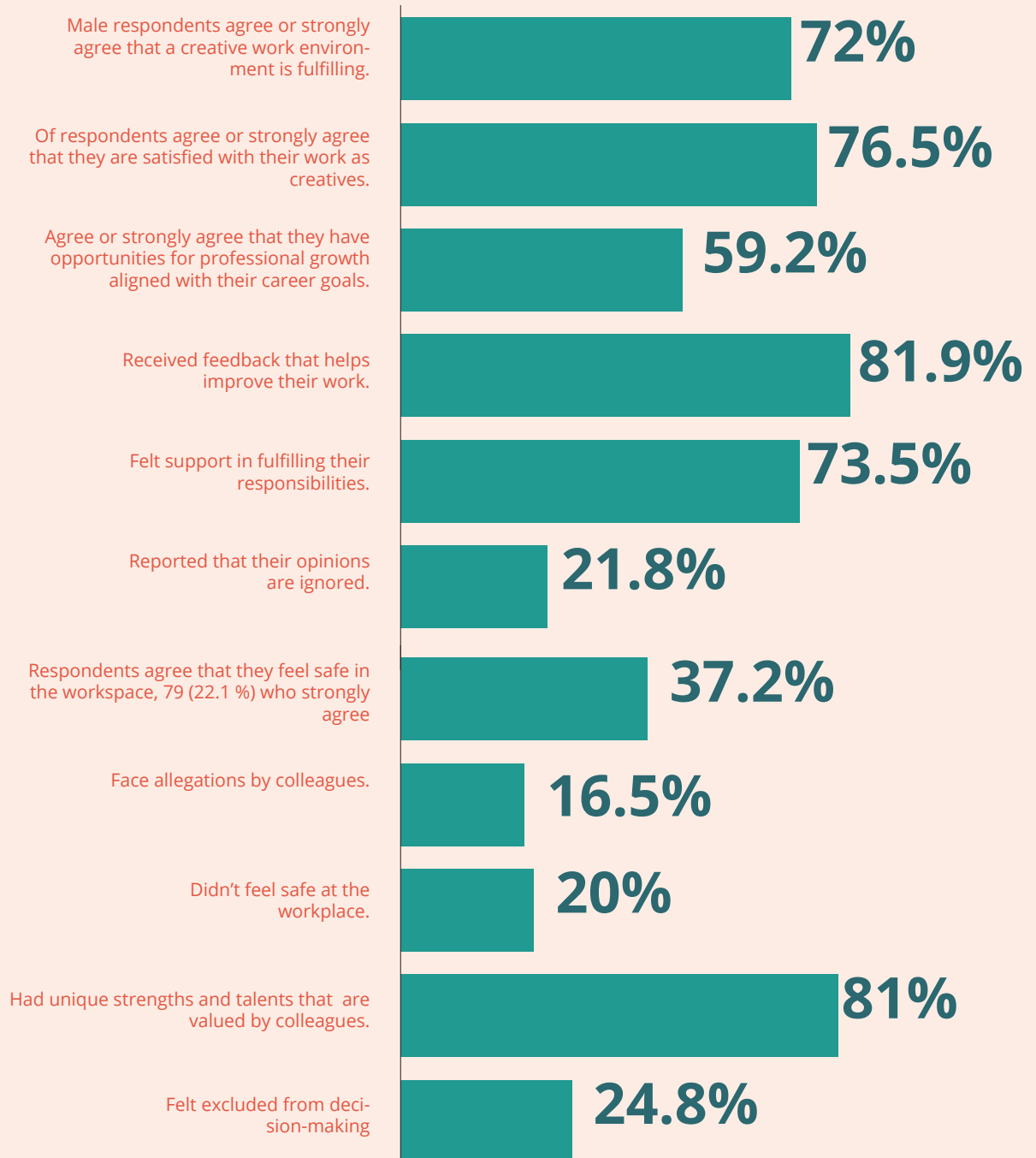
Career Expectation of Young Women creatives.



Dignifying and Fulfilling Work



Perception and experience of fulfilling work



5.0 Conclusion

Evidence indicates that Ethiopia's creative sector is growing due to the country's rich cultural legacy and technological advancements. Still, advancement is constrained by gendered and structural barriers that limit women's involvement at all levels. Women face restrictive family expectations, heavy domestic responsibilities, and patriarchal norms that reduce their ability to commit fully to creative work. At the structural level, gaps in policy, extremely low public funding, and the concentration of opportunities in Addis Ababa reinforce inequalities that disproportionately affect women, especially those living outside the capital. Although women report feeling underpaid, a statistically significant wage gap was not found; this suggests deeper issues around occupational segregation and undervaluation rather than formal pay disparities.

Despite these constraints, many women remain deeply fulfilled by their work, driven by the intrinsic value of creative expression and the collaborative spirit of the sector. The coexistence of satisfaction and marginalization highlights both the resilience of women creatives and the essential need for gender-responsive reforms. The sector's potential for inclusive growth requires coordinated, multi-level action: safer and more equitable workplaces, stronger policy frameworks, decentralized opportunities, and increased public investment. Meaningful and long-lasting progress requires the creation of an enabling environment where women can enter, maintain, and grow in their careers with safety, dignity, and institutional support.

“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.”

Policies and Pragmatic Recommendations

Gender disparities substantially restrict the growth and inclusion of Ethiopia's creative sector. Discrimination in task allocation, underpayment, and exclusion from decision-making limit women's professional agency, while high levels of harassment and the absence of workplace safeguards weaken workforce retention. Geographic inequality and domestic care burdens further marginalise women, particularly those outside the capital city. Addressing these disparities requires multi-level action by all stakeholders. Priority interventions include:

01

The Parliament and other relevant line Ministries

should integrate sector-wide equity provisions and legal protections into existing frameworks, such as the 2017 film policy and copyright laws.



Key Highlights

- ➔ The Ministry of Culture and Tourism should develop regional creative hubs, fund the construction of studios, performance venues, and exhibition spaces outside of Addis Ababa to decentralize opportunities.
- ➔ The Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs should strengthen public investment to meet the African Union's recommendation of allocating 1% of the national budget to the cultural sector, up from the current 0.0847%.
- ➔ The Ministry of Technology and Innovation should put in place digital creative infrastructure, for example, digital production tools to provide access to all creatives in Ethiopia.

02

Creative Associations and Guilds**Key Highlights**

- ➔ Establish official mentorship networks designed to train and transition young women into leadership and decision-making positions.
- ➔ Develop professional codes of conduct and clear guidelines on workplace safety to be adopted by all member organizations.
- ➔ Advocate fair pay to address the economic disparities and undervaluation of women's creative work.

03

Creative Enterprises and Workplaces**Key Highlights**

- ➔ The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, through its labor inspection and compliance units, and in collaboration with creative guilds and associations, should institutionalize anti-harassment policies and enforce confidential and effective reporting mechanisms to ensure a safe and respectful creative environment.
- ➔ Creative Workspaces must eliminate discriminatory practices such as assigning gender-stereotyped tasks (e.g., cleaning or making coffee) to professional female staff. This should be actively monitored by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and creative guilds through regular inspections.

Creative Employers should implement equitable hiring and promotion standards to increase female representation in technical and leadership roles.

04

Donors and Development Partners**Key Highlights**

- ➔ Fund digital literacy initiatives that help women pursue high-value careers in fields like sound engineering, animation, and digital editing.
- ➔ Support low-cost entry points for creative women, such as community arts cooperatives and pottery collectives.
- ➔ Invest in ongoing research that monitors the implementation of gender-sensitive policies and tracks progress across the sector.

05

Civil Society and Women's Rights Organizations**Key Highlights**

- ➔ Launch awareness campaigns to challenge the stigma surrounding creative professions (e.g., the "spoiled" label of female creatives) and promote the cultural value of women's work.
- ➔ Engage neighborhood organizations to fight negative social norms and encourage family support for female creatives.
- ➔ Provide agency-building programs that empower women to identify and report exploitative situations.

06

Educational Institutions**Key Highlights**

- ➔ Expand creative arts curricula in public universities beyond Addis Ababa, specifically targeting underrepresented fields like fashion design.
- ➔ Promote female role models and mentors within technical training programs to prepare women for leadership.

6.0 References

International Centre for Research on Women & Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa. (2025). Gender-Lensed Mapping of the Creative Sector in Ethiopia.

International Centre for Research on Women & Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa. (2025). Behind the Scenes, Ethiopia: Young Women and Gender-based Inequities in Africa's Creative Sector.



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