



TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION: NEW INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

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Champions of Hurdles: A Multiple Case Study on the Experience and Meaning of Pursuing a Doctoral Degree for Ethiopian Women

Endalkachew Taye Shiferaw, Helen Asrate, and Afework Eyasu

In the Western world, one-fifth of master's degree graduate students pursue their doctoral education; of these students, 40%–60% of them do not graduate (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Schmidt and Hansson (2018) also reported an attrition rate of up to 50% in doctoral studies depending on the discipline and country. Those who pursue their doctoral studies often experience high levels of anxiety, depression, physical symptoms of poor health condition, problems in maintaining relationships, and strains related to financial resources, quality of life, and well-being (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Factors such as lack of supervision, paucity of funds, demotivation of students, and family commitment are correlated to attrition from doctoral programs (Magano, 2013).

Internationally, the gender gap in higher education has been showing progress. However, in developing countries like Ethiopia, it is still a tangible problem. Ethiopia has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, with 41% of women considered illiterate (Beyene, 2015). Girls in Ethiopia often are vulnerable to harmful traditional practices, including early

marriage, genital mutilation, and expectations to manage domestic housework at an early age, which affect their ability to attend school (Beyene, 2015). Moreover, it is estimated that one quarter of female students withdraw from higher education before graduation.

At each level in the pyramidal education system, the proportion of females is smaller than males and decreases progressively (Abraha, 2012). For instance, in the 1967–1968 academic year, the available data show that only 29.7% of primary school (grades 1–6) students, 26.7% of junior secondary (grades 7–8) students, and 18.3% of senior secondary (grades 9–12) students were female (Arts, 1968). Thirty years later, in the 1995–1996 academic year, female students were 38.2% in primary schools, 46.4% in junior secondary schools, 45.2% in senior secondary schools, and 13.9% in universities (Habtu, 2001). More recently, during the 2018–2019 academic year in Ethiopia, there were 1,255,569 students who sat for the grade 10 Ethiopian General Secondary Education Certificate Examination (EGSECE), and among them 572,997 (45.6%) were female. From the total number of students (854,893) who scored 2.0 and above — which is considered the passing grade — only 367,067 (43%) were female (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2018–2019). At the tertiary level of education in Ethiopia, women’s enrollment increased from 27% to 35% between 2008–2009 and 2016–2017. Similarly, there was an increase in female undergraduates from 23.4% to 30.6% between 2009–2010 and 2016–2017 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], 2014; MOE, 2016–2017). At the post-graduate level, the proportion of females increased from 11.3% and 17.8% between 2008–2009 and 2016–2017 (FDRE, 2014). Although the data show that progress is incremental, there still remains a high gender gap in postgraduate programs (MOE, 2012–2013).

According to Abraha (2012), there are three fundamental reasons for the pervasive gender disparity in Ethiopian education: the challenge of translating policies into practice and gender factors, such as perceptions about earning potential and male favoritism. Owing to tradition, Ethiopian society sees education as the exclusive preserve of men (Habtu, 2001). The socialization process determines gender roles by subjugating women, so that girls are perceived as holding an inferior position. Boys are expected to learn and become self-reliant household breadwinners, and girls are brought up to conform, be obedient and dependent, and

specialize in indoor household activities. As a result, Ethiopian women, particularly in rural areas, hold higher illiteracy rates and lower educational attainment, which leads them to earn less wages and get married at younger ages (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2008). In recent years, the Ethiopian government has recognized the critical role that women's empowerment plays in achieving its development goals and has instituted various legal and policy reforms (Beyene, 2015). However, there is a tangible disparity in the implementation of laws and policies all over the nation. There still is a significant gap between regional states within the nation, and between urban and rural areas (Abraha, 2012).

In general, due to a multitude of factors, the relatively few Ethiopian women who join postgraduate programs face challenges including evaluation biases, added family responsibilities, sexual harassment, and strict, gender-based discriminatory policies (Beyene, 2015). Gao (2019) added that the double burden of domestic work and the domination of male desires and preferences, especially in love and marriage choices, influence women's decisions to withdraw from their education. However, by overcoming such challenges, some women have benefited from the opportunity to attend school. For example, we begin to see women as policymakers, activists, entrepreneurs, academics, and other successful activities in a variety of sectors.

However, a significant gender gap remains. To further highlight this, in 2016–2017 only 13.6% of all 28,761 academic staff in higher institutions were women. Among these women, only 7.7% were doctorate-level degree holders (MOE, 2016–2017). This relatively small group of women were able to overcome significant academic and social barriers to earn their doctoral degrees. To explore this gap, Ethiopian social work doctoral students from the University of Gondar were invited to remember former female professors in their prior studies: most were unable to recall any. The lack of female professors prompted the doctoral students to conduct a study on the experiences and meanings of pursuing doctoral studies by Ethiopian women holding a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree. The research team authoring this chapter believe that sharing the experiences and meanings of women who have completed a doctoral degree can inform future generations of students regarding gender equality and justice in Ethiopian higher education.

This multiple case study aims to describe and examine three Ethiopian women's experiences and meanings of earning a PhD. The research team was composed of two male and one female social work PhD students from the University of Gondar in Ethiopia. As doctoral students ourselves, we witnessed and experienced the challenges associated with doctoral programs. We were curious about how Ethiopian women with a PhD recalled their unique challenges and perceived the meaning of earning this advanced degree.

The social work profession is known for its commitment to advancing social justice and women's rights as a necessary component of human rights. The profession also focuses on integrating the global gender equality and empowerment agendas in collaboration with international organizations such as the United Nations (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2012). Furthermore, the past Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide social workers the opportunity to revisit and modify their empowering role in socio-economic development, human rights, and environmental issues (Jayasooria, 2016).

As mentioned above, the goal of this qualitative study is to understand the experiences of Ethiopian women who pursued a doctoral degree, and the factors that affected their academic and career endeavours in higher education institutions. The theoretical framework adopted for the study is situated in feminist theories, specifically intersectionality theory. Intersectionality theory advances that everyone has various multilayered identities based on social relationships, history, and the operation of power structures (Ferguson et al., 2014). According to Guittar and Guittar (2015), intersectionality is a framework that considers the analysis of people's experiences based on the interconnections of ethnicity, race, class, gender, nationality, religion, sexuality, and any social categories that situate one's experience of power in society. It provides a unique vantage point to consider a holistic understanding of the experiences of an individual within a society. Therefore, this study considers the participants' social identity factors, such as spirituality, family background, economic situation, culture, and personal values, in their educational and personal journey.

Methods

A multiple case study research design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the three Ethiopian women's experience and meaning of earning a PhD. This approach helps comprehend the differences and similarities between the cases (Stake, 1995). Furthermore, grounded in empirical evidence, the suggestions obtained from multiple cases can also support convincing theories through strong and reliable information (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select study participants to get thick information on the research problem and the central phenomenon of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful sampling is a form of non-probability sampling in which researchers depend on their own judgment when choosing members of the population to participate in their study. The researchers' judgment relies on the premise of seeking out the best data for the study to address the research purpose and questions (Morse, 2010; Patton, 2015). Accordingly, in this study, the participants were selected based on the criterion identified by the researchers, that is, Ethiopian women who had earned a PhD.

An interview guide matrix was developed by the researchers to design the interview questions, using the biopsychosocial and spiritual model of social work. Biopsychosocial and spiritual assessments provide a holistic understanding of past and current circumstances, needs, risk and protective factors, and the environmental context (Gale, 2019). The interview guide was designed to gain information on the experiences of the participants' educational path from elementary school through their completion of a PhD.

After being informed of the purpose of the study, all participants voluntarily accepted and signed an informed consent form. The researchers assured the participants that their identity would be kept confidential. To maintain participants' confidentiality, researchers used pseudonyms and interviewed the women separately in different places and times. One participant was interviewed by phone and two were interviewed face-to-face in their offices. All interviews were conducted in Amharic, the working language of Ethiopia. These three interviews lasted between 1.5 to 3 hours

in duration. All three participants allowed the researchers to audio-record the interviews.

After each interview, the data were transcribed into the English language and analyzed using within-cases analysis to compare themes across multiple cases. Cross-case analysis was also used to discern common and different themes among the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Findings (Within-Cases Analysis)

Kidist's Case

Kidist, born in 1971 in the northern rural part of Ethiopia, is the oldest daughter of her family. After the death of Kidist's father, when she was three months old, her mother remarried and gave birth to a son. Due to her mother's remarriage, when she was 1 year old, Kidist moved to live with her grandmother. Her grandmother was a nun and Kidist regularly attended church with her. Kidist was exposed to measles at age 3, when a measles epidemic hit the province, causing her to partially lose her vision. Her grandmother, who was unable to afford medical treatment, tried unsuccessfully through rituals to save her vision at the age of 7; Kidist had nonetheless the chance to attend a boarding school for visually impaired children. Kidist stayed at the boarding school for 3 years, where she completed grade 1–7. Because of her excellent academic performance, within one year, Kidist completed 5 grade levels (from 1–5).

When I joined the boarding school it was the end of the academic year, so until the new academic year began, I was practicing reading and writing in braille. When I attended grade 1 class, my performance was excellent, and the school administration decided [that I] pass the next grades by taking each grade level exam. So due to this, within 1 year I reached grade 5.

Kidist had good social relationships with her classmates and teachers. She was also a leader in the church choir. However, living far from home made Kidist miss her family and feel lonely quite often. To manage her stress, she frequently went to church to pray for herself and her family. After

completing grade 8, following the school's rules, she left, with a small amount of pocket money, to attend her remaining grade levels outside the boarding school, elsewhere in an urban area.

Kidist then moved to Addis Ababa, the capital city, with her aunt. However, while living with her aunt, she was expected to perform many domestic tasks that interfered with her education. It was by resisting domestic labour that Kidist managed to get a very good result on the regional exam for grade 8 students, enabling her to join a high school for special students in Addis Ababa. When she was in grade 10, Kidist's mother traveled to Addis Ababa to support Kidist. While there, Kidist's mother started a petty street vegetables vendor business with her daughter's pocket money to cover their living costs; when the boarding school had stopped providing financial support to Kidist, she had obtained from the Ministry of Education monthly pocket money for disabled students until she graduated. Life out of boarding school was difficult for Kidist, but her academic performance remained strong. At the end of her secondary education, she was able to achieve a very good score on the national exam.

In 1990, Kidist joined Addis Ababa University to study English language and literature. When Kidist was at the university in the early 1990s, there was minimal access to educational materials, such as books, for visually impaired students. To deal with her academic issues, she used the help of an assistant reader. However, finding an assistant reader who could convert notes to braille was a serious challenge. The students who served as voluntary assistant readers read books and gave her recorded tapes. She often used the recordings to write notes and complete her assignments. Meanwhile, Kidist became a member of *MahibereKidusan* (an association of orthodox Christian students). She found the association helpful in strengthening her spiritual life, providing both relief from stress and hope to face any challenges.

Immediately after graduation, in 1994, the government assigned Kidist to an English language teaching position in a high school. After starting her new job, Kidist married one of her colleagues at the school where she was teaching. Her husband was much older, and they had a son in 2002. Her husband had already two children from his previous marriage, but Kidist did not know about them before she married him. When Kidist decided to attend graduate school, her husband was not in favour of the

idea. As a result, they separated until she completed her master's degree in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). Without support at home, she took her son with her while studying at the university.

While she was in the master's program, one of her instructors discouraged her based on her visual impairment and tried to prevent her from attending his class. The instructor also told his other students that he did not want to have a blind student in his class: "I feel sick when I [see] a blind person in my class. You blind guy, it is shame on you and [it] is too much for you even attending class in BA, not only MA and PhD." He tried to get Kidist stop attending his class. Kidist did her best to convince him that she was capable, but he ignored her pleas. She was confused about whether to drop or continue his course. If she dropped out, she could not afford to retake the course with another instructor at a later stage, because her sponsor organization only allowed funding for 2 years. If she continued the class, her teacher would not willingly teach her. Finally, she decided to continue the class without his permission, even though she knew there were no blind students who had completed the course properly in the history of his teaching.

I became confused because the time to add and drop the course had already passed and even if the time of graduation had been postponed, my salary would have terminated. Without a salary, I couldn't have continued my class and I would have faced a serious economic problem to support my mother and care for my son. Therefore, I decided to continue the class without my teacher's permission, and I was ready to take any risk that came from him.

At the end of the semester, in addition to the written exam, there was an oral presentation required to fulfill the course. At the time of her presentation, her teacher provided 16 questions only for her, while the other students got less than 5 questions. Kidist responded to those questions properly. Finally, for this course, Kidist earned a B+. "I don't know ... whether my God covered his eye or not, [but he] finally he gave me B+."

Some of Kidist's classmates and faculty members used to assume that, owing to her visual impairment, she could not be successful in her studies

or her future career. However, she overcame such problems through personal strength and the help of God.

When people undermine me, I t[ell] ... myself I should be strong and show them I can perform things. Most of the time I don't hate those persons who undermine me because I believe that they are the source of my strength. I always pray to gain a solution from God. And I also believe ... He can manage things for me, and I stay in patience.

After earning her masters' degree, Kidist was hired as a lecturer at one of the public universities in Ethiopia. At that time, she reunited with her husband and started a new life in the new place. Kidist's husband's friends often mocked him on the basis of his wife's disability and he began to show shame for marrying a disabled woman. Finally, she decided to leave him without any official divorce and joined another university in a different province.

After 2 years, Kidist received a scholarship to undertake her PhD at Addis Ababa University. She was able to manage the academic pressure by giving priority to her education. However, the added role of taking care of her mentally ill brother as well as her son challenged her for quite some time.

I was used to schedule my own activity and I gave priority [to] my education. At times, when I became overloaded, I hired a temporary servant to wash clothes and make injera [food]. My mother also helped me by [caring for] my brother even if [caring for] him was more challenging to her.

While dealing with this situation, Kidist began to experience economic hardship and she became diabetic. To manage her financial difficulties, she sold some of her educational equipment and household items and began to skip meals quite often.

When I was attending the PhD program, I was faced with serious economic problems to print my dissertation and for

transportation fees to return from my working place. So, at that time, I decided to sell my braille [equipment] that I was awarded from boarding school. I know it is very important for me, but printing my dissertation also was a must, and to do it getting money by selling this braille was a solution. I always ate only twice (morning and night) a day because I couldn't afford to eat more than this. This situation was making my life very difficult when I attended my second and third degrees.

When Kidist wrote her dissertation proposal, she faced a serious challenge from one of her evaluators (or leaders) who, by not giving any comments, delayed the process for about 6 months. As a result, she was forced to extend her graduation.

After I submitted my dissertation proposal, the department distributed it to three individuals, who are called anonymous leaders, to evaluate my proposal. They read my proposal and returned it to the department within one month: their comments indicated that my proposal would be approved after I corrected it based on their comments. But the remaining anonymous leader did not give any response to the department and held it for 6 months. Finally, the department decided to give my proposal to another anonymous leader. Based on the new and the previous two anonymous leaders' comments, the proposal needed 3 months to correct. Therefore, the department again decided to submit my proposal by this extended time. Due to this, the date of completion of this PhD program was extended for about 6 months.

Despite this delay, for Kidist, earning a doctoral degree was like returning from death — like a resurrection and a miracle.

I considered it as I return from death. I also considered it a miracle. Because when I think about the uncountable chal-

lenges that I faced, I did not believe ... I could ... reach that goal. I ... believe that I did with] the help of my almighty God.

After returning to her university, in addition to teaching, Kidist competed for a different administrative position. However, the authorities were concerned and not willing to give her a chance to hold that position due to her visual impairment. They also assumed that she was awarded her PhD through affirmative action, not by her own efforts. Her colleagues considered their doctoral degrees superior to hers.

To your surprise, the people who have a PhD, like me, considered ... their PhD as unique and better than mine, since they assumed or considered ... I hold my PhD through begging the name of Saint Mary or affirmative action, and not by my own effort. Now even the people who are educated considered me just like a person who can't survive in every position.

Jegnit's Case

Jegnit, who was born in 1974 in the northern highlands of Ethiopia to farmer parents, is the third daughter of the house. Even though her two elder sisters got married at the age of 8 or 9 years, her father decided to send her to school in their vicinity. Close to her neighbours and family members, Jegnit was also used to having a good relationship with both her teachers and classmates. Jegnit's religious life started when she was a child and, throughout her childhood, she used to carry "Sunday bread" baked by her grandmother to church.

To continue her junior high school education, Jegnit had to go to a nearby town. Her father took her to live with his relatives, who were closer to the school, and she stayed there until she completed junior high school. She started to miss her family, since it was the first time she was separated from them. She believed that "... being separated from my family posed the biggest challenge in my life."

In the new school, as a rural girl, she dressed like the “country/ rural” community. Other students stared and mocked her way of dressing, but later she began to dress like urban dwellers. Another challenge was the shift of instructional language from Amharic to English. In the new school, Jegnit felt alienated and confused. Her social relationships suffered, but later she took on the new habit of admiring the beauty of nature. Both in her elementary and junior high school surroundings, there was no electricity, so they used a gas-lamp to study at night. She believed that such difficulties contributed to her future strength.

To attend secondary school, Jegnit went to a bigger town, which was located 30km away from home. In the new town, Jegnit rented a room with three other female students. Her roommates were her only friends and her relationships with the teachers were good. Her goal in high school was to get strong enough grades to gain access to the university. Jegnit knew that if she failed at that point, the only option in life would be to get married and become a housewife. So, she often went to church to pray to God to make her wishes come true. After studying very hard, Jegnit became one of the top students from the school and she was admitted to Alemaya (now Haromaya) University in 1990. She chose to study agriculture to benefit her farming family and community.

After Jegit registered for the second semester, the socialist government ordered all university students to go to military training. At the time, Jegnit, who was 17, was sent to the Belate Military Training Camp in southern Ethiopia. The soldiers from the camp provided their uniforms and equipment, and they started the training. In the midst of the 2-month training period, President Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974–1991) left the country. At that time, the country was in the middle of a civil war between the government forces and the guerilla fighters. For security reasons, the soldiers took the trainees to Moyle, a border town with Kenya. The Kenyan soldiers then took them to a place called Odaa, and they later settled in a big refugee camp called Walda. Jegnit was registered as a refugee and stayed there for 3 years. Many students in the camp became ill with yellow fever, and some of them died. Likewise, Jegnit became ill for 3 months and nearly died. After recovering, she got a part-time job in the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) field office at Odaa and, through this opportunity, met a French pharmacist woman. The pharmacist helped Jegnit get a 3-month

tourist visa and together they went to France. The “French lady’s” parents became Jegnit’s guardians. After receiving asylum, Jegnit entered a language school to learn French at the university.

Right after she finished French language class (within 2 years), Jegnit continued her studies at the *Université de Poitiers* and earned a Bachelor of Science (BSc) in 2000 and a Master of Science (MSc) in chemistry in 2001. She was awarded another scholarship and graduated with an MSc in environmental science in 2002 from the *Université de Mulhouse*. Jegnit reported she had good relationships with her professors in France at both levels.

In 2001, Jegnit returned to Ethiopia to see her biological parents and was happy to find that they were alive. After returning from Ethiopia, Jegnit wanted to start a job in France; however, there were no job opportunities that enabled her to fulfill her career vision, so she began to apply for scholarship programs. She was accepted at Kingston University in England. After 4 years, in 2008, she graduated with a PhD degree in organic chemistry. Jegnit published her research in journals and a book. She then moved to the University of Toronto in Canada to pursue a post-doctoral research position in biochemistry.

While Jegnit was in Canada, she married an Ethiopian man and had a son. Later Jegnit and her husband, who has a PhD in sociology, received an invitation to work at a higher education institution in Ethiopia. After accepting the invitation, Jegnit and her husband launched new graduate study programs in their respective disciplines in Ethiopia. Currently an associate professor, she is heavily engaged in research and advising students. Along with fellow institutional female PhDs, she sometimes makes motivational speeches at different universities. Dr. Jegnit believes that she is happy, and also wants to focus her work on rural education and environmental rehabilitation areas.

Jegnit attributes her earning a PhD to her father’s positive attitude and motivation to continue her education since her elementary years. She believed that her spiritual connection with God also contributed to her successes because it kept her moving on, from the beginning of her education to the end.

... My life is the reflection of God's work. Now I don't think the whole thing is done by my power and my capacity. It is the power of God, and I do not want to boast about what I have done. I'm a person that has a lot to do, a lot more ... we all have a purpose with God, if we can pass anything it is with God ... and if we walk faithfully and work hard, we can achieve the thing that we wanted the most. I want people not to admire me, but to acknowledge God and to honor Him ... I succeed because of him. Without God, I wouldn't just sit down and talk to you right now.

The overall meaning of pursuing her education up to the doctoral level was about becoming a relevant contributor to her community. Having a doctoral degree provides her with the means to make a meaningful contribution for the betterment of her community and her nation at large. Earning a PhD made Jegnit realize the power she has to bring change for herself and others.

Abeba's Case

Since 2006, Abeba has been working as an assistant professor of Fisheries and Aquatic Science (Biology) at an Ethiopian university. She was born in 1982 and raised in a rural part of the Amhara region. She is the fifth of six children from an uneducated family. Four of the six children attended school, though, and were able to attend a university; the other two became a priest and a farmer.

Abeba started school in grade 1, since kindergarten was unavailable. She was among the top-ranking students and received a double promotion at one point. Her father passed away when she was 11 and later a marriage proposal came, but her elder brother saved her from early marriage. After finishing elementary school, she joined a secondary school. Since it was far from her village, Abeba had to rent a room in the nearby town and travel every weekend to get food at home. During the time she was living away from her family, some men approached her to engage in a relationship, and she told them that she had a dream to achieve. However, when she experienced tuberculosis, her academic competency began to decline. Abeba discussed this issue with her brother and came up with the

solution of withdrawing from classes for a year until she fully recovered. After a year, she was reinstated in grade 11 and became successful. She earned a top score on the national exam and was admitted to study biology at a university.

At the university, Abeba devoted most of her time to her education and participated in church activities. During this time, she met her future husband while they were attending church education. After her graduation in 2004, Abeba was married in an orthodox religious ceremony, had two children, and was hired as a biology teacher in a secondary school. While working, she also started her master's program. However, she did not have a sponsor and she paid for the entire tuition fee. At the time she started her master's program, Abeba had a 2-month-old child. She convinced herself to manage her child, her career, and her education in order to achieve her goal. In the end, she became a top scorer in the department.

After finishing her masters' degree, Abeba had a chance to work as a university lecturer. After some years of service, she was awarded a scholarship from Addis Ababa University to earn her PhD. In the doctoral program, she was the only woman in her cohort of five students. Her PhD research project required her to get into sophisticated laboratory testing and seasonal data collection in a distant area. Also, some of the laboratory equipment was not available at the Addis Ababa University laboratory. Therefore, she went overseas for short term training and for further sample investigation, leaving her children with her husband.

The scholarship helped me to access very necessary laboratory tools and experiences [knowledge] for my experiment. The university [where] I studied didn't have access to these lab tools. So, I went to Belgium, Korea, Japan, Germany, and China for short-term training.

In the meantime, Abeba spent copious amounts of time in the laboratory and became detached from her family. She also faced economic hardship because of a lack of funds for her research project. Her PhD advisors were very helpful to her. She described herself as a kind of self-deterministic woman and open to critique from her supervisors. "They supported me in all matters from the beginning up to the end of my dissertation."

Abeba's family, and especially her husband, who also has a doctoral degree, shouldered her throughout her education. She shared, "I am so lucky ... while doing my MSc and PhD education ... my husband had a lion share of my success." She completed her PhD in the allotted time, and developed good social skills, both at the university and in her community.

After Abeba returned to her university in Ethiopia, she became the Director of the Assessment Center and President of the Female Teachers Association, in addition to the usual duties of an assistant professor. She also mobilized other fellow female faculty members to work on gender issues, through planning conferences, organizing induction training for new female staff members, and motivating them to conduct action research on gender issues. Even though Abeba has been engaged in all of these activities, she explained that she is not satisfied with her current position. Due to the corrupt system, budget constraints, and the lack of laboratory facilities, she could not excel with her research projects.

Concerning the meaning of having a PhD, Abeba said it was an "enjoyable adventure." Despite the challenges, she had a great experience and explained that "... there were ups and downs, but I enjoyed it." Abeba elaborated, "the process of acquiring doctoral education was very tough. After we acquired it, we didn't give it value as such, but we should value it. You know, at the level of PhD, you do your new findings, mostly by yourself so it was challenging and enjoyable."

Cross-Case Analysis

All participants were born and grew up in the northern part of rural Ethiopia, which is characterized by a patriarchal community. All three were raised under the culture of the traditional Ethiopian orthodox Christianity. They also were required to travel away from their families to access education. Specifically, for Kidist, due to her visual impairment, it was difficult to get special needs education nearby, and she was forced to move to another region far away from her family. For Abeba and Jegnit, the threat of early marriage was a factor in their educational experiences.

Health concerns were experienced by both Kidist and Abeba. The measles epidemic outbreak in Kidist's vicinity exposed her to harm and led her to partially lose her vision. Her visual impairment deterred her from attending a formal school near her family. Likewise, Abeba's health

problem (throat tuberculosis) and the stress of life changes contributed to her lower academic performance when she was in high school.

Concerning their academic journey, all three women were able to gain admission to university. Two studied science and one studied language. Two of the participants were able to graduate within the allotted time, while Jegnit was forced to drop out of university due to political reasons and became a refugee. Despite this experience, she was able to graduate overseas after being granted asylum.

After graduation, Abeba and Kidist became high school teachers and got married. Jegnit pursued her master's and doctoral education abroad right after finalizing her undergraduate classes and was married after her doctoral education. After working for some years, Abeba started her master's degree by paying the tuition on her own, while Kidist received sponsorship from the government. After accomplishing their master's degrees, both Abeba and Kidist became lecturers at a university. After a couple of years of service in their respective universities, both were awarded domestic scholarships to continue their doctoral education.

While attending their post-graduate programs, Abeba and Kidist were engaged in multiple responsibilities, including taking care of their children, helping their parents, managing their home affairs, and the like. They both experienced economic hardships. In the case of Kidist, her marital separation forced her to carry the whole burden of the family by herself. Abeba also had to work to generate income while also working on her master's degree. Because of Kidist's disability, she encountered discrimination at all levels, from her husband and his friends and from some of her instructors, classmates, and other faculty members.

With regard to support, the participants' parents, other family members, husband (for Abeba), and other individuals contributed significantly to their overall achievement. Their persistence towards their education also contributed to their success. Their personal strength, family support, and their spiritual affiliations contributed to their persistence towards their education and success. The meaning they gave to their academic endeavour varied based on their musings about their respective experiences. For Kidist it is all about "resurrection," for Abeba, it was an "enjoyable adventure," and for Jegnit, it was a path to become a relevant being for the community.

Discussion

This multiple case study reveals the experience and meaning of earning a doctoral degree for three Ethiopian women. The main finding of the study was that each participant encountered a host of hurdles to completing their education. However, the participants' strength, family support, and religious affiliation helped them to achieve their current professional status. As rural girls, all three experienced a lack of access to formal education at an early age, and their parents were forced to send their daughters far from their hometown to get educated. Similarly, Mergo (2007) identified that accessing formal education was difficult for girls in Ethiopia due to various societal and infrastructural challenges. The challenge of early marriage was evident for two of the participants; however, their family members refused to let them get married so that they could continue their education. Beyene (2015) also stated that vulnerability to harmful traditional practices such as early marriage, abductions, forced marriages, and female genital mutilation, as well as economic, physical, psychological, and sexual violence, hinders girls' education.

Additionally, the study also revealed that the participants' spirituality contributed significantly to successfully managing their life and academic stresses. All three women used their religious affiliations to cope with their stress. Likewise, Wood and Hilton (2012) found that spirituality can serve as a mechanism for students to overcome barriers. A spiritual base provides them with purpose, direction, focus, and a sense of fulfilling their destiny.

The measles epidemic outbreak led Kidist to partially lose her vision, which deterred her from attending a formal school near her family. Abeba's health problem (throat tuberculosis) and stress of life changes contributed to her lower academic performance at high school. Sverdlik et al. (2018) acknowledge that both the physical and psychological well-being of students can influence their performance and achievement.

While they were attending post-graduate education, the three participants had multiple or added responsibilities which posed challenges for them. Bireda (2015) reported that women who have the chance to engage in graduate and post-graduate studies often add the role of student to an already existing set of family, community, and partner-related responsibilities. The double burden of domestic work and the domination

of male desires and preferences, especially in love and marriage choices, influences women's decision to withdraw from their education (Gao, 2019). Douglas (2014) also stated that overload and strain represent a challenge for women's performance in graduate school.

Two of the study participants experienced economic hardship during their postgraduate studies. In line with this, Bireda (2015) explained that women in post-graduate studies face a higher level of stress due to financial constraints. Furthermore, Douglas (2014) added that to overcome financial problems, female students often engaged in additional income-generating opportunities. To accomplish their doctoral program successfully, all participants were effectively managing their time and made their education a priority. Similarly, Mirick and Waldkowski (2019) indicated that students' time management, careful organization of responsibilities, and the desire to be a positive role model enabled them to complete all required doctoral tasks successfully.

In addition, negative experiences encountered from faculty and administrators motivate women to persist in their education (Mirick & Waldkowski, 2019). This is consistent with the findings of our study. For instance, one of our participants viewed people who undermined her as a source of strength, which motivated her to show her performance by disproving their expectations. In our study, the participants' meaning for having a PhD derived from their personal, social, and spiritual experiences. Their respective meanings of educational and life journeys ranged from a resurrection, an enjoyable adventure, and being relevant to one's community. Likewise, Burton (2016) described the meaning of earning her PhD as a redefinition of her identity.

Conclusion

Our chapter is entitled "Champions of Hurdles" because it is about the life and educational experiences of three Ethiopian women who overcame the odds to earn doctoral degrees. As women of color, citizens of one of the poorest countries in the world, and members of a religious community, their educational journeys were replete with difficulty. However, each of them was able to earn a doctoral degree and provide services for her nation.

This multiple case study explored the selected cases of three Ethiopian women who earned a PhD. Given the socioeconomic conditions and

cultural attitudes towards girls in Ethiopia, the study revealed how difficult it is for Ethiopian girls to gain access to formal education. Moreover, the situation is much worse for girls with disabilities. Postgraduate study often poses challenges of economic insecurity and added responsibilities for women. However, family support, spirituality, and personal strength contributed to these women's accomplishments.

This study may not reflect the overall reality of Ethiopian women; nor does it assess the overall policy and strategies of Ethiopian higher institutions empowering or disempowering female postgraduate students. Therefore, we recommend further expansive research to shed more light on this issue.

The Ethiopian government needs to prioritize girls' education at all levels, particularly in rural areas as the majority (80%) of the population resides there. They also need to provide equal access to education for people with disabilities. The notion of "education for all" is about providing educational opportunities for children and young people. The educational system, in turn, could help the nation achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2010) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

According to the International Labor Organization (2013), there are an estimated 15 million people with disabilities in Ethiopia, who represent 17.6 % of the population. The Ethiopian Ministry of Education estimates that only 4% of children with special needs are enrolled in primary education (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia-Ministry of Education [FDRE-MOE], 2015). Minimizing this huge gap represents a great task for the Ethiopian government. The provision of economic support and other affirmative actions for girls and students with disabilities will contribute to their enrollment in higher education and participation in higher positions. This can encourage young people to advance their educational and career endeavours. Likewise, UNESCO (2010) supports affirmative action and other incentive programs for female students and other socially disadvantaged groups.

To reduce gender-based discrimination, higher education institutions need to create an empowering climate on the issues of gender and disability. They have to train their staff members and students on gender equity,

and craft new policies to enhance women's involvement. Furthermore, universities need to share best practices of women educators in academia in the mainstream media and other social networks.

Local social workers, educators, and social development practitioners are required to address local realities regarding personal, social, and community challenges. We can use student practicum reports to gain a much wider understanding of local problems and solutions. In this regard, Ethiopian universities need to revisit their "business as usual" practicum trend, by focusing on communal settings in rural areas to address the gender gaps so evident in education and in other social institutions.

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