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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gendered Social Capital and the Political Economy of Unequal Educational Outcomes in Ethiopia[1]

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Abstract

This paper examines gender inequality in Ethiopian higher education through the lens of social capital and political economy, reframing educational disparity as a structural failure of the state's obligation to guarantee the right to education. Using a multi-sited mixed-methods design, the study analyzes survey data from 131 Ethiopian-born participants who completed K-12 education in Ethiopia and pursued higher education either domestically, in the diaspora, or as refugees. Quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrate persistent gendered disparities across three critical stages: access, participation, and post-graduation outcomes. Female participants were more likely to originate from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, significantly more likely to experience sexual harassment during university, and less likely to secure internships, key pathways to labor-market integration. These cumulative disadvantages translate into lower career satisfaction and constrained professional mobility. Beyond material inequalities, the study identifies a critical political barrier: a pronounced perception gap. Male participants were substantially more likely than female participants to believe that access to higher education is gender-equal, obscuring structural disadvantage and inhibiting reform. Drawing on Social Capital Theory, the analysis shows how gendered access to bonding, bridging, and linking social networks systematically advantages male students while limiting women's access to institutional resources and opportunities. The findings contribute to political science debates on human rights, informal institutions, and development by demonstrating how patriarchal social structures undermine formal equality commitments, producing durable educational and political inequality in Ethiopia.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Social Capital, Political Economy, Higher Education, Human Rights, Patriarchy, Ethiopia.

1. Introduction

1.1 Framing Educational Disparity as a Human Rights Imperative

The right to education is a foundational human right, enshrined in international law and recognized as indispensable for achieving individual dignity, fostering democratic citizenship, and driving national development. It functions not merely as a social good but as a political claim against the state, obligating it to ensure equitable access and opportunity for all its citizens (Lauterpacht, 1948). While the Ethiopian state has made formal policy commitments to gender equality in education, the lived reality for female students reveals a persistent and systemic violation of this fundamental right (Daudet et al., 2001). This paper moves beyond a descriptive account of educational inequality to offer a political analysis of its structural

[1]This research is aligned with and intended to support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. In particular, the study contributes to **SDG 5 (Gender Equality)** and **SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)** by addressing structural gender disparities and unequal access to educational and socioeconomic opportunities.

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causes and consequences, arguing that gender-based disparities in higher education represent a failure of state obligation and a critical human rights issue. The central research question guiding this analysis is: "Does gender play any role in the higher education access, participation, and successful outcomes of Ethiopian female and male students?" The thesis advanced here is that gender is a primary determinant of educational experience and success in the Ethiopian context. These disparities are not random or isolated but are systematically produced and maintained by deeply embedded social structures and patriarchal norms. These informal structures effectively mediate, and often subvert, formal state policies aimed at achieving equity (North, 1993; Adams, Osho, Woods, & Osho, 2006). Political science, with its focus on power, resource allocation, and the implementation of state policy, is uniquely equipped to analyze this phenomenon. Education is a key state-provided resource, and its inequitable distribution is a political problem of justice and rights (Flinders, 2017; Moore & Osho, G.S., 2017).

Education has long been recognized as a cornerstone of human development, democratic participation, and social mobility. Beyond its instrumental value in developing skills and fostering economic growth, education carries intrinsic political significance: it is a claim individuals make upon the state for inclusion, dignity, and equal opportunity (Salau et al., 2017). International human rights instruments enshrine the right to education as universal and indivisible, obligating states not merely to provide access but to ensure that educational systems operate in ways that are equitable, safe, and enabling for all citizens (Nunes, Osho, & Nealy, 2004). However, across much of the Global South, and particularly in contexts marked by deeply entrenched gender norms, the promise of education as a pathway to equality remains only partially fulfilled.

Ethiopia presents a compelling case for examining the gap between formal commitments to educational equality and lived realities within higher education. Over the past several decades, the Ethiopian state has expanded access to education at all levels, adopting policies that explicitly endorse gender equality and women's participation (Salau et. al 2016). Female enrollment in universities has increased, and gender equity is routinely articulated as a national development priority. These achievements, however, obscure persistent disparities in how education is experienced and translated into opportunity. For many women, entry into higher education does not guarantee equal participation, protection, or outcomes. Instead, inequality reemerges within institutions through informal practices, social norms, and unequal access to resources (Adams, Robinson, Osho, & Adejonwo, 2006). This paper argues that gender disparities in Ethiopian higher education must be understood not simply as educational shortcomings but as political and human rights failures. While policy discussions often focus on enrollment ratios or funding constraints, such metrics capture only the surface of inequality. They overlook how power operates within educational spaces, shaping who feels safe, who gains access to professional networks, and whose experiences are recognized as legitimate. From a political science perspective, education is a state-mediated resource, and its unequal distribution reflects broader struggles over power, recognition, and social hierarchy.

The central question guiding this study is whether gender plays a decisive role in shaping access to higher education, participation within university life, and post-graduation outcomes among Ethiopian students. The analysis proceeds from the premise that gender is not a secondary or incidental variable but a primary axis along which opportunity is structured. Inequality, in this sense, is not accidental; it is produced through the interaction of formal institutions and informal social arrangements that privilege some groups while marginalizing others. Political science offers a valuable lens for examining these dynamics by foregrounding the roles of institutions, power relations, and state responsibility. Education policy is not implemented in a vacuum. It is filtered through social norms, bureaucratic discretion, and informal networks that can either reinforce or undermine official commitments to equality.

In contexts where patriarchal norms remain influential, these informal institutions often operate alongside the state, shaping outcomes in ways that are resistant to formal reform. Understanding how these parallel structures function is essential for explaining why gender inequality persists despite policy advances. Hence, this study situates educational inequality within a human rights framework, emphasizing that the right to education encompasses more than physical access to classrooms. It includes the right to learn in environments free from violence and intimidation, the right to participate fully in academic and professional development opportunities, and the right to benefit equitably from education's long-term returns. When women are disproportionately exposed to harassment, excluded from internships, or constrained in their career trajectories, the right to

education is compromised in substantive terms, even if formal access appears equal.

A distinctive contribution of this paper lies in its focus on social capital as a mediating mechanism between gender and educational outcomes. Social capital refers to the resources embedded in social relationships, networks of trust, influence, and access that facilitate or constrain individual advancement. While higher education systems are often portrayed as meritocratic, access to opportunity within them frequently depends on informal connections, mentorship, and institutional familiarity. These resources are not distributed evenly. In patriarchal contexts, men are more likely to occupy positions within networks that provide access to decision-makers, professional opportunities, and institutional protection. Women, by contrast, often rely on more localized, supportive networks that offer resilience but limited reach. By applying Social Capital Theory, this study moves beyond documenting gender gaps to explaining how those gaps are reproduced. It demonstrates that inequality is sustained not only through overt discrimination but through subtle, network-based mechanisms that shape who hears about opportunities, who receives endorsements, and who feels entitled to claim institutional resources (Osho & Adams, 2025). This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of inequality that bridges individual experience and structural constraint.

Another important contribution of this research is its attention to perception as a political variable. Inequality does not exist solely in material terms; it is also mediated through how individuals interpret fairness and opportunity. If those who benefit from existing arrangements perceive the system as equitable, inequality is less likely to be challenged. This study reveals a significant divergence between male and female perceptions of gender equality in higher education, highlighting how misrecognition can function as a barrier to reform. Such perception gaps are politically consequential because they shape policy priorities, institutional responsiveness, and the legitimacy of demands for change. The study adopts a multi-sited, mixed-methods approach that reflects the transnational realities of Ethiopian higher education. Increasing numbers of Ethiopians pursue tertiary education not only within the country but also as refugees or members of the global diaspora. These trajectories offer a unique opportunity to examine how gendered inequalities travel across contexts, adapting to new institutional environments while remaining rooted in shared social foundations. By including participants from domestic, refugee, and diaspora settings, the study captures both continuity and variation in educational experiences, thereby enriching the analysis of inequality as a dynamic, context-dependent process. The inclusion of diaspora and refugee populations also situates the research within broader debates on migration, globalization, and development. Educational inequality is often treated as a national issue, yet its consequences extend across borders, shaping patterns of mobility, labor market integration, and transnational identity. Understanding how gendered disadvantage persists or transforms in these settings contributes to comparative political analysis and highlights the global dimensions of educational justice.

This paper makes a direct contribution to core debates within political science. First, framing educational disparity as a human rights issue connects a domestic social problem to the fields of International Relations and Comparative Politics, which scrutinize state compliance with international human rights norms (Sen, 2000). Second, it provides a powerful case study of how state policies are contested and shaped by informal institutions and cultural norms, a classic theme in political theory and development studies. The analysis demonstrates how the patriarchal structure of Ethiopian society creates a parallel power system that undermines the state's formal commitment to equality (Bogaards, 2022). Finally, the study's inclusion of diaspora and refugee populations connects the research to contemporary themes of globalization, migration, and transnational politics, offering insights into how educational and social inequalities are reproduced and contested across borders (Yitbarek, 2024). In doing so, this paper presents a political analysis of the state's failure to guarantee a fundamental human right, providing new empirical grounding for understanding the complex relationship between gender, social structures, and political outcomes in the Horn of Africa.

2. Methodology

To capture the complexity of gendered educational experiences, this study employs a rigorous mixed-methods approach, specifically a convergent questionnaire variant design (Yitbarek, 2024). This design is a key methodological strength, as it facilitates the simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data from the same participants. The quantitative strand, composed of closed-ended survey questions, provides a broad overview of trends and disparities. In contrast, the qualitative strand, consisting of open-ended questions, offers rich, narrative data

that illuminates the lived experiences behind the numbers. This triangulation of data provides a more holistic, validated, and nuanced understanding of the research problem than either approach could achieve on its own. The unique composition of its sample further enhances the study's originality. The research draws on data from 131 Ethiopian-born participants who completed their K-12 education in Ethiopia. This cohort is strategically divided into those who pursued higher education within Ethiopia and those who did so abroad, including individuals living as refugees in Kenya and as part of the global diaspora (Yitbarek, 2024). This multi-sited sample is a significant and rare feature in studies of this nature. It allows for a comparative analysis of how gender disparities manifest across different socio-political contexts within the home country, in a neighboring refugee context, and in the wider international diaspora. This design not only strengthens the study's internal validity but also broadens its relevance to political science debates on migration, transnationalism, and the challenges of development in a globalized world.

The analytical framework for this paper is explicitly grounded in Social Capital Theory, drawing on the foundational work of Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman **(**Bourdieu, 2011**).** This theoretical lens is used to move beyond simply identifying disparities and toward explaining the mechanisms that produce and reproduce them. Social capital, defined as the resources embedded in social networks, is conceptualized as a key factor unevenly distributed along gender lines. The framework helps analyze how social networks, community norms, and family support systems facilitate or impede educational access and success. By examining who has access to which types of social capital (e.g., bonding, bridging, linking), the paper demonstrates that these networks are deeply gendered, providing male students with advantages often inaccessible to their female peers (Yitbarek, 2024). Finally, the research is informed by the investigator's distinct positionality as "a male researcher who has (a) lived experience in the research setting country, in this case Ethiopia, and (b) who also has diaspora experience" (Yitbarek, 2024). This perspective offers a unique analytical lens, allowing for an examination of gender dynamics from within the patriarchal system being studied, enriched by a comparative understanding gained from living abroad.

2.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study adopts a multi-sited, mixed-methods research design to capture the complex and layered nature of gender inequality in Ethiopian higher education. Gendered educational outcomes are shaped not only by formal policies but also by informal institutions, social norms, and transnational dynamics. A single-method or single-site approach would be insufficient to illuminate these interlocking forces. Accordingly, this research employs a convergent mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously from the same participants and analyzed in parallel before being integrated during interpretation. The mixed-methods approach is particularly well suited to the study's core research question: whether and how gender influences access, participation, and outcomes in Ethiopian higher education. Quantitative data provide systematic evidence of patterns and disparities, while qualitative data offer insight into how individuals experience, interpret, and rationalize these disparities. The combination allows the analysis to move beyond documenting inequality toward explaining the social and political mechanisms that sustain it.

The multi-sited design further strengthens the study by recognizing that educational inequality does not operate exclusively within national borders. Ethiopian students increasingly pursue higher education across multiple contexts, including domestic institutions, neighboring countries, and the global diaspora. By incorporating participants who studied in Ethiopia, as refugees, and abroad, the research captures how gendered disadvantages are reproduced, mitigated, or transformed across different institutional and political environments. This design enhances both the analytical depth and the external relevance of the findings.

2.2 Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection

The study draws on data from 131 Ethiopian-born participants who completed primary and secondary education in Ethiopia and subsequently pursued higher education either in Ethiopia or abroad. Eligibility criteria were deliberately structured to ensure comparability across participants while allowing for variation in higher education contexts. All participants shared a common educational foundation shaped by the Ethiopian K–12 system, which provided a consistent baseline from which to examine divergence in higher education experiences. Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Initial recruitment targeted individuals with direct experience in Ethiopian higher education, refugee education pathways, or diaspora academic settings. These participants were then invited to

share the survey with peers who met the study criteria. This approach was particularly effective in reaching refugee and diaspora populations, which are often underrepresented in formal educational research due to geographic dispersion and limited institutional access. While the sample is not statistically representative of the entire Ethiopian student population, it is analytically appropriate for the study's objectives. The aim is not population-level generalization but theory-driven inference. The sample provides sufficient diversity across gender, location, and educational trajectory to allow for meaningful comparison and theoretical insight into how inequality operates across contexts.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that included both closed-ended and open-ended items. The instrument was designed to capture three interrelated dimensions of educational experience: access, participation, and outcomes. These dimensions reflect the study's conceptual framework and align with international human rights standards that define education as encompassing availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. The quantitative component consisted of closed-ended questions measuring socioeconomic background, experiences of sexual harassment, participation in internships, perceptions of gender equality in access, and post-graduation career satisfaction (Ojumu et al., 2025). These indicators were selected for their relevance to the existing literature on gender inequality, education, and labor-market transition, as well as their capacity to capture both material and perceptual dimensions of inequality.

The qualitative component comprised open-ended questions that invited participants to reflect on their educational journeys, the challenges they faced, the sources of support they received, and their interpretations of gender dynamics within their institutions. These narrative responses were essential for understanding how individuals made sense of their experiences and how informal norms and social networks shaped opportunity structures. The questionnaire was administered electronically, allowing participants to respond at their own pace and ensuring accessibility across geographic locations. This mode of administration was significant for including diaspora and refugee participants who might otherwise be difficult to reach. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify gender differences across key indicators. Percentage comparisons were used to highlight disparities in experiences and outcomes between female and male participants. While the analysis does not rely on advanced inferential statistics, this is a deliberate methodological choice. The emphasis is on identifying substantive gaps that are politically and socially meaningful rather than on testing narrowly defined causal relationships.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses were read iteratively to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and salient narratives related to gender, power, and access to resources. Coding focused on themes such as safety, institutional support, networking, mentorship, family expectations, and perceptions of fairness. These themes were then examined in relation to the quantitative findings to assess convergence, divergence, and complementarity.

Integration occurred at the interpretive stage, where quantitative patterns were contextualized using qualitative insights. For example, statistical differences in internship participation were interpreted alongside narratives describing informal referrals, gendered expectations, and exclusion from professional networks. This process of triangulation enhances the validity of the findings by demonstrating consistency across data sources while also revealing the mechanisms underlying observed disparities.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Social Capital as an Explanatory Lens

Social Capital Theory provides the central analytical framework for this study. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu and Coleman, social capital is understood as the resources embedded within social networks that facilitate or constrain access to opportunities. The framework distinguishes between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, each of which plays a distinct role in shaping educational and professional trajectories. This theoretical lens is beneficial for analyzing gender inequality because it highlights how access to resources is mediated through relationships rather than distributed evenly through formal institutions. By examining who has access to which types of networks and how these networks operate within patriarchal contexts, the study moves beyond surface-level explanations of inequality. Social capital theory also provides a bridge between individual experience and structural analysis. It allows the study to connect micro-level interactions, such as mentorship and peer support, with macro-

level outcomes, such as labor-market inequality and political misrecognition. This makes the framework especially well-suited to political science inquiries into power, institutions, and rights.

3.2 Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher's positionality is an important component of the methodological approach. As a male researcher with lived experience in Ethiopia and extended experience in the diaspora, the investigator occupies a position that is both insider and outsider. This positionality offers advantages and challenges. On the one hand, cultural familiarity facilitates contextual understanding and rapport with participants. On the other hand, gendered power dynamics necessitate reflexive awareness of how positionality might shape interpretation. To address these concerns, reflexivity was incorporated throughout the research process. Particular care was taken to privilege participants' voices in the qualitative analysis and to avoid imposing normative assumptions onto their narratives. The mixed-methods design itself serves as a check on interpretive bias by requiring consistency between statistical patterns and lived experience.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the study, particularly given the sensitive nature of topics such as sexual harassment and discrimination. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. The survey was designed to protect anonymity, and no identifying information was collected. Participants were informed of their right to skip questions or withdraw at any time. Special attention was given to minimizing potential harm. Questions about harassment were carefully framed to avoid retraumatization, and participants were not required to provide detailed descriptions unless they chose to do so. The electronic format further enhanced privacy, allowing participants to respond without fear of exposure.

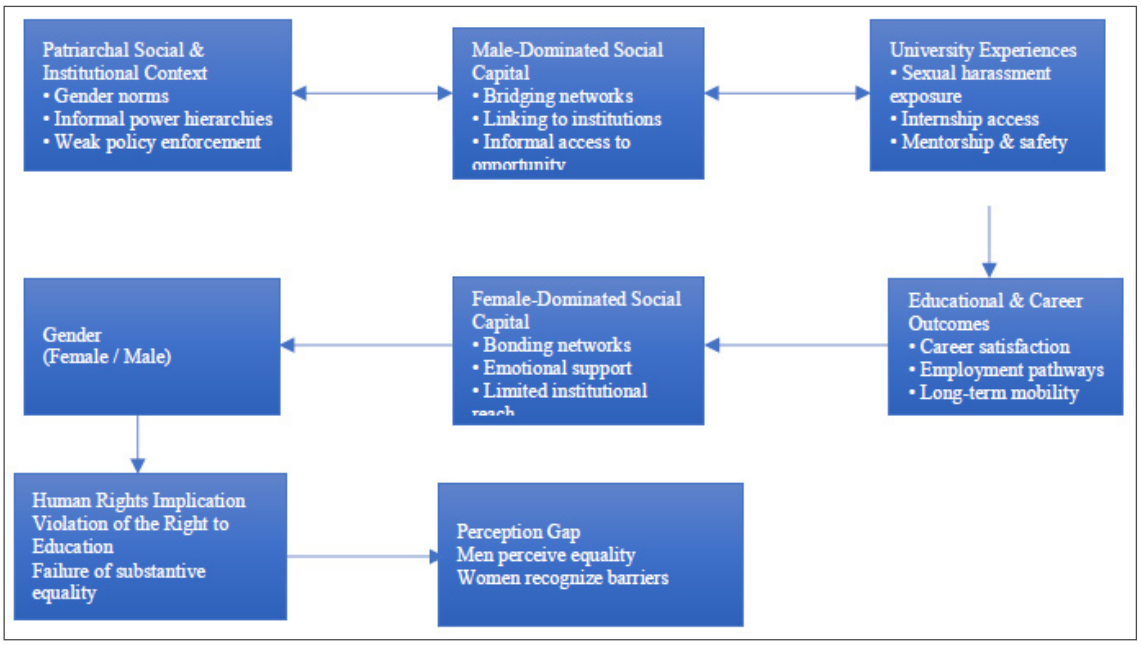

Figure 1. *Conceptual framework of gender, mediated through differential access to social capital within a patriarchal institutional context, produces unequal educational experiences, perception gaps, and long-term outcomes in Ethiopian higher education*

As with any study, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The use of non-probability sampling limits statistical generalizability, and self-reported data may be subject to recall bias or social desirability effects. However, these limitations are mitigated by the study's theoretical orientation, triangulation of data sources, and inclusion of diverse educational contexts. Rather than undermining the findings, these limitations underscore the value of the study's qualitative insights and its contribution to theory-driven understanding. The goal is not exhaustive representation but analytical clarity regarding how gendered inequality operates within and across institutional contexts.

In sum, the multi-sited, mixed-methods methodology employed in this study provides a robust and nuanced foundation for analyzing gender inequality in Ethiopian higher education. By integrating quantitative patterns with qualitative narratives and grounding the analysis in Social Capital Theory, the study captures both the scale and the substance of inequality. This methodological approach enables a politically informed examination of how informal structures, perception gaps, and networked power undermine

formal commitments to educational equality. Figure 1 shows how gender, operating through patriarchal social structures, shapes differential access to social capital, which in turn produces unequal educational experiences, perceptions, and outcomes in Ethiopian higher education. The framework integrates Social Capital Theory with a political economy and human rights perspective.

3.4 The Architecture of Inequality

The empirical findings of this study reveal a systemic architecture of inequality that disadvantages female students at every critical stage of their higher education journey. These disparities are not isolated incidents but form a cumulative pattern of disadvantage that begins with barriers to access, intensifies through unequal participation, and culminates in divergent long-term outcomes.

3.5 Barriers to Access

The foundation of educational inequality is laid long before students enter university, rooted in pre-existing economic and social disparities. The quantitative data clearly establish an economic disadvantage for female students. A significantly higher proportion of female participants reported lower-class backgrounds than their male peers, who were more likely to identify as middle-class (Yitbarek, 2024). This initial economic disparity creates a tangible barrier, limiting access to quality secondary schooling, preparatory materials, and the financial security needed to pursue higher education without significant strain.

Societal expectations compound these economic constraints. While the data show that a majority of both female (77%) and male (75%) participants felt their families expected them to attend university, a subtle but important difference emerges in the dissent. A larger proportion of male participants (13%) than female participants (7%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this expectation (Yitbarek, 2024). This may suggest that while the aspiration for higher education is present for both genders, the pathways and the social and professional roles envisioned for them post-graduation remain heavily gendered (Eremie, Kennedy, Osho, & Kritsonis, 2012). For many women, the expectation to attend university may be coupled with a narrower set of socially acceptable career outcomes, circumscribing their ambitions from the outset.

3.6 Inequalities in Participation

Once inside the university, female students navigate an environment that is demonstrably more hostile and less supportive than that experienced by their male counterparts. The findings on sexual harassment most starkly illustrate this. An alarming 37% of female participants reported experiencing sexual harassment during their university studies, a rate nearly five times higher than the 8% reported by male participants (Yitbarek, 2024). This finding moves the issue beyond a social problem to a fundamental violation of human rights, the right to a safe and secure learning environment, free from violence and intimidation. Such a hostile climate directly impedes women's ability to participate fully in academic and social life, creating psychological distress and a significant barrier to their educational success (Amadi & Osho, 2025).

This hostile environment is compounded by unequal access to critical professional development opportunities essential to future success. The data reveal a significant 15-percentage-point gap in internship participation: only 58% of female students secured an internship during their undergraduate studies, compared to 73% of their male counterparts (Yitbarek, 2024). This disparity has profound and lasting implications, as internships provide essential hands-on experience, professional networks, and a crucial bridge to the labor market. The denial of equal access to these opportunities places female graduates at a significant disadvantage from the moment they enter the professional world.

While institutions may have formal support mechanisms in place, their efficacy appears limited. Data on the use of campus gender offices show that female students were only slightly more likely than male students to use these services (49% vs. 45%) (Yitbarek, 2024). The fact that over half of female students did not utilize these services, despite facing demonstrably greater challenges, suggests potential shortcomings in the offices' outreach, accessibility, or perceived effectiveness. This points to a gap between formal institutional commitments to gender equity and the lived reality of female students on campus (Osho et. al., 2025).

These individual data points are not discrete but are interconnected in a sequential chain of disadvantage. The initial barrier of economic precarity at the access stage contributes to a more stressful, less supported experience during the participation stage, characterized by a higher risk of harassment and reduced access to career-building opportunities, such as internships. This arduous journey logically culminates in poorer long-term outcomes, such as lower career satisfaction

and greater regret over educational choices (Bentley & Osho, 2004). This narrative demonstrates a systemic problem in which the educational structure disadvantages women at every critical juncture (Osho et al., 2025). A policy that focuses only on one stage, such as affirmative action at admission, is likely to fail because the subsequent stages of participation and transition to the workforce remain deeply inequitable. This holistic view of the cascade of disadvantage is a key analytical contribution of this paper.

Table 1. *Gender Differences in Access, Participation, Perceptions, and Outcomes in Ethiopian Higher Education*

Indicator	% Female Participants	% Male Participants	Percentage Point Difference
Experienced Sexual Harassment	37%	8%	+29 points for Women
Participated in an Internship	58%	73%	-15 points for Women
Believe Access is Equal	44%	68%	-24 points for Women
Enjoy Current Career	63%	76%	-13 points for Women
Wish They Studied Something Else	33%	40%	-7 points for Women

3.7 The Politics of Perception and the Role of Social Capital

Beyond the objective measures of disparity, this research uncovers a crucial political dimension: a profound chasm in how male and female students perceive gender equality. When asked whether female and male students have equal access to university education, 68% of male participants agreed. In stark contrast, a majority of female participants disagreed, with only 44% believing that access is equal (Yitbarek, 2024). This 24-percentage-point gap in perception is not merely a statistical curiosity; it represents a fundamental political obstacle to reform. Table 1 provides a concise yet powerful empirical snapshot of gendered inequality in Ethiopian higher education, capturing differences not only in material experiences but also in perceptions, opportunities, and long-term outcomes. When read collectively rather than as isolated indicators, the figures reveal a patterned sequence of disadvantage that disproportionately shapes women's educational and professional trajectories. These differences are not random fluctuations; they are structured outcomes that reflect how power, norms, and access to resources operate within the higher education system.

The most striking disparity appears in reported experiences of sexual harassment. More than one-third of female participants indicated that they experienced sexual harassment during their university education, compared to fewer than one in ten male participants. This 29 29-percentage-point difference represents more than a gendered inconvenience; it signals a deeply unequal learning environment. Sexual harassment functions as a form of informal exclusion, limiting women's freedom of movement, participation, and self-expression within academic spaces. The psychological toll associated with such experiences, fear, stress, and diminished sense of belonging, has been widely shown to undermine academic engagement and persistence. In this context, harassment becomes a mechanism through which gender hierarchy is reproduced, reminding women of their conditional presence in spaces formally designated as equal. The prevalence of harassment also has political implications. Universities are not merely educational institutions; they are public spaces governed by state policy and oversight. When such environments fail to protect female students, the state's commitment to educational equality becomes symbolic mainly. The data suggest that formal access to university does not translate into substantive equality once students are enrolled. Instead, women must navigate environments that are more hostile, more demanding, and more psychologically costly than those encountered by their male peers.

A second critical disparity emerges in access to internships and professional development opportunities. While a majority of both female and male participants reported completing at least one internship, the gender gap remains substantial: 58 percent of women compared to 73 percent of men. This 15-point difference is particularly consequential because internships often function as gateways to employment, mentorship, and professional networks. They are not simply supplementary experiences but key transitional mechanisms linking education to labor markets.

The unequal distribution of internships suggests that selection processes may rely heavily on informal referrals, personal connections, or discretionary judgment, thereby favoring those already embedded in influential networks. In this sense, the internship gap reflects not only unequal opportunity but unequal access to the social capital necessary to secure such opportunities. Women's relative exclusion from these pathways compounds earlier disadvantages, ensuring that inequality persists beyond graduation. Perceptual differences further deepen the structural

nature of inequality. When participants were asked whether access to higher education is gender-equal, a clear divide emerged between male and female respondents. While more than two-thirds of male participants agreed that access is equal, fewer than half of female participants did. This 24-percentage-point gap reveals a divergence in lived experience that has direct political significance.

Perception is not a neutral or secondary dimension of inequality. How individuals interpret social reality shapes whether inequality is acknowledged, contested, or normalized. In this case, the data suggest that men who disproportionately benefit from existing structures are more likely to perceive the system as fair. Women, whose experiences include harassment, restricted opportunity, and constrained outcomes, are more likely to recognize inequality as systemic. This divergence is not merely cognitive; it is political. Reform requires recognition, and recognition is unlikely when dominant groups perceive existing arrangements as equitable.

Differences in post-graduation outcomes reinforce the cumulative nature of gendered disadvantage. Female participants were less likely than male participants to report enjoying their current careers, and slightly less likely to indicate that they would choose the same field of study again. While the percentage-point differences in these indicators are smaller than those observed for harassment or perception, they are no less important. Career satisfaction reflects the long-term consequences of educational experiences, including access to opportunities, professional growth, and workplace inclusion. The lower levels of satisfaction reported by women suggest that inequality persists after graduation; instead, it carries over into professional life. Taken together, the indicators in Table 1 illustrate a sequential process. Initial inequalities in safety and participation shape access to professional opportunities, which in turn influence career trajectories and long-term satisfaction. This sequence underscores why narrow policy interventions, such as focusing solely on admission rates, are insufficient. Gender inequality in higher education operates across multiple stages, requiring a holistic, analytical, and policy response (Knox, Adams, Arungwa, and Osho, 2020).

The chi-square analysis summarized in Table 2 demonstrates statistically significant gender-based differences in selected higher-education outcomes. Female students reported substantially higher exposure to sexual harassment than male students, and this association between gender and harassment experience was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 8.70$, $p = 0.003$). This finding highlights the disproportionate vulnerability of women in higher education.

Gender differences were also evident in perceptions of educational equity. Male students were significantly more likely than female students to believe that access to higher education is equal, with the association between gender and perceived access reaching statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 7.32, p = 0.007$). In contrast, no statistically significant gender differences were observed in internship participation or enjoyment of current career paths. Although male students reported higher rates of internship participation and career enjoyment than female students, these differences did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Similarly, while a higher proportion of male students indicated a desire to have studied a different academic field, this association was not statistically significant. Taken together, these results suggest that while structural inequalities related to harassment and access perceptions are pronounced, gender differences in experiential and aspirational outcomes appear more nuanced and may require further investigation using larger or longitudinal samples.

Table 2. *Association Between Gender and Higher-Education Outcomes (Chi-Square Tests)*

Outcome	Female Yes n (%)	Male Yes n (%)	χ^2 (df=1)	p-value
Sexual harassment	18 (30.0%)	6 (8.5%)	8.70	0.003
Internship participation	34 (56.7%)	50 (70.4%)	0.17	0.681
Believe access is equal	26 (43.3%)	46 (64.8%)	7.32	0.007
Enjoy current career	38 (63.3%)	54 (76.1%)	2.18	0.140
Wish studied something else	20 (33.3%)	28 (39.4%)	0.65	0.421

The logistic regression results presented in Table 3 indicate that gender remains a significant predictor of several higher-education experiences. Female students were significantly more likely than male students to report experiencing sexual harassment, with the odds of reporting such experiences approximately four times higher for women (OR = 4.01, 95% CI [1.58, 10.18], $p = 0.003$). This result underscores the persistent gendered nature of vulnerability in higher education environments.

Gender also significantly predicted perceptions of educational equity. Female students had substantially

lower odds of perceiving access to higher education as equal compared to male students (OR = 0.38, 95% CI [0.19, 0.77], p = 0.007), indicating pronounced gender differences in how institutional fairness is experienced and interpreted.

In contrast, gender did not significantly predict internship participation or enjoyment of current career paths. Although female students were less likely than male students to report internship participation and to enjoy their chosen career paths, these differences did not reach statistical significance. Finally, female students exhibited higher odds of expressing dissatisfaction with their field of study, as measured by a desire to have pursued a different academic field; however, this association approached but did not achieve conventional levels of statistical significance. Collectively, these findings suggest that while gender strongly shapes experiences related to harassment and perceptions of access, its influence on career satisfaction and experiential outcomes appears more complex and may be contingent on additional structural or contextual factors.

Table 3. *Logistic Regression Predicting Educational Experiences (Female = 1, Male = 0)*

Outcome (DV=1)	Odds Ratio (Female)	95% CI	p-value
Sexual harassment	4.01	[1.58, 10.18]	0.003
Internship participation	0.81	[0.40, 1.64]	0.555
Believe access is equal	0.38	[0.19, 0.77]	0.007
Enjoy current career	0.59	[0.29, 1.19]	0.140
Wish studied something else	1.95	[0.94, 4.07]	0.074

3.8 The Politics of Perception and Recognition

Beyond measurable disparities, one of the most significant findings of this study lies in the divergence between male and female perceptions of equality. The perception gap revealed in Table 1 highlights a fundamental political problem: inequality that is not recognized by those in power is unlikely to be addressed. In Ethiopia, as in many societies, political, economic, and institutional leadership remains disproportionately male. When male actors perceive higher education as gender-neutral, structural inequality becomes politically invisible.

This invisibility has material consequences. Policies are shaped not only by evidence but by political will, and political will is shaped by perception. If inequality is interpreted as marginal or nonexistent, reform can be framed as unnecessary or excessive. The perception gap thus functions as a stabilizing force, reinforcing the status quo by dampening urgency and legitimizing inaction. In this way, perception becomes a site of power, shaping which inequalities are acknowledged and which remain obscured. Importantly, the perception gap should not be interpreted as simple ignorance. Instead, it reflects differential positioning within social structures. Individuals embedded in systems that privilege them often experience those systems as neutral. Conversely, those who bear the costs of inequality are more likely to recognize its presence. This dynamic is central to understanding why gender inequality persists despite formal commitments to equality.

3.9 Social Capital and the Reproduction of Inequality

Social Capital Theory offers a compelling framework for explaining both material disparities and perception gaps. At its core, the theory emphasizes that resources are embedded in social relationships and that access to these resources is unevenly distributed. In the Ethiopian higher education context, the data suggest that men are more likely to benefit from bridging and linking forms of social capital, which extend beyond close-knit groups and connect individuals to institutional authority, professional networks, and decision-makers. These forms of capital facilitate access to internships, mentorship, and employment opportunities. They also provide informal guidance on navigating bureaucratic processes and institutional cultures. Male students' greater access to such networks helps explain their higher internship participation and greater satisfaction with career outcomes. It also shapes perception: individuals who move through institutions with relative ease are more likely to view those institutions as fair.

Female students, by contrast, appear to rely more heavily on bonding social capital. Strong ties with peers, particularly other women, provide emotional support, solidarity, and resilience in environments that may be hostile or exclusionary. The higher value women place on having female classmates and instructors reflects the importance of these supportive networks. However, bonding capital alone rarely grants access to institutional power or professional opportunity. As a result, women may find themselves

supported but constrained, connected but excluded from the channels through which advancement occurs. This distinction helps explain why gender inequality persists even when women demonstrate academic competence and resilience. The issue is not a lack of effort or aspiration but unequal access to the social resources that translate education into opportunity. Social capital thus operates as a hidden mechanism that reproduces inequality, often beneath the surface of formal policy.

3.10 Synthesis and Implications

The evidence presented in Table 1, when interpreted through a political and sociological lens, reveals a system in which gender inequality is produced through interaction between hostile environments, unequal access to networks, and divergent perceptions of fairness. Sexual harassment limits participation, restricted access to internships constrains opportunity, and perception gaps inhibit reform. Social capital mediates each of these processes, advantaging those already positioned within dominant networks.

This analysis reinforces the argument that gender inequality in Ethiopian higher education cannot be addressed through isolated or symbolic reforms. Effective change requires confronting informal institutions, redistributing access to networks, and challenging the perception gaps that legitimize inequality. For political science, the findings underscore the importance of integrating perception, informal power, and social structure into analyses of rights and development. Equality, as this study demonstrates, is not achieved through policy alone; it is negotiated through networks, norms, and recognition.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Implications for Human Rights and Political Science

This study has shown that gender inequality in Ethiopian higher education is neither episodic nor incidental. Instead, it is systemic, cumulative, and deeply embedded in the social and political architecture that governs access to opportunity. From the earliest stages of educational access through patterns of participation in universities to post-graduation outcomes, women encounter persistent disadvantages that shape both their academic trajectories and their life chances. Taken together, the findings reveal a higher education system that falls short of fulfilling the state's obligation to guarantee education as a fundamental human right. Formal commitments to equality coexist with informal practices and social norms that systematically undermine those commitments, producing predictably unequal outcomes.

The implications of these findings for public policy are substantial. First, the evidence of widespread sexual harassment in higher education institutions demands urgent attention. Sexual harassment is not merely a social ill or a disciplinary concern internal to universities; it constitutes a violation of personal security and dignity, and by extension, a violation of the right to education itself. When female students are subjected to intimidation, coercion, or abuse within academic spaces, their capacity to learn, participate, and advance is directly compromised. International human rights law imposes a clear obligation on states to protect citizens from such harms. Accordingly, Ethiopian higher education policy must move beyond symbolic commitments and adopt enforceable, standardized anti-harassment frameworks. These should include independent reporting mechanisms, legal protections against retaliation, mandatory investigations, and consequences that are credible enough to deter abuse. Without such measures, institutional silence functions as tacit complicity, reinforcing gendered vulnerability within academic spaces.

Second, the findings point to a structural gap in access to professional development opportunities, particularly internships and career-building experiences. These opportunities operate as critical bridges between education and employment, and unequal access to them has long-term consequences that extend well beyond graduation. The observed gender gap in internship participation suggests that informal networks and discretionary decision-making processes disproportionately advantage male students. Addressing this requires more than encouragement or awareness campaigns. Institutions must formalize transparent, merit-based allocation systems for internships, mentorship programs, and professional placements. Such systems should be monitored for gender equity and integrated into broader accountability frameworks. Without institutional reform, women remain peripheral participants in pathways essential to economic mobility and leadership development.

Third, the persistence of patriarchal norms emerges as a foundational constraint shaping educational inequality. These norms operate at multiple levels: within families, where expectations about gender roles influence educational investment; within communities, where women's aspirations may be socially constrained; and within institutions, where leadership structures and informal cultures often

reflect male dominance. Addressing these dynamics requires long-term, multi-level intervention. Educational reform must be paired with community-based initiatives that challenge restrictive gender norms and expand the range of socially acceptable futures for women and girls. Curriculum design, teacher training, and public discourse all play a role in reshaping how education is valued and for whom it is seen as transformative.

Beyond policy implications, this research makes several important contributions to political science. First, it advances the study of education by firmly situating it within a human rights framework. Rather than treating educational inequality as a development gap or a resource deficit, the analysis frames it as a political failure tied to state responsibility and accountability. This perspective reinforces the idea that access to education is not a discretionary policy choice but a legal and moral obligation grounded in international norms. By doing so, the study connects domestic educational outcomes to broader debates in comparative politics and international relations concerning state compliance with human rights standards.

Second, the study demonstrates the analytical value of Social Capital Theory as an explanatory tool rather than a descriptive metaphor. Gendered access to social capital, particularly bridging and linking networks, emerges as a key mechanism through which inequality is reproduced. Male students are more likely to benefit from networks that connect them to institutional authority, professional opportunities, and information channels that facilitate advancement. Female students, by contrast, rely more heavily on bonding networks that provide emotional support but limited access to institutional power. This uneven distribution of social capital helps explain why formal equality measures often fail to produce substantive equality in outcomes. The analysis thus contributes to political economy debates by showing how informal social structures mediate access to state-provided goods.

Third, the study enriches scholarship on African politics and development by incorporating a multi-sited perspective that includes domestic students, diaspora populations, and refugees. Educational inequality does not end at national borders; it travels with individuals as they migrate, seek refuge, or pursue opportunities abroad. By examining these populations together, the study highlights how inequalities rooted in the home context continue to shape experiences across transnational spaces. This approach adds depth to the study of migration and globalization, illustrating how structural disadvantage is reproduced even when individuals exit the immediate reach of the state.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the research underscores the political importance of perception gaps. The finding that male participants are substantially more likely than female participants to perceive higher education access as equal has profound implications for reform. Political change depends not only on evidence of inequality but also on its recognition by those in power. When dominant groups perceive the system as fair, structural disadvantage becomes politically invisible. This perception gap acts as a stabilizing force for inequality, dampening the urgency of reform and legitimizing the status quo. By foregrounding perception as a political variable, the study contributes to broader debates on power, recognition, and the politics of inequality.

In sum, this research demonstrates that gender inequality in Ethiopian higher education is sustained through an interaction of institutional weakness, patriarchal social norms, unequal access to social capital, and political misrecognition. Addressing these challenges requires more than policy adjustments at the margins; it demands a rethinking of how education, equality, and state responsibility are understood and operationalized. For political science, the study offers a compelling case of how informal institutions and perception gaps can undermine formal rights, reinforcing the need for analytically integrated approaches to human rights, development, and social justice.

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