

## **Affirmative Action in Higher Education: Experience from Bahir Dar University**

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**Abstract:** This article discusses affirmative action implementation experiences in Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. The study mainly focuses on affirmative action employed in the recruitment of female academics. Data was generated from interviews with university managers and heads of departments; focus group discussions with female academics and from policy and strategic plan document reviews. The study indicated that although the number of female academics has increased quite significantly and female academics benefited quite a lot from the affirmative action practices, the outcome was achieved without having a clear policy guideline, without clear communication among stockholders, without proper involvement of departments, faculties and other concerned bodies, and with no follow up support for affirmative action beneficiaries. Due to these problems, female academics face variety of workplace challenges. Many of the University community consider female academics less deserving of the position they hold. Female academics are also harassed by their male students in particular. These created frustrations in female teachers and a feeling of being insecure to work in an unhealthy environment.

**Keywords:** affirmative action, female academics, higher education

### **Introduction and Context**

In recent years, increasing the participation and representation of females in different sectors (education, business, leadership positions, etc.) is a fundamental issue. It is supported by governments, policy makers, and practitioners. To this end, affirmative action (AA) practices are being implemented worldwide. Ethiopia is not an exception. In Ethiopia females' role is restricted at home for centuries; very few females were educated and

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are trying to compete with their male counterparts. In recent years, however, AA policies and practices are being applied at various levels to assist females in their struggle for a better life. Education is one of the focuses of the AA initiative. The Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia, formulated in 1994, explains the need to give special attention to females at all levels of the education system (FDRGE, 1994). Based on this policy initiative, AA strategies are introduced in university entrance requirements, in employment, and placement at work places. These strategies help females get preferential treatment: for example, girls join universities with a lesser entrance exam result than boys.

In line with such a national initiative, Bahir Dar University (BDU) is also implementing AA, especially in recruitment of female academics. This practice has raised their number in a considerable way. For example until June 2004, the University had only 7 female academics (4 in the Faculty of Education, 1 in the Faculty of Business and Economics, and 2 in the Faculty of Engineering), which was not more than 3% of the total academics. In 2006 however, the number increased to 115 (89 Bachelor Degree holders, 6 Masters Degree holders, and 20 diploma holders serving as technical assistants). These were and are distributed across faculties (62 in the Faculty of Education, 40 in the faculty of Engineering, 10 in the Faculty of Business and Economics, 2 in the Faculty of Law, and 1 in the Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Science). The number of female academic grew to 14.4% of the total academics (Bahir Dar University Academic Programs Office, 2006). This change was achieved mainly due to the implementation of AA initiatives in the academics recruitment processes. But the change did not go smoothly; there were informal complaints on the recruitment processes and work place.

Literature indicates that AA is not favoured by all. Some favour AA practices because it challenges deep-rooted and persistent prejudices, discriminations and systemic barriers that hinder fair participation of females and minorities (Busby, 2006; Snyder, Cleveland, and Thornton, 2006; Holzer and Neumark, 2006; Crosby and Clayton, 2001); they also cited research evidence that

shows performance success of minorities and females who had benefited from AA though they have weaker credentials on paper (Holzer and Neumark, 2006). Some argue that discrimination is inefficient use of human resource (Snyder, Cleveland and Thornton, 2006; Holzer and Neumark, 2006). Others also believe that treating 'historically unequals equally' is not fair (Bacchi, 1996). On the other hand, those who argue against AA describe it as stigmatizing its recipients, hurt them due to mismatch between their skills and that required by the work. They also argue that AA perpetuates negative stigma regarding the abilities of minorities that even affects competent ones. AA also benefits less qualified and less deserving people and discriminates better qualified ones (Holzer and Neumark, 2006; Snyder et al., 2006; Crosby and Clayton, 2001; Bacchi, 1996). Opponents of AA contained that AA damage self-esteem by attaching success of every member of minorities to AA rather than individual talent and hard work (Crosby and Clayton, 2001).

Due to such complex arguments, AA implementation needs systematic change. The intervention should be based on thorough discussion, the value of AA, the criteria, the scope, the procedure, and the follow up mechanisms; discussions on such issues can contribute a lot for reducing challenges during execution (Knight and Hebl, 2005; Crosby and Clayton, 2001). More importantly, the value of continuous professional development support for an effective success of AA beneficiaries is becoming a serious agenda (Busby, 2006; Holzer and Neumark, 2006; Donovan, et al, 2005; Wunsch, 1993; Acker, 1992). Thus, from informal data and literature, there is a need to conduct research on AA implementation related issue in BDU to better understand the practices and consequences, to reduce problems and let other institutions learn from BDU's experiences. This research, thus, examines AA implementation experiences of BDU.

## **Research Questions**

This study was designed to answer the following basic questions.

1. What policies and practices are in place to decrease under-representation of females in the academia in BDU?
2. What is the consequence of AA practice in BDU: benefits, challenges, perceptions?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study could be relevant in respect to the following aspects.

- It identifies gaps between policy and practice.
- It helps BDU learn from its strengths and weaknesses.
- It helps AA practitioner institutes to evaluate their strategies.
- It creates awareness on what has to be done to make AA practices effective.
- It also informs AA beneficiaries the need to make preparations in order to overcome challenges.
- It indicates to higher education institutes the basic preconditions for a successful AA practices.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **Definition and Scope of Affirmative Action**

Robert (1990, p.77 cited in Bacchi, 1996) defines AA as, "A generic term for programmes which take some kind of initiative either voluntary or under the compulsion of law, to increase, maintain, or encourage the number or status of certain group members usually defined by race or gender." From Holzer's and Neumark's perspective (2006, p.463), AA refers to "a set of practices undertaken by employers, university admissions offices, and government agencies to go beyond non-discrimination, with the goal of actively improving

the economic status of minorities and women with regard to employment, education, and business ownership and growth.” Knight and Hebl (2005) identified three forms of AA: compensatory procedures, proportional selection quotas, and weak preferential treatment. The compensatory procedures, that take the form of “increased recruiting, training, mentoring, and career guidance for targeted groups” (P. 50), are said to be more likely to be accepted because it does not give weight to a particularistic feature (like gender, race). In the proportional selection quotas, individuals are selected based on the quota given to that particular group. But weak preferential treatment gives preference to qualified member of a certain group but higher weight is given to gender/race than given by the other forms. According to Knight and Hebl (2005), when more weight is given to the particularistic characteristics, the reaction of people will be more negative. Busby (2006, p.45) indicated that AA can have “radical policies based on sex conscious criteria such as selecting a less qualified female over a better qualified male...to reach a prescribed quota”, or a relatively fair support mechanism that assist the underrepresented groups by “leveling the playing field” which can be undertaken in the form of “targeted provision of training to increase the promotional prospects of the members”.

Holzer and Neumark (2006) also describe that in addition to special recruitment efforts given to minorities and females, in some cases, additional considerations are taken into account even knowing that candidates are weaker in certain dimensions. This kind of treatment gives extra value for the beneficiaries that go beyond the relatively agreed up standard for considering minorities. For Over and Sherwood (1994) internal promotion strategies (competing without external advertisement, being informed about a position from a mentor, and being encouraged to apply) are AA practices. The assumption behind the internal promotion strategies is that since it is not open for outsiders, it can reduce the possibility of having many competent applicants who could make the competition tougher. These indicate that the forms of AA vary from smaller supports (encouraging, providing information, offering training, mentoring and guiding etc.), to stronger measures (securing

quotas, giving additional value for gender or race, etc.) which has implications for the controversies on AA practices.

### **Why Affirmative Action is Argumentative?**

AA is an argumentative issue, some advocate it and others stand against it. Both groups present their own reasoning to convince audiences. Researchers try to provide answers to the why of such debates. According to Snyder, Cleveland and Thornton (2006) attitude towards AA plans and activities are affected by self interest, belief in the existence of discrimination, and racism. Because females and minority males benefit from AA, they usually support it; females also are said to believe in the existence of discrimination; and people of colour have more positive attitude towards AA. Knight and Hebl (2005) also describe the impact of type of AA and type of justification; their research indicated that “increased recruiting of minority applicants was somewhat fair, that proportional selection quotas were somewhat unfair, and that weak preferential treatment was very unfair” (Knight and Hebl, 2005, p. 556). The result also shows that provision of justifications (information about rationales, objectives, forms, selection procedures, individual and institutional benefits etc. of AA) positively influenced attitudes and justifications needs to be phrased in a way that positively influences judgment of the participants: how the program supports the beneficiaries, how it supports the community as a whole including non-beneficiaries, or both. This can maintain social harmony, inter-group peace, individual happiness, efficiency, and profitability (Crosby and Clayton, 2001), and make AA congruent with equal opportunity (Bacchi, 1996).

Generally, it is possible to say that any kind of well planned, properly implemented and formally evaluated activity that is intended to improve the status of disadvantaged groups can be considered as AA. The planning, implementation and evaluation process should not only focus on AA activities but it also should include post-recruitment tasks, like provision of a follow up Continuous Professional Development (CPD) program to empower AA beneficiaries by filling gaps and ensuring success (Busby, 2006; Holzer

and Neumark, 2006; Wunsch, 1993). It might be easier to recruit based on AA initiatives, **but, unless** AA beneficiaries involve in CPD, challenges may persist.

## **Methodology**

This study is a qualitative research. As the issue is controversial, argumentative, and politically highly sensitive, qualitative methods are believed to be better strategies to gain deeper data that can effectively address the focus of the research. The study tries to explore AA implementation experiences of BDU based on qualitative data generated from interview, focus group discussion (FGD) and document review.<sup>1</sup> BDU was selected because of the informal data gained from different sources for its intensive use of AA initiatives in the recruitment of female academics. The researcher also believes that investigating such a practice could be vital for the University itself as well as for other universities that wish to implement AA in a better way by getting lessons from the BDU experience.

## **Data Sources**

Data were generated from academic managers of the University, Heads of Departments (HoDs), and female academics. A total of 5 top academic managers (academic vice president, academic program officer, two faculty deans and an assistant dean from five faculties) were selected purposively. It is believed that these have a better understanding of AA policy, practices, and outcomes. From seventeen departments having female academics, 3 Head of Departments (HoDs) who were available for interviews were included in the study to enable the research to gain data about their perception, involvement in recruitment decision makings, and experiences at department level. Thirty female academics who were available in the University during the data collection participated in the FGDs.

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<sup>1</sup> The data were collected from April – May, 2007

## **Instruments**

Interview, FGD, and document review were used to generate data. Interview and FGD scheme were designed based on literature and the focus of the research. After design, the instruments were evaluated by two educational experts and consequent improvements were made. Interview was used to collect data from top managers and HoDs. The interviews focused on availability of AA related policies, nature of AA practices and its outcomes. All the interviews were semi-structured. FGDs were conducted with female academics, almost all were graduate assistants- with Bachelor Degrees (only one is a lecturer – with a Masters Degree). The main points raised in the discussion include attitude towards AA, benefits and challenges of AA, and support mechanism after recruitment. Discussions were audio-taped; some key note was also taken during discussions. Document review was used to generate data from Senate Legislation (Bahir Dar University, 2005) and the 5 and 20 years strategic plans of BDU (Bahir Dar University, 2003) about existing policies and plans to enhance representation of female academics.

## **Data Analysis**

As discussed in Miles and Huberman (1994), a general analytic practice was used to analyze the data. That is, the qualitative data generated from interviews, FGDs and documents were transcribed, reread to check for accuracy, summarized, and thematically categorized. Thematic categories were drawn from the generated data in consideration of research questions. The interview result was analyzed using the pseudo names given to the participants for the purpose of anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality. The FGD result was analyzed as a group; necessary words of individual participants are quoted to clarify and support identified thematic categories. Identified thematic categories and patterns were described and discussed to draw generalizations. To care for the quality of the overall analysis and reduce partiality in drawing generalizations, data gained from the different

sources (academic managers, HoDs and female academics) and different methods (interview, FGD) were supplemented.

## **Result**

### **Affirmative Action Policy and Practices**

#### **Policy**

The review of the Senate Legislation of BDU indicated the absence of a clear guideline on preferential treatment in academics recruitment. It only describes the minimum Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) required to be a graduate assistant, which is 2.75 and under special conditions, it can go down to 2.5. As explained by all of the interviewees, this information serves as a way for making interventions in situations requiring preferential treatment. The problem here is that it does not clearly specify the special conditions, which in turn may create implementation challenges. The other document examined is the strategic plan of the University (Bahir Dar University, 2003). Despite vagueness and inexistence of policies in the legislation in relation to raising the representation of females in the academics, the 20 years strategic plan stated that around the year 2023, the ratio of male and female academics of BDU will be 50:50, and that of female managers will be above 30%. Some of the strategies set to achieve these objectives are “following affirmative action policies in female college entrance, employment, management training programs, etc., providing academic and social support for females in need, extensive training and awareness programs and activities in and out of BDU communities for attitudinal and behavioural change,” (Bahir Dar University, 2003, p. 16). This strategic plan fits with the national initiatives and plans to increase the participation of females (FDRGE, 1994). However, the plan in itself will not be an end; its implementation requires a number of activities to be done, including policy making and standard setting which BDU lacks. Manager B is aware of the danger of performing with no guiding principles. He said the following.

We do not have affirmative action policy, but the practice is strong compared to other universities. Yet, this is not enough. The practice should not be something done irregularly with the positive feeling of some individuals. There should be a clear policy guideline and procedure that anyone coming into the management position can implement.

From the reply Manager B gave, it is possible to understand the danger of practicing AA without having a guiding principle. The response also implies the necessity of policy formulation that is based on international experiences, the Ethiopian context and the specific needs of a particular institute. In doing so, the practice can be well grounded, well supported, well defended and consistently accomplished.

### **Practices**

The data generated from interviews and documents indicated that AA during recruitment of female academics is being implemented without having clear, agreed upon procedures and criteria; it is done only as per the strategic plan. Manager B said, "If females fulfil minimum requirements though they are competing with a male having greater grade, priority is given to them." But the priority given depends on the way the recruitment is undertaken. The data obtained from the top management and HoDs indicate that the University is using three kinds of recruitment procedures. The first is conducted by a committee (one representative from each faculty and some top managers); this is applied in vacant positions announced via national media (TV, radios, news papers), and the committee has its own criteria to apply. The second type is a procedure used by departments to recruit their own graduates. Here, only members of a department select qualified candidates based on a number of criteria and the academic commission of their respective faculty approves or rejects their proposal. The third one is a procedure applied only to recruitment of female graduates of the University. This is conducted through the Academic Programs Office (APO). APO posts internal announcements and BDU female graduates of that academic year

participate. Unlike the other two, competition is only among females and selection is made only on the basis of CGPA.

Thus, in recruitments conducted by committees (to fill in vacancies advertised at a national level for an externally vacant position) and departments (selection from own graduates), female applicants get fixed extra points other than those gained based on the required credentials. If a female exceeds a male candidate with the addition of this point, she wins the position. However, in recruitment done by APO, as long as the female's CGPA is not less than 2.5, she can win provided that the number of applicants for a specific department and the plan matches. That is, if the plan is to recruit two females for a department and the female applicants are more than two, there will be competition among them based on their CGPA.

This inconsistency in the procedures and criteria resulted in negative consequences: departments that already gave priority to females in recruitments undertaken at department level receive extra female academics recruited by APO and they feel that their legislative right in selecting suitably qualified academics for their respective department is taken away. The legislation gives department and faculty academic commissions the right to make decisions regarding recruitment of its graduate. Manager D commented that:

In previous years, departments used to assess the personality, overall aptitude of applicants in addition to CGPA. Recently, however, departments' role is almost none; even in the selection of applicants for externally vacant positions, only one person from each faculty is represented in the committee. This by itself creates dissatisfaction, destroys ownership, departments do not care about arising problems because they think they are not responsible for that.

This quotation indicates the risks brought by radical shift in practices. The shift from an already established academics recruitment system that gave

more responsibility to departments and faculties to a system that totally ignores their roles and responsibilities resulted in carelessness, and hopelessness. It destroyed ownership and accountability. It would have been fair to give more attention to the established system and try to communicate, discuss, and reach consensus with concerned bodies about the value of applying AA initiatives so as to respond to national and international developments in the area of enhancing representation of disadvantaged groups.

HoDs also emphasized the value of relying on the legislation and giving responsibility to departments to keep quality or create smooth and healthy work relationship. HoD K reflected his feeling:

I remember female graduates with a 2.5 CGPA were claiming to be recruited as if it is a right. It should be done in line with the University's Legislation. The present recruitment is not following the rules and regulations. The departments do not have roles. We do not have information on how they are employed; we are ordered only to accept them. Departments should have a role in the process.

As shown in the quoted excerpt, HoD K's replies shows dissatisfaction exhibited at department levels. Although the legislation gives departments rights to involve in recruitment processes, AA driven recruitments violate those rights. The development of such feelings at department level has implications for workplace interactions. It can negatively impact interaction among academics which may hinder opportunities to learn from each other. As experience tells, newly recruited academics learn many academic issues as well as other routines from their seniors. Thus, the dissatisfaction observed at department level due to improper recruitment procedures may harm newly employed academics by blocking or limiting workplace learning opportunities.

The top management is also aware of some of the complaints. Manager B described it like this:

To be frank, this created complaints. Both male and female senior staffs were not happy with it. Especially in the first years, there were problems. There was gossip as if recruited females did not fulfil the requirement. It is true that if you see their grades, I can say 99% of the males have a CGPA above 3.00, but for females it goes down to 2.5. The University did this because 2.5 is legislatively supported under special conditions.

Although the top management was aware of the complaints raised at department and faculty levels, no intervention was made to clarify matters. They just hear it and leave it. There was little concern or little awareness about its impact on workplace interaction. They should have created mechanisms so that confusions can be cleared, pros and cons of the AA practice can be discussed and workplace harmony can be prioritized. Instead, the top management blames faculties and departments for transferring their right to APO because of their own failure. According to manager C, recruitments made at top management level were implemented because faculties and departments were not ready to apply preferential treatment in employing female graduates.

Generally, the data generated from the interviews indicated that the AA practices in BDU were not perceived positively even with people having leadership roles because its implementation was not based on an established criteria and procedure. It violates the Legislation, at least in terms of participation of departments/faculties in the process. As a result, faculty and department heads argue that the preferential treatment itself as well as the way it is practiced is not legislative.

## **Consequences of the AA Practice: Benefits, Challenges, Perceptions**

### **Benefits**

Female academics who participated in the FGDs believed that the AA has created chances that would have been rare if the initiative had been inexistent. The power of AA in attacking the influential factors hindering females from performing up to their capacity was a recurrent point in the discussions. The words of one of the participants are worth quoting here.

We all know our culture, the family influence on girls; we know how a girl and a boy are treated in a family. The boy can study, can collaborate with his friends, can come home late or pass the night somewhere else, but the girl cannot. She has to help her mother; she has to be at home most of the time. We all pass through such challenging conditions. I think, some support is necessary to compensate losses due to these obstacles. To me, affirmative action is one of the support mechanisms.

As can be understood from this quote, differences in upbringing of a boy and a girl due to cultural influence are used to support the necessity of AA programs for disadvantaged females. Due to cultural influence, girls have less freedom than boys especially in collaborating with others. Usually, parents prefer their daughters to stay at home due to fear of sexual abuse; girls also have more household responsibility of supporting their mothers than boys. These restrictions and burdens influence females' academic performance negatively. Thus, AA practices are considered as mechanisms of compensating for the losses caused by such cultural influences.

The other positive thing frequently raised in the FGDs is related to the value of AA in creating motivation on the part of the beneficiaries. Participants focus on the motive they developed after they joined the academic environment. One participant said, "When females get an opportunity of becoming academics in a way that they never expect, their motivation

increases. They become hard working. I have observed this kind of change in the colleagues I knew as a student, in myself too. It makes you think of the possibility and work hard for development.” Here, the motivational value of AA is emphasized. After recruitment through AA initiatives, female academics developed the motive to work hard for betterment. This might be because the AA practice has challenged their prior wrong perceptions.

The FGDs participants also see the AA as a way that creates conditions for easier access to educate oneself. They believed that working in the University by itself creates better access to innovations like the use of ICT, recent research findings, and recent theoretical as well as practical developments. They also appreciated working with people having rich experiences and expertise. One of the participants said:

You work with experienced professionals and experts. If you are eager and systematic, you can learn from informal talks, from their daily routine. There is a challenge, but if you want to get something from their expertise and experience, the door is not closed. There are some people who are keen to share, there are also their opposites.

A related topic focused on during the discussions was getting further education within a shorter period of time. The word of one of the participants, quoted below, summarizes the ideas raised in all the FGDs.

Doing your Masters within a shorter period is a crucial part; you are also motivated for that because of the environment. The majority of the academic staff is above you, the Legislation requires and encourages you to grow horizontally as well vertically; everybody talks about searching for scholarships, doing a masters or a PhD, conducting research, etc. Seeing these, you will not be out of the group. You know, if I work in an office, all these motivating opportunities will be very rare.

As experience tells, the Ethiopian government is committed to improve the professional qualifications and standards of higher education teachers. To this end, opportunities of doing a Masters Degree are guaranteed. There is also a great move towards expanding Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs. As a result, higher education institutes are becoming preferred workplaces for individuals who want to upgrade their professional qualifications. Besides this, higher education institutes are places where many highly qualified professional work. Participants of this study, thus, appreciated all these learning opportunities and believed that this was possible due to the AA practice.

The other major aspect raised during the FGDs relates the value of the AA to female students. Participants believed that having female academics is valuable in having role models. A participant explained this as follows. The points the respondent raised highlight the ideas raised by all participants of the FGDs.

It is also good for female students, they share their problems with me freely; they feel comfortable to talk in classes and while coming to my office. Our existence as academic staff here may change their attitude, they may think of the possibility of achieving higher status. Generally, we can be role models for them.

The participants believed that seeing female academics in the University can be one motivating factor for female students' academic success. It may initiate female students to work hard to achieve better in their academic life. It can make them more visionary; it can ease their university life as they can share their problems and challenges with female academics more freely. Manager D also explained that increasing the number of female academics can be a power to induce further supportive strategies for females; when the University has more female academics, there will be more opportunities to undertake gender sensitive programs. The increase in the number of female academics is also important to provide more support for female students. The profile by itself may be valued by government because enhancing the

representation of females in every sector is one of the development goals of the Ethiopian government.

### **Challenges**

Although the AA practice has the benefits described above, the FGDs participants believed that students, the academics as well as the top management are directly or indirectly creating challenges. Many participants believed that the extent to which AA is being applied (the gap between female's and male's grade), the way recruitment is undertaken, and inadequate attempt made to communicate about AA are the major causes for most of the problems being experienced. The discussions revealed that the major challenges female academics face include being considered as inefficient, perceiving AA as a movement against males, harassment, frustrations, and unfavourable work environment.

The first challenge participants in every group emphasized was the wrong perception most people have about female academics' competence. For most of the University community, females are not fit for the positions they hold, and are there only because of the AA. In the discussions, they reflect the experiences they had in this respect. A participant from the Engineering Faculty explained her experience as follows.

In our faculty courses that Bachelor holders can offer are clearly identified. During allocations, we are asked to choose the course we want to teach. But if my choice is a course that the person in charge of allocating considers tougher, he will give it to a male staff who has the same qualification and experience as I have. When I ask for the reason, he tells me that he thinks the man can teach it better. My interest is not considered, my performance is not evaluated, and such a decision is made just because I am a female. I taught courses that I do not want to teach for a number of semesters.

Another respondent from the Engineering Faculty explained a related challenge as, “Students also feel as if they are not learning well when they are taught by a female academics. Some students even go to a male’s classes if he is teaching the same course to other students.” From the above two responses, it is possible to understand the extent to which the University community (both teachers and students) perceive the abilities of female academics. According to the participants there is a tendency to perceive female academics as less competent regardless of their performance. It seems there is a predetermined prejudice about female academics teaching efficiency.

The HoDs and the top management were also asked whether efficiency problem is observed. Almost all described that informally, they got information from students and academics. But no one had concrete evidence, and no attempt was made to check whether the information has a real base. Manager B said the following.

As I told you, most of the female academics are graduate assistants. According to the legislation they are not meant to teach. But because the University does not have adequate senior staffs, graduate assistants are offering courses without experience, without time for preparation, without adequately understanding the course they teach. We are giving roles that they should not have to play. This can result in problems but it is not unique to females, males also share.

According to Manager B, even if efficiency problems are experienced, it is not peculiar to females. However, the issue here is inefficiency is more emphasized if the teacher is a female. This is because many of the female academics were recruited via AA initiatives. The University community tends to associate every efficiency problem with the AA practice rather than critically examining possible causes. Such experiences indicate the problems with managing the change process. As AA initiatives are new developments in the Ethiopian context, it requires careful planning,

execution, monitoring, follow-up and evaluation. When the University community shows reactions like this (perceiving AA beneficiaries as inefficient), mechanisms of studying the perception, designing and implementing interventions need to be exercised. Failure to do so seemed to result in sustaining the prejudices.

HoDs, on the other hand, associate performance weaknesses with grading. According to them, female academics give inflated grades to cover their weakness. Two of the HoDs interviewed believed that female academics give good grades so as to reduce complaints from students. HoD K explained a case as: "One of our staff did this, and the department changed the grade, then students complained saying 'she has promised to give good grade'. But this doesn't represent all female academics; there are females who are doing fine." However, HoD L has a different story. In his department, female academics are competent. They perform well, accomplish tasks on time, cooperate for any kind of work, and no complaint has been experienced about them. He also described that grading is not done only by an individual teacher but the teacher along with other committee members in the department sit together and decide the scale. As a result, according to him "there is no way to give inflated grades". One thing this department head also mentioned is that the female academics in his department have also good credentials on paper, their own CGPA is good. Departmental good practices (like conducting grading in committees as HoD L explained) can be shared across faculties to avoid complaints. Such practices can help the female academics who try to 'cover inefficacy', look for ways of improving this efficiency. This can happen if the University tries to monitor and follow-up AA practice related issues.

The second challenge that female academics described is related to development of wrong perception about AA, considering AA as a movement against males. In the discussions, most of them raised their observations and experiences. Even in one of the discussions, a participant pointed at a group of males to consolidate her ideas. The discussion was being held in an open air in front of a cafeteria. A group of males were staring at the

females' hot discussion. She takes that as an example to describe how much males feel uncomfortable to see female gatherings. The participants believed that in BDU, the male academics feel uncomfortable with the increase in the number of female academics. This issue was recurrently discussed in all the groups. A participant said "Male staffs also directly insult you, saying "it is your time; enjoy the favour at the cost of males' failure". Another participant added "Some male staffs are not happy with our presence. They also indirectly discriminate; their gossip discourages." HoD L also describes a related issue although from the point of view of male students, he said "you can sense a feeling of hopelessness on male students; even if their academic achievement is higher, females with lower grades can be preferred to be recruited as academic staff. This creates a negative feeling; they consider it as hurting them." By and large, this can be associated with AA implementation problems, the dissatisfaction about the AA practice. It seems that AA driven recruitments made without the consent of departments and faculties affected the perception of the University community negatively resulting in less comfortable workplace interaction among female and male academics.

On the other hand, Manager B associates the negative perception of the senior academics who were newly recruited ones (both females and males) with sharing benefits. A related with feeling is reflected in HoD M's descriptions of young academics in general. He said the following.

Young graduates are not concerned about task; they are concerned about money and benefit. I can tell you an example; there was a staff in my department who does not have class in the regular program. She did not come to the department for a whole month. But when she heard that I was distributing memory stick, she came and asked me. Is it not necessary to advice students? Is it not good to read in the library or office? Is having a class the only reason to come to the University? I am sorry to say, they are not concerned about work only.

In recent years, the University is expanding and a lot of academics are being recruited. The increase in the number of academics, regardless of sex, has implications for financial and other benefits. That was believed to be the source of discomfort, according to Manager B.

The third challenge discussed is harassment, a serious problem frequently mentioned by participants of the main campus. The harassment comes from male students. It ranges from showing disrespect to verbal as well as more serious threats. The majority of the participants believed that students do not usually welcome a female academic. A participant said "Grading is very difficult. Because I am a female, they do not fear; they even try to harass. Personally, I changed my house due to students' harassment. They came to my home and disturb. I was living close to the campus. I thought it would be good to be far if that helps and moved to another area." Another participant also explained about a related story as follows.

Students create a lot of challenges. They come even to my home; terrify me in person and through telephone. They insult me. Sometimes they even try to beat. I know that this did not happen of males. I reported to my department, but there was no solution. So I take my own measure, having a guard. At that time, I was also thinking of leaving the job and search for another.

The top managers also explained the existence of serious problem in this regard. All of them described cases experienced in their faculty. In one faculty, a case was seen by the faculty's discipline committee and the student who harassed the female academics was dismissed from the University for about a year. In the other faculty, the dean heard about a case that female academics was verbally harassed and fears to come to her office. He asked the department to bring evidence to be seen by the discipline committee but the department failed to do so, and as a result no measure was taken. Cases where female academics were forced to change grades due to harassments from male students were also described by the managers. The participants believed that although the impact of these kinds

of harassment depends on the confidence the female academics has and how carefully she performs her work, it disturbs at least psychologically.

According to the FGDs participants, these challenges created frustrations on the part of female academics and make the work environment unhealthy. The participants in all the FGDs indicated that female academics are expected to work harder to overcome all the challenges. They believed that in order to be perceived positively by students, they have to always be outstanding. For them, this is frustrating and demanding. Two quotes that summarize the ideas raised in the different FGDs are presented as follows.

You always think of making an excellent lecture; if you fail to do so even in one session, students will not perceive it positively. Sometimes, due to different reasons, there is a probability of going to class less prepared. This time, if the teacher is a male, they perceive it as lack of preparation; if a female, they see it as an indicator of her academic weakness. Every time, I have to be careful to avoid such criticisms.

At the beginning, it is difficult; students judge before they see your performance; you have to work very hard and show your capability to make them develop a positive feeling; this is challenging. Even some students purposely try to frustrate by posing questions that they think I can't properly answer.

Due to such challenges, participants of the FGDs described the environment as "harsh". The fewer acceptances by some of their own department academics, male students and the University community in general, the harassment they experience, the informal hearsays that circulate in the University and direct insults experienced make the work environment unfavourable. As one of the participants said, many of them believe that "If the female is not well prepared to confront, properly handle and overcome the challenges, the environment is hard to live in." This shows the magnitude of workplace challenge experienced by female academics of BDU.

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According to the participants of the study, the workplace challenges are shared by every female academics.

### **Perceptions**

Although the majority of participants of the study have positive attitude towards AA in general, the way they perceive it differs. Some of them see it as a necessity; others believe in its value but are much worried about its consequences. Some prefer support mechanism at lower level to make girls competent, and some totally disagree with AA agenda.

The first category of participants believed that girls and boys in Ethiopia do not have equal opportunity to concentrate on their education. Some families who have better educational background and/or better economic condition do not treat their daughter and son equally. This puts females at a disadvantage. Thus, AA is a necessary intervention. Explanations like “Its necessity is not questionable, not because females are inferior but because they are disadvantaged due to different factors.” were recurrent in the discussions. The participant quoted below, focused on the impact of sexual relation requests on university female students’ achievement.

Male students or teachers may impact on a girl’s performance due to sexual relation. If male students want to disturb, it is easy, they know how to do it. Some instructors also want sexual relation with female students. If she fails to respond positively, it will have impact on her grade. Due to this and other background related problems, it is difficult for most girls to compete with males and reach higher status. In this condition, affirmative action can play a role in smoothening the way.

According to participants who believed in the necessity of AA practices, even in universities where male and female students live in campus and family burdens are believed to be minimal, there are more serious problems that affect the females’ academic achievement. Most of them focus on the impact

of sexual relations. Female students have to react to all kinds of sexual issues themselves. This creates psychological disturbance which affects their academic progress.

The second category of participants also believed in the value and necessity of AA in increasing the representation of females but they are worried about its consequences. An explanation quoted from one of the FGD participants elaborates this.

To some extent affirmative action is good in encouraging females; but it is creating a bad image on the society; they think as if females are incompetent; they feel that females couldn't achieve high without support. The staffs as well as student are developing this feeling. Its negative side is becoming huge.

The participants also tried to associate the community's feeling with the kind of AA being implemented. Most of them explained that it should be fair enough so as not to create an exaggerated preferential treatment; "the support should be reasonably fair" was a recurrent issue. The issue of being fair, providing preferential treatment for a female reasonably and relatively deserving, was also an issue two of the HoDs emphasized. HoD K said the following:

If you favour a female with a grade point not too far from the male, that is good. If you use affirmative action in a way that does not affect the quality of education, the psychology of the female, it is good. Otherwise, it will create crisis, it will devalue the name of the University.

HoDs associate this kind of fairness with caring for the quality of education besides creating harmony among academics of the University. According to them, people will not complain about reasonable positive actions because all are part of the society. They know how females are treated. The resistance, at least in informal talks, resulted from the way the AA is practiced.

The third category of FGD participants considered supporting students at lower levels (during student life) as the best strategy to increase the participation of females rather than applying gender-based AA during university entrance and/or employment. The HoDs also emphasized the value of supporting females while they are students. For them, especially the University can observe the performances of females during their first year and can provide necessary support for those who are doing fine to keep on. The support can include verbal encouragement, material support, indicate the possibility of having bright futures if they continue to study hard, and having a follow-up mechanism to respond if they face problems. The HoDs focused on these aspects because they observed some female students who achieve good grades in the first year at the University but gradually decrease for reasons not clearly known. Manager C also shares this idea: "I prefer the provision of tutorial support, material support or support in other ways which they are students to enable them to perform well. Then if the gap is narrow and relatively fair, encouraging a female is fine. Otherwise, I think, putting a female in a situation that requires beyond her capacity makes her suffer." However, there was overwhelming argument among FGDs participants almost in every group on this issue. Those who strongly believe in the necessity of AA were not against supporting female students. Their argument lies in the fact that in the current condition the support that everybody aspires is not available; female students struggle with all kind of obstacles. So, they believed that there is no choice other than applying AA.

The fourth category of the FGD participants, on the other hand, considered AA as unnecessary because it undermines females' talent and encourages them to develop persistent negative perception. One of the participants argued as "Affirmative action destroys hard work. I can understand how female students' perception is being affected with it. They have started thinking of fulfilling the minimum requirement rather than trying to achieve a higher result. I believe, if a girl starts to think about the 'at least', she will never achieve the 'at most'." The focus of this category of participants was on development of feeling of dependency on AA initiatives. As described earlier in this article, AA is considered as having motivational value, to work

hard for continuous development, but there is also a feeling that it can perish desires to exert much effort for success. This invites further investigation in the area.

## **Discussion**

The result of this study indicated that AA driven female academics recruitment is made without having a guiding policy document. The management of the University cite a vague phrase in the Senate Legislation and the strategic plan of the university as guidelines for the AA practice though strategic plans cannot replace policy documents. According to Crosby and Clayton (2001) and Knight and Hebl (2005), implementing AA without a clear policy can harm achieving intended outcomes. It is clear that goal setting is an essential part of any change but the goals cannot be an end in themselves; there should be strategies, procedures, or standards that help in effectively realizing stated goals. Let alone having no guiding principles and procedures, as Fullan (1991) explained, the implementation of a change is even affected by clarity of means of execution. In this regard, BDU is far behind and this implies the urgency of working on policy formulation.

Although there is no policy to guide AA practice, AA is intensively implemented in BDU in different forms: 1) giving extra weight/point to a female; 2) arranging special recruitment procedure where only females compete–targeted hiring. These strategies significantly increased the number of female academics in BDU within a very short period of time, from 7 in June 2004 to 115 in March 2006. This matches with the worldwide emphasis given to raise representation of females in the academic environment (White, 2003; Donovan et al., 2005; Acker and Feuerverger, 1996; Over and Sherwood, 1994; Wunsch, 1993; Acker, 1992). It and addresses concerns of the Ethiopian government on enhancing females' participation at all levels of the education sector (FDRGE, 1994). However, the strategies were sources of concerns and complaints. As Knight and Hebl (2005) explained, targeted hiring and giving more weight for the

particularistic issue (gender in this case) creates challenges. In such cases, a great deal of work has to be done to convince whiners through discussion and provision of systematic justifications (Knight and Hebl, 2005) as to how recruiting more female academics can benefit females themselves, male academics, the University, and the country at large. Such kinds of discussions can challenge prejudices, clear misconceptions, create positive insights, initiate critical thinking about the pros and cons of the AA practice and enable individuals to reach logical conclusions.

Crosby and Clayton (2001) indicated that in applying AA initiatives, a great deal of concern should be paid for social harmony, individual happiness, and inter-group peace so as to get the support of all stakeholders. However, in the case of BDU, the result of the study shows that emphasis was given to recruitment only; concern for orienting the community, communication among people in the top and lower management levels and stakeholder involvement in the decision making processes about AA related issues was minimal. As a result, departments and faculties complained about the AA practice. They do not have information about how the female academics are recruited, especially in recruitments made at the APO level. They lost their legislative right in making decision on recruitment processes. The consequence of this is destroying accountability. It negatively affects interaction among academics. They blame blaming each other rather than find collaborative solutions to problems. This puts the female academics into a challenging environment.

Although the issues discussed above indicate the extent to which implementation of AA initiatives in BDU was problematic, the result of the study also highlights the benefits of the AA practice. The AA practice has benefited female academics by giving chances that would have been rare in the absence of AA been missing. For most of them, becoming academics without support was impossible. It also created motivation for further development; they believed that after the door is opened, it is up to each of the individual female academics to work hard and continue growing. It also gave them better access to graduate level education and informal learning

from experienced academics. The University encourages, supports, and requires every academics to upgrade their academic qualifications and the environment by itself motivates one to look for further education opportunities. There was also a perception about the positive contribution of having more female academics in the University who can be role models for female students. However, all these benefits are shadowed by challenges female academics are facing. They experience harassments especially from male students; the University community considers them inefficient in their tasks simply because they are recruited via AA initiatives. They are expected to work harder to convince the community that wrongly perceives their abilities. All these challenging situations created a feeling of frustration, especially for beginners. The result of the study also indicated the negative impact of the experienced challenges on perception about AA. Some AA beneficiaries tend to prefer support offered to students to make them competent, with others even consider AA as unnecessary. Thus, there is a need to seriously consider about how to make AA activities efficient and constructive.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, almost all participants of the study focused on reasonable preferential treatment indicating that the current situation is far from being perfect. This also has an implication for participants' dissatisfaction with the current AA practice of the University. Although most of the participants have positive attitude towards AA, concerns due to implementation problems were recurrent. Most agreed with reasonable and fair preferential treatment that doesn't create reverse discrimination. This result matches with the idea of not giving too much weight to gender (Knight and Hebl, 2005), and making AA congruent with equal opportunities principle (Bacchi, 1996). The way AA is being applied in BDU and the perception being developed by the University community seem to be negatively impacting attitude towards AA. If the AA implementation was reasonably fair, complaints and challenges would have been minimal. As Knight and Hebl (2005) described the type of AA and the justification provided affect attitudes. The BDU community did

not get adequate information (justification) on AA related issues. The weight given to gender is believed to be much; as a result, the attitude towards the AA initiative is affected negatively. As part of the Ethiopian society, the University community is not unaware of problems females are facing. If the University implemented AA in a more systematic way, that is, communicating the rationale, objective, procedure, criteria and relevance, its acceptance would increase. Involving individuals from the different hierarchies of an organization in the decision making process (Fullan, 1992) would have reduced challenges. Thus, it is possible to conclude from this research that implementing AA without having a policy, without making clear communication among various stakeholders, without involving stakeholders in decision making processes, and without having clear monitoring and follow-up strategies about workplace experiences results in serious damages to AA beneficiaries and institutes.

### **Implications**

What can be learnt from the BDU experience?

- Preparation of AA policy document that clearly sets the standards, criteria and procedures is the first thing any institution should do. This enhances consistency, and fairness. It can also reduce challenges.
- Involvement of stakeholders in the planning, policy formulation and decision making processes is very essential. Thus in implementing AA, getting the attention, interests, and wishes of stakeholders, making thorough discussions and reaching a reasonable consensus are very crucial. Every aspect of the change process should be communicated to the various stakeholders. This may enhance the support stakeholder will have for the initiative.
- Communicating about AA related issues to university communities in general for awareness creation can help reduce challenges beneficiaries may face in the work place.
- University managers have core responsibilities of enhancing quality of education, harmony among academics, and creating positive,

collaborative, collegial culture. Thus, AA practice should be done with clear awareness and consideration of these components.

- Simply focusing on execution of AA at entry level (in this case employment), without concern for workplace situation and ongoing support will not bring any successful story. Follow-up mechanism as to how AA beneficiaries are doing is necessary. This makes it possible for BDU to evaluate practice and design intervention strategies.

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