



Policy Brief

Talented but Marginalized: Policy Recommendations to Address Gender Inequities in Ethiopia's Creative Sector.



Executive Summary

In sub-Saharan Africa, the creative industry has exhibited immense potential not only as custodian of culture and heritage but also as a driver of economic growth, contributing to poverty reduction through job creation.¹ However, the sector is characterised with various forms of gender inequities. Young female creatives continue to face pay disparities, lack of leadership opportunities, unfavourable working conditions and harassment, all of which limit their economic empowerment and compromise the sector's diversity and innovation.²

In Ethiopia, evidence of gender inequities is compelling: 39% of young female creatives feel that men dominate their workplaces, 50.5% think that their gender causes them to be underpaid, 87% receive offensive remarks about their appearance, and 45% encounter sexual demands.³ As a result, the experiences of female creatives are not only uninspiring, their careers get constricted, thereby depriving them opportunities to reach their optimal potential.

In addition to limiting women's economic rights and safety, these obstacles also limit the potential of the creative sector to serve as an inclusive platform for poverty reduction because women's artistic voices as well as the cultural and economic benefits they produce are suppressed in the absence of fair compensation, leadership and respect. Therefore, addressing these issues is essential for social inclusion, gender justice and long-term growth in the creative economy.

This policy brief is based on findings from the Young Women and Gender-Based Inequities in Africa's Creative study," which was conducted by the International Centre for Research on Women Africa (ICRW) and the Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA). It focuses on women's participation in Ethiopia's creative sector, challenges faced, and evidence-based recommendations to address them.



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1. Izugbara, C., Magak, K., Kirwana, V., Boasiako, C., & Gueye, K. (2025, May 16). Africa's creative goldmine: Unlocking growth amid gendered challenges. <https://mastercardfdn.org/en/articles/africas-creative-goldmine-unlocking-growth-amid-gendered-challenges/>

2. GIZ, *Cultural and Creative Industries Gender Study*, 2023.

3. Behind the Scenes Ethiopia: Young women and gender-based inequities in Africa's Creative Sector



Findings

- 1 Leadership Gap:** Women remain significantly under-represented in decision-making and senior leadership positions across the creative sector, limiting their influence over resource allocation, and policy direction.
- 2 Economic Undervaluation:** Over half of young women creatives report that their gender negatively influences their pay, indicating persistent gender-based wage disparities within the sector.
- 3 Workplace Harassment:** There is widespread harassment, undermining women's safety, psychological well-being, and professional advancement within the sector.
- 4 Social Stigma:** Gender stereotypes are frequently used to question or diminish women's success, reinforcing discriminatory attitudes and limiting equitable recognition.
- 5 Resilience & Commitment:** Despite systemic barriers, 82.4% of young women creatives report that their work remains personally meaningful and a source of dignity, reflecting strong resilience and commitment to the sector.

Recommendations

Government, development partners and industry bodies at every level are urged to work together to address the barriers by implementing the following:

- **Pay Equity:** The Ministry of Labor and Skills should formulate and enforce transparent pay policies to close the wage gap and establish compensation channels.
- **Leadership Programs:** The Ministry of Culture and Sports should partner with industry associations to create structured mentorship, paid fellowships, and leadership training programs that increase women's representation in senior creative roles
- **Norms Campaign:** The Ministry of Women and Social Affairs should lead a nationwide media and community campaign to challenge gender stereotypes and promote respect for women in the creative sector.
- **Zero-Tolerance Harassment Policy:** The Ministry of Labor and Skills should require all creative organizations to implement enforceable anti-harassment policies, confidential reporting systems, and clear accountability measures tied to licensing and public funding.

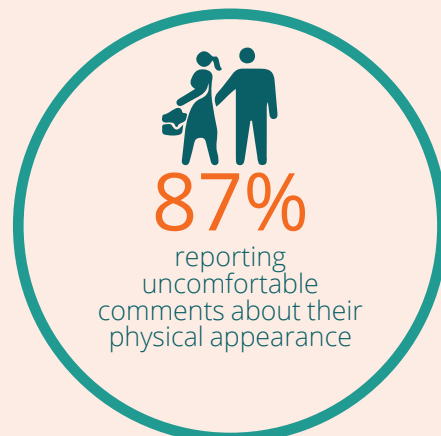
Introduction

The global creative economy has become a strong force, particularly for young people, for economic expansion, cross-cultural interaction, and job creation. This potential is becoming more apparent throughout Africa as the creative industry grows.

However, despite the expansion, this growth is systematically limited by persistent gender inequalities across the continent, as studies confirm women frequently face structural barriers and discrimination. In Ethiopia, the *Behind the Scenes: Young Women and Gender-based Inequities in Ethiopia's Creative Sector* study, which focused on young female creatives (aged 18–35) across Addis Ababa and regional centres including Amhara, Oromia, Central Ethiopia, and Sidama, confirms this profound, pervasive gender inequality that constrains the entire sector's productivity.

Evidence shows that 50.5% of female creatives feel underpaid because of their gender; they are marginalized in leadership roles, as 38.8% see creative workspaces as male-dominated, and they face routine hostility and harassment, with 87% reporting uncomfortable comments about their physical appearance and 45% experiencing sexual propositions or pressure (OSSREA & ICRW, 2025). Despite these profound obstacles, an overwhelming 82.4% find their creative work personally dignified and fulfilling, underscoring the potential locked within this talent pool.

This policy brief aims to inform government, development partners, and sector stakeholders on pathways for implementing evidence-based solutions to foster a more gender-inclusive and equitable creative economy in Ethiopia.



Women's participation in Ethiopia's creative industry.

Ethiopia's creative sector benefits greatly from the contributions of women in both traditional and contemporary fields. However, structural obstacles that restrict advancement, equitable compensation, and safe working conditions limit their participation. Their roles, the importance of their contributions and the obstacles to their inclusion are described below:

Participation, Economic and Social Significance

Ethiopian women are essential to many different creative subsectors, such as traditional crafts, music, dance, film, digital content creation and administrative cultural work.

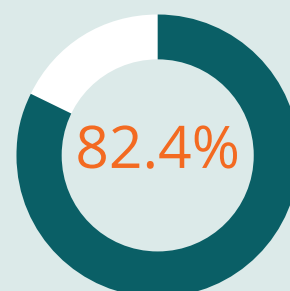
For many women, creative work is a means of earning money, gaining independence and expressing themselves. 82.4% of young female creatives say they find their work personally fulfilling, and the majority plan to stay in the field for a long time. Even though social stigma—such as calling dancers *Chefari*, which means “spoiled” or “indecent”—continues to deter many from pursuing creative careers, the creative sector supports women's economic independence and local cultural economies.

Challenges faced by female creatives in Ethiopia.

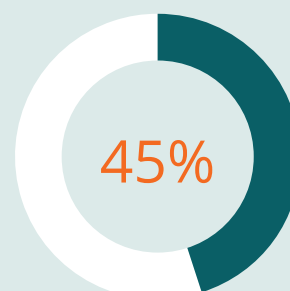
Ethiopia's young female creatives face several systemic, interrelated obstacles that restrict their access to economic opportunities, career advancement and safety. These obstacles are summarized into five main categories in the following subsections, which highlight the major limitations influencing their work experiences.

» Harassment and Safety

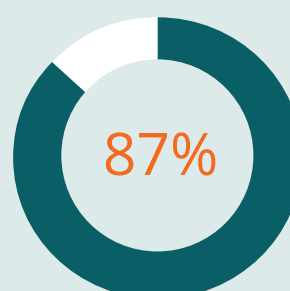
One of the biggest obstacles facing Ethiopia's young female creatives is harassment. 45% of women report experiencing sexual demands, 87% report uncomfortable remarks about their appearance, and 43.7% are aware that women may lose employment opportunities if they reject such advances. Weak institutional safeguards are a major contributing factor to the persistence of abuse; 52.5% of respondents think harassment persists because workplaces don't have anti-harassment policies.



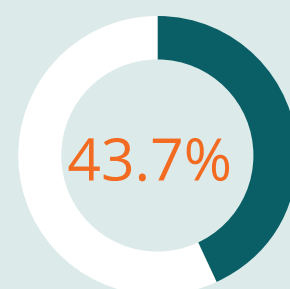
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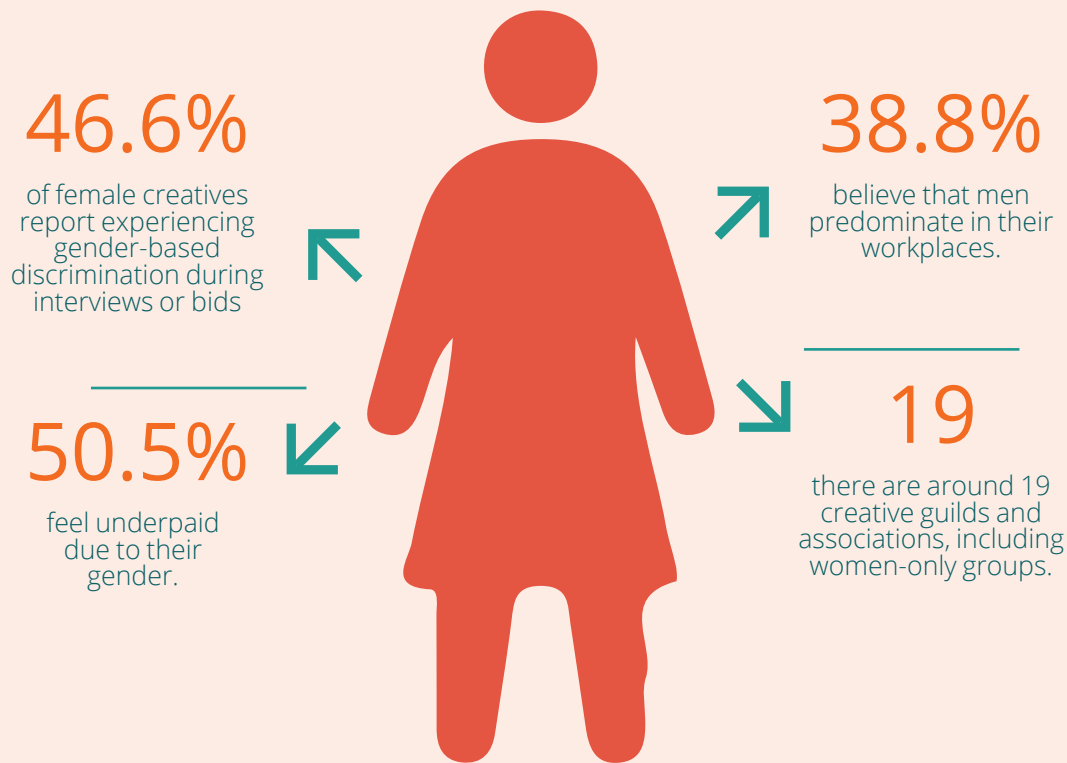
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are aware that women may lose employment opportunities if they reject such advances.



"The gender issues we discussed, such as being cast in a movie based on physical appearance or for sexual favours, can undermine female creatives' dignity and fulfilment 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 this work is insufficient to sustain a living, it is again a barrier from being dignified and fulfilled."
(Female IDI, AM, 02)

» Pay Discrimination and Economic Inequality

In all creative sub-sectors, women face systemic economic disadvantage; 46.6% of female creatives report experiencing gender-based discrimination during interviews or bids, and 50.5% feel underpaid due to their gender. Occupational segregation is widespread, and women are often assigned low-status, gendered jobs like cleaning or coffee service, which hinders their ability to advance professionally and make a living.

"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)

» Male Dominance and Leadership Exclusion

Women continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in leadership, ownership, and technical decision-making positions despite high participation. Many report unequal access to opportunities for advancement, and 38.8% believe that men predominate in their workplaces. Women are underrepresented in jobs like producers, screenwriters, and sound engineers, which restricts both career advancement and industry innovation. However, they are more visible in support roles like editing and costume design.

"There are around 19 creative guilds and associations, including women-only groups. However, women rarely hold leadership positions, prompting the creation of separate women's associations. Existing stakeholders, including government bodies, remain largely non-inclusive" (Musician, M).

» Stigma and Socio-Cultural Barriers

Women's participation and acceptance in creative work is limited by patriarchal norms. Married women fear sexualization at work and are subject to increased scrutiny. Participation is further restricted by work-family conflict, as many are forced into part-time jobs or leave the industry after maternity leave due to childcare and household responsibilities.

"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)

» Policy Gaps and Underfunding

Gender inequality is made worse by macro-level policy neglect. Only 0.0847% of the national budget, well below the AU's recommended 1%, is allocated by the government to the creative sector. The lack of gender-responsive policies that are necessary to safeguard women and promote fair sector growth, as well as inadequate regional infrastructure and training opportunities, are all consequences of this underfunding.

Coping mechanisms for challenges faced by female creatives.

Young female creatives in Ethiopia respond to challenges they face in the creative sector, using various strategies that show systematic gaps within the sector. These coping strategies are not only personal responses but also signs of deeper systematic gaps in protection, regulation, and economic support.

According to the BtS Ethiopia Study, young female creatives have turned to using social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook to get visibility, build networks, and also bypass male-dominated structures in the sector. While this shows digital transformation, i.e., content creation in their respective creative domains, it also shows institutional neglect. It shows the failure of formal creative institutions to provide safe, equitable,

and accessible paths to women's participation in the creative sector. The normalization of online harassment on these platforms clearly shows the absence of inclusive digital safety policies and weak implementation of laws on online harassment.

Young female creatives have coped with gender-based underpayment and unstable income by supplementing their earnings from creative work with other income-generating activities like teaching, starting up small businesses and doing community performances. These coping strategies signify the lack of formal pay structures, employment contracts, and social safety nets within the creative industry.

The study also pointed out the leverage of peer support networks and social circles among young female creatives as safe spaces for coping with harassment, exclusion, and discrimination in workplaces. These spaces provide emotional and psycho-social support and peer-to-peer learning, hence bridging the gap made by the lack of formal institutional mechanisms, such as conflict resolution systems and safeguarding structures, to handle human resource complaints that arise within the sector.

Finally, the study revealed disturbing incidents where some young female creatives give in to sexual advances to secure opportunities in the creative sector. This should be seen as a survival strategy these vulnerable young women use to submit to those with power over them or gate-keeping creative opportunities. It also shows institutional failure to enforce anti-harassment laws, lack of a structured referral pathway to safely report such cases, and the absence of ethical hiring strategies in various creative domains. The normalization of online harassment among creatives for financial gain shows how the current creative environment drives such harmful behaviours due to a weak police and enforcement to hold people accountable for actions like harassment. A participant noted,

[...]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 AA, 35)

Call for Action.

1 Safe & Dignified Workspaces.

The Government of Ethiopia, through the Ministry of Women & Social Affairs (MoWSA), creative guilds, and employers, should develop and implement a comprehensive anti-harassment and safe workspace policy.

- Put in place a structured reporting system and referral pathway that ensures confidentiality for survivors.
- Provide training on all forms of harassment and their prevention and response, including digital harassment, mandatory for all workspaces, and put in place zero-tolerance guidelines.

2 Leadership & Decision-Making.

The Ministry of Culture & Sports (MoCS), Creative Guilds, and Academic Institutions should promote women's leadership and participation across all creative domains:

- Put in place inclusive leadership development programs for all creatives.
- Make gendered indicators and targets for all creative domains and bodies, for example, creative boards, committees, etc.
- Establish fellowships and training opportunities for young female creatives in various creative domains, e.g., photography, creative academia, and production, to develop their knowledge and skills.

3 Economic Equality & Fair Compensation.

The Ministry of Labour & Skills (MoLS), creative employers, and creative guilds must adopt and enforce structured pay frameworks by:

- Introducing minimum pay wages and equal pay for equal work rules in various domains.
- Have penalties in place for all kinds of pay discrimination, for example, withholding payments due to refusal of sexual advances.
- Make annual pay audits in creative workspaces and ensure compliance of various creative employers.

4 Social Norm Change & Public Perceptions.

Religious & cultural leaders, NGOs, the media, and the government of Ethiopia through the Ministry of Culture and Sports (MoCS) should launch social norms change campaign to fight the myths and misconceptions about female creatives and their work.

- Engage religious and cultural leaders, male creatives as campaign champions.
- The media should air positive messages and success stories of female creatives.
- Conduct community sensitizations aimed at clearing stereotypes against young female creatives, like the labelling of female creatives as spoiled.

Conclusion.

Ethiopia's creative sector is promising; however, its potential is obstructed by gender inequities, unsafe work environments, and deeply rooted social norms. Young female creatives continue to show remarkable persistence by resorting to digital platforms like TikTok and Facebook, making peer-to-peer support spaces, and sustaining their livelihoods by making various side businesses despite various challenges faced. As Ethiopia aims at achieving a thriving and globally competitive creative economy, it is foundational to empower young female creatives' participation. This brief calls for a collective partnership between the Government of Ethiopia, academia, creative institutions, religious and cultural leaders, and development partners to work together and transform Ethiopia's creative sector into a safe, equitable, and innovative space.

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Acknowledgement

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Africa Regional Office, provided overall leadership and stewardship of the Behind the Scenes (BtS): Young Women and Gender Inequities in Africa project, including its conceptualization, strategic direction, coordination, and implementation oversight. The Implementation of the project was made possible through the collective efforts of individuals and institutions committed to advancing safer, more inclusive, and equitable creative industries across Africa. We extend our deepest appreciation to the young women creatives, artists, cultural practitioners, policymakers, industry stakeholders, and community actors who generously shared their experiences, reflections, and expertise throughout the research and engagement processes. Many participants spoke with honesty and courage about the opportunities and challenges shaping their professional and personal lives. Their voices and lived experiences form the foundation of this evidence and continue to inform the project's vision for meaningful change within Africa's cultural and creative sectors.

We are especially grateful to the Country Principal Investigators, Youth Researchers, field mobilisers, and institutional partners whose commitment and professionalism made the successful implementation of the study and related activities possible. We acknowledge the valuable contributions of the Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA) in Ethiopia, the University of Rwanda, the University of Cape Coast in Ghana, the University of Lagos in Nigeria, LAREM in Senegal, and ICRW teams in Uganda and Kenya. Their collaboration strengthened the project's participatory and youth-centred approach to evidence generation and engagement.

We also appreciate the support provided by government institutions, creative industry associations, civil society organisations, and academic partners that contributed to consultations, validation processes, and dissemination efforts across the participating countries.

This report was developed with support from the Mastercard Foundation.

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