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INSTITUTIONAL MEDIATION OF GENDER EQUALITY NORMS: UN WOMEN AND THE NATIONAL ACTION PLAN IN ETHIOPIA'S EDUCATION SECTOR IN 2021–2023

Eka Dwi Yanti
International Women University
ekaadwiiyantii@gmail.com

Sintia Catur Sutantri
International Women University
sintia@iwu.ac.id

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis peran UN Women dalam mengatasi ketimpangan gender di sektor pendidikan Ethiopia melalui National Action Plan (NAP) 2021–2023. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah metode deskriptif kualitatif yang didukung oleh analisis dokumen serta teori konstruktivisme, organisasi internasional, dan kesetaraan gender. Studi ini menelaah implementasi NAP melalui program-program seperti Gender Transformative Norm Project, Leadership for Results Programme, dan Education Equality for Climate Resilience Programme. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan adanya peningkatan akses pendidikan bagi perempuan, perubahan norma sosial, serta penguatan koordinasi antara UN Women, pemerintah Ethiopia, dan para pemangku kepentingan lokal. Namun demikian, resistensi budaya, keterbatasan sumber daya, dan kesenjangan kualitas pendidikan masih menjadi hambatan bagi kemajuan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pengurangan ketimpangan gender memerlukan strategi jangka panjang yang berkelanjutan dan kolaborasi multisektor untuk membangun sistem pendidikan yang inklusif dan responsif gender guna mendukung perubahan yang transformatif dan berkelanjutan.

Abstract

This study analyzes the role of UN Women in addressing gender inequality in Ethiopia's education sector through the 2021–2023 National Action Plan (NAP). Using a qualitative descriptive method supported by document analysis and the theories of constructivism, international organizations, and gender equality. The study reviews NAP implementation through programs such as the Gender Transformative Norm Project, the Leadership for Results Programme, and the Education Equality for Climate Resilience Programme. The findings indicate improvements in women's access to education, shifts in social norms, and stronger coordination between UN Women, the Ethiopian government, and local stakeholders. However, cultural resistance, limited resources, and disparities in educational quality continue to hinder progress. The study concludes that reducing gender inequality requires sustained long-term strategies and multi-sector collaboration to build an inclusive and gender-responsive education system that supports transformative and lasting change.

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PENDAHULUAN

Gender inequality in education remains a significant issue in many developing countries, despite efforts to promote gender equality through global and national reforms. Recent data shows that progress towards gender parity is inconsistent, particularly in secondary education, where socioeconomic pressures, early marriage, and systemic vulnerabilities limit girls' participation. Education is recognized as a vital tool for enhancing women's social, economic, and political empowerment.

In Ethiopia, there remains a significant education gap between men and women. According to the Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey data from 2016, 44.62 percent of women have no formal education, while only 14.62 percent complete secondary education, and just 7.93 percent achieve higher education. The high rates of child marriage and low secondary school completion indicate that structural barriers hinder women's education. This situation highlights that the issue of women's education is not only about access to formal education but also involves social norms and institutional structures that restrict women's participation (Hussen & Gebre, 2023).

Research on gender equality in Ethiopia can be categorized into three main approaches. First, some studies emphasize socio-cultural and structural factors that inhibit women's participation. Work by Sebsib Hadis, Mulugeta Tesfaye, and Shimellis Hailu (2021), as well as Meseret Tsige, Gry Synnevåg, and Jens B. Aune (2020), illustrates how patriarchal norms, household economic inequality, and limited access to productive resources systematically restrict women's engagement, including in education. While these studies effectively identify the structural roots of inequality, they tend to treat these barriers as relatively static social factors and do not examine how formal state institutions respond to or perpetuate such inequality through public policy.

Second, several studies highlight the National Action Plan (NAP) as a strategic tool for integrating the Women, Peace, and Security agenda into domestic policies (True, 2016; El-Amraoui, 2022). Literature on UN Women generally positions the organization as a normative actor that promotes the adoption and harmonization of this agenda at the national level. However, these studies primarily focus on political and security dimensions, particularly women's

involvement in the peace process. As a result, the education sector, a critical institutional arena for transforming gender relations, has not been thoroughly analyzed within the context of NAP implementation and the role of UN Women. This gap underscores the need for an analysis that explores how equality norms are implemented in the education sector through the interaction between international organizations and domestic institutions.

Numerous studies have explored gender inequality in Ethiopia and the strategic importance of the NAP for promoting gender equality. However, existing analyses often remain focused on normative commitments and policy design, failing to systematically trace the institutional mechanisms through which international organizations, especially UN Women, collaborate with domestic institutions to translate the commitments of the NAP into actionable policies and practices within the education sector. This indicates a significant gap in the analysis of implementation, particularly concerning how formal rules, informal norms, and bureaucratic practices influence or even hinder the institutionalization of gender equality norms (UN Women Ethiopia, 2023).

This lack of analysis underscores an important question: not just whether the NAP was adopted, but how power dynamics and institutional structures impact its implementation in the education sector (Lowndes, 2020). The Feminist Institutionalism approach is particularly relevant for addressing this gap, as it enables the exploration of the interplay between international organizations and domestic institutions in a non-gender-neutral context, where global norms are negotiated, selected, and implemented based on local conditions.

The review indicates a continuing gap in understanding how formal and informal institutional structures in Ethiopia influence the implementation of the National Action Plan, particularly within the education sector and with the support of international organizations. Previous research has often treated policy as a technical instrument or assessed program outcomes in a descriptive manner, neglecting to examine how patriarchal norms, bureaucratic practices, and institutional power dynamics affect the effectiveness of implementation. The Feminist Institutionalism approach facilitates a deeper analysis of how gendered institutions can either promote or obstruct the integration of gender equality norms into education policy.

By contextualizing the NAP within the education sector and investigating the interaction between the promotion of international norms and domestic institutional frameworks, this study goes beyond mere policy evaluation. It contributes to Feminist Institutionalism by empirically examining how Women, Peace, and Security norms are mediated within specific governance contexts practices (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010).

This study aims to analyze how formal and informal institutional structures in Ethiopia shape the implementation of gender equality initiatives in the education sector under the NAP (2021–2023), with a particular focus on the role and involvement of UN Women. Using the Feminist Institutionalism approach, this research operates under the premise that institutions are not gender-neutral arenas but are influenced by power relations, social norms, and bureaucratic practices that can either facilitate or limit the translation of equality commitments into concrete policies and practices (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010).Thus, the focus of this research is not solely on policy adoption but on the institutional dynamics that shape the implementation process. Correspondingly, the research questions are: How do formal and informal institutional structures in Ethiopia influence the implementation of gender equality initiatives in the education sector under the National Action Plan (2021–2023), particularly those supported by UN Women?

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

This study employs a Feminist Institutionalism framework to analyze how formal and informal institutional structures in Ethiopia influence the implementation of gender equality initiatives in the education sector, specifically under the National Action Plan for the period 2021-2023. This framework views institutions as gendered systems in which formal regulations and informal norms interact to shape policy processes (Krook & Mackay, 2011). Rather than serving merely as a normative reference, Feminist Institutionalism provides analytical categories for interpreting empirical findings. Thus, the theory acts as a systematic tool for explaining how institutional arrangements affect implementation dynamics.

The analysis follows three operational dimensions that translate the theoretical framework into concrete inquiries. First, it examines how formal institutional

arrangements—such as legal mandates, administrative procedures, and coordination mechanisms—create opportunities and constraints for policy implementation. Second, it explores how informal norms, gendered power relations, and bureaucratic practices mediate or reshape these formal commitments in practice. Third, it assesses how UN Women engages with these institutional configurations, considering whether its interventions reinforce, negotiate with, or encounter resistance within domestic institutional structures.

By systematically applying these analytical dimensions to the empirical data, the framework enables the study to clarify how institutional dynamics affect the translation of gender equality commitments into specific educational policies and practices. This approach ensures that the findings are analyzed through well-defined institutional categories rather than through mere descriptive narration. Consequently, the analysis transcends policy rhetoric and focuses on the mechanisms that influence implementation outcomes. Through this structured application of theory, the study provides an institutional explanation of how and why implementation occurs in particular ways within Ethiopia's education sector.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, policy-oriented case study approach to examine the implementation of gender equality initiatives within Ethiopia's education sector, as outlined in the National Action Plan (2021-2023). This design allows for an in-depth exploration of the institutional dynamics and policy processes within a specific socio-political context.

The data is gathered from secondary sources, including the UN Women Ethiopia Strategic Note (2021-2025), Ethiopian government policy documents, and reports from international organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF. These materials provide insight into both formal policy commitments and documented implementation practices.

The unit of analysis encompasses policy frameworks, institutional arrangements, and programmatic interventions related to gender equality in the education sector, as well as the policy discourse surrounding their implementation. This includes the National Action Plan, education sector policies, and initiatives supported by UN Women that reflect institutional engagement.

Data analysis is conducted through systematic stages of reduction, categorization, interpretation, and verification. The analysis is guided by categories derived from Feminist Institutionalism. To enhance the validity of the findings, the study employs source triangulation, comparing government documents, reports from international organizations, and secondary scholarly literature to ensure consistency and analytical reliability. This methodological approach enables the study to go beyond mere descriptive accounts and generate a structured institutional explanation of the dynamics involved in policy implementation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Formal Institutional Structures

The formal institutional structures that govern the implementation of the National Action Plan (2021–2023) in Ethiopia's education sector are reflected in the allocation of responsibilities, coordination mechanisms, and capacity-building programs integrated within state institutions. The National Action Plan assigns cross-sectoral responsibilities related to women's participation, protection, and institutional accountability, including those relevant to the education sector. This is operationalized through collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, which illustrates a formal distribution of authority among various administrative bodies (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2021).

Initiatives aimed at building institutional capacity further reinforce these mandates. The Leadership for Results Program, implemented in partnership with UN Women and national training institutions, seeks to enhance gender-responsive leadership within schools and administrative bodies (UN Women, 2022). Performance indicators for this program include the number of school leaders trained and the incorporation of gender-sensitive policies at the institutional level. Additionally, the Second Education and Community Development Project, supported by international partners such as the World Bank and UN Women, emphasizes community engagement, the improvement of educational facilities, and teacher training in rural areas (Rainbowftf.ngo, 2024).

These programs illustrate that commitments to gender equality are not only stated in policy documents but also embedded within administrative structures

and leadership development mechanisms. The UN Women Strategic Note for 2021–2025 further reinforces this alignment by prioritizing the strengthening of institutional capacity and governance reform in support of Women, Peace, and Security commitments (UN Women Ethiopia, 2023). Together, these elements demonstrate the formal incorporation of gender norms within Ethiopia's education governance framework.

Policy documents in the education sector, including national education strategies and sector development plans, also incorporate gender-responsive targets. These include commitments to improve girls' access, retention, transition, and completion rates at both primary and secondary levels (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2021). Gender focal points and inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms are mentioned within these policy frameworks as tools to ensure both vertical and horizontal alignment. These provisions indicate that gender norms have been methodically integrated into planning and reporting structures, suggesting institutional incorporation that extends beyond mere rhetorical endorsement (Waylen, 2014)

From an institutional perspective, these measures signify that gender equality norms have been systematically integrated into planning, monitoring, and reporting structures, moving beyond rhetorical support to formal administrative incorporation. However, as institutional scholarship warns, this procedural integration does not automatically guarantee substantive transformation. The outcomes of implementation are still influenced by factors such as bureaucratic capacity, resource allocation patterns, and entrenched gender norms within governance systems (Waylen, 2014).

The UN Women Strategic Note for 2021–2025 enhances the existing framework by prioritizing gender-responsive governance, strengthening institutional capacity, and supporting commitments related to Women, Peace, and Security. By providing technical assistance, policy advisory roles, and support for monitoring frameworks, the Strategic Note aligns its initiatives with national administrative structures instead of functioning independently. This alignment among the NAP, sectoral education policies, and UN Women programming reflects the formal dissemination of norms that has been integrated into Ethiopia's institutional framework (UN Women Ethiopia, 2023).

However, an examination of administrative directives and reporting

mechanisms reveals inconsistencies in procedural specifications across different institutional levels. Although strategic documents express clear commitments to gender equality, the availability of detailed operational guidelines, standardized monitoring tools, and enforcement provisions varies between federal and regional authorities (UN Women Ethiopia, 2023). In some cases, gender mainstreaming is included in policy frameworks without corresponding budget allocations or clearly defined penalties for non-compliance. This trend suggests a strong formal articulation and legal incorporation of gender equality, but only partial administrative consolidation, indicating that while gender equality is structurally embedded, its procedural implementation remains inconsistent.

Informal Institutional Structures

Implementation of policies is not solely dictated by formal mandates; it is also significantly influenced by informal institutional structures rooted in social norms and organizational culture. The NAP (2021–2023) explicitly recognizes sociocultural barriers, such as discriminatory gender norms and gender-based violence, as obstacles to women's participation (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2021). However, responses to these norms are primarily addressed through targeted programming rather than through regulatory measures.

The Gender Transformative Norm Project, implemented by UN Women in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and community organizations, directly tackles entrenched gender expectations that impact girls' educational retention and participation (CARE, 2023). This project's performance indicators include increased school retention rates and a reduction in discriminatory community practices. Its integration within the broader education policy framework reflects an understanding that informal norms significantly influence educational outcomes.

Similarly, the Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Campaign aims to enhance safeguarding and reporting mechanisms within schools (UN RC/HC Ethiopia, 2021). The creation of school protection protocols and reporting systems demonstrates efforts to address informal power imbalances and gender-based vulnerabilities within institutional settings. However, varying levels of implementation across different regions suggest that organizational culture, discretionary

authority, and local leadership play significant roles in how these mechanisms are executed in practice.

Beyond formal policy commitments, implementation is shaped by informal institutional structures that are embedded in bureaucratic routines, organizational cultures, and broader social norms. Implementation reports from UN Women (2023) and evaluations from UNESCO (2023) and UNICEF (2023) show variability in how gender equality priorities are enacted at both federal and regional administrative levels. Although policy documents articulate standardized commitments, monitoring assessments reveal inconsistencies in prioritization, reporting practices, resource allocation, and program uptake across different jurisdictions.

From a Feminist Institutionalism perspective, these variations reflect the operation of informal institutions, which consist of unwritten rules, norms, and power hierarchies that determine institutional behavior alongside formal regulations (Waylen, 2014; Lowndes, 2020). Informal hierarchies, discretionary administrative practices, and localized interpretations of mandates influence how formal commitments are translated into everyday governance routines. As a result, institutional outcomes are shaped not just by the presence of formal gender mainstreaming provisions, but also by how these provisions interact with existing bureaucratic cultures and gendered power relations. These dynamic underscores the articulation–enactment gap, revealing that institutional change is filtered through context-specific configurations of authority and social norms rather than being implemented as a uniform, linear process.

Policy discourse within the NAP framework has increasingly moved beyond merely ensuring regulatory compliance to emphasizing normative transformation. This shift signifies an institutional recognition that legal reform alone is inadequate for achieving substantive gender equality outcomes (UN Women, 2024). The Gender Transformative Norm Project exemplifies this understanding by directly addressing deeply rooted gender norms that affect girls' educational participation, community expectations, and institutional responses to gender-based vulnerabilities. Its incorporation into the broader policy architecture indicates that policymakers view social norms not only as external factors but also as integral institutional forces that shape the implementation environment (CARE, 2023).

Table 1. Gender Parity Index (GPI) of Primary and Secondary Education in Ethiopia Academic Year 2018/2019–2022/2023

Academic Year	GPI Primary Education	GPI Secondary Education	Reference
2018/2019	0,83	0,72	UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023
2020/2021	0,86	0,74	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2021
2022/2023	0,89	0,78	UN Women Ethiopia, 2023

Source: Processed from (UNESCO, 2023), (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2021) dan (UN Women Ethiopia, 2023).

As shown in Table 1, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) in primary education increased from 0.83 in the 2018/2019 school year to 0.89 in 2022/2023. Similarly, the index for secondary education rose from 0.72 to 0.78 during the same period. Although these figures indicate incremental progress, the index still falls short of full parity, especially at the secondary level. This highlights ongoing structural constraints that continue to influence implementation outcomes (UNESCO, 2023; Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2021; UN Women Ethiopia, 2023). These trends suggest that gender equality norms have been partially institutionalized within educational systems.

However, persistent disparities remain, particularly in participation and retention in secondary education. This indicates that changes in societal norms occur gradually and unevenly. Reports have pointed out how informal practices—such as unequal resource allocation, discretionary enforcement of policies, and localized interpretations of gender mandates—affect implementation outcomes. Bureaucratic incentives and limitations in administrative capacity further interact with gendered power dynamics, reinforcing existing hierarchies instead of transforming them completely. These factors demonstrate that informal institutions serve as filters between policy articulation and institutional enactment, influencing not just the recognition of gender equality but also the depth to which it is practiced (Ministry of Education, 2023).

This gap illustrates that implementation outcomes are shaped by mediated processes rather than direct interventions. The discrepancies between policy articulation in

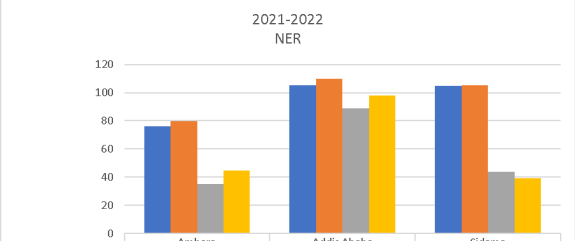
the NAP and practical enactment in the education sector reflect the interaction between formal regulatory frameworks and informal institutional configurations. Consequently, UN Women-supported initiatives show varied levels of adoption influenced by domestic institutional structures (UN Women Ethiopia, 2023).

Institutional Mediation of UN Women

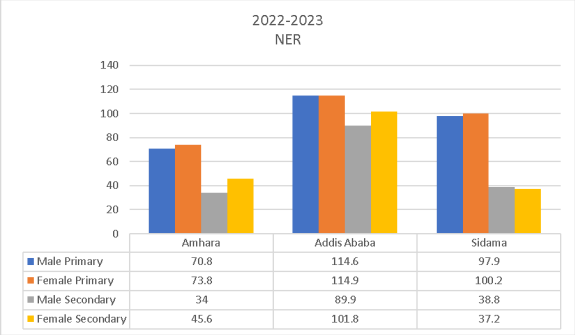
The mediated nature of implementation becomes evident when examining structural constraints and outcome indicators. The Education Equality for Climate Resilience Programme, implemented by UN Women in partnership with UNICEF and local governments, targets climate-sensitive regions by improving safe learning environments and access to water and sanitation (UN Women, 2022). This program illustrates how gender equality initiatives intersect with broader structural vulnerabilities, including environmental stressors and infrastructural limitations.

Despite measurable improvements in gender parity and enrollment as indicated in Table 1, the institutional implementation remains constrained by persistent structural challenges. Socioeconomic vulnerability, disparities between rural and urban areas, early marriage practices, and entrenched gender norms continue to affect girls' educational paths, particularly during the transition to secondary education. While policy frameworks focus on expanding access, economic pressures at the household level and unpaid care responsibilities disproportionately impact adolescent girls' retention, limiting the sustainability of enrollment gains. Government education performance reports further indicate that dropout patterns are closely linked to poverty exposure and gendered expectations within domestic environments (Ministry of Education, 2021). These constraints suggest that improvements in GPI and Net Enrollment Rate (NER) do not automatically lead to substantive equality but represent conditional progress reliant on broader socio-institutional transformations.

Figure 1. Net Enrollment *Rate* (NER) of Male and Female Students in Primary and Secondary Education in Three Ethiopian Regions (Amhara, Addis Ababa, and Sidama) for the 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 Academic Years



	Amhara	Addis Ababa	Sidama
Male Rimary	76	105.1	104.9
Female Primary	79.9	109.7	105.2
Male Secondary	35.3	89.1	43.6
Female Seondary	44.5	98.2	39



	Amhara	Addis Ababa	Sidama
Male Primary	70.8	114.6	97.9
Female Primary	73.8	114.9	100.2
Male Secondary	34	89.9	38.8
Female Secondary	45.6	101.8	37.2

Source: Processed by the author from the Data *Ministry of Education, Education Statistics Annual Abstract* (2021) (Ministry of Education, 2021) and *Ministry of Education, Education Statistics Annual Abstract* (2023) (Ministry of Education, 2023).

The Regional Net Enrollment Rate (NER) data for the 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 school years in Figure 1 highlight varying implementation patterns across different administrative contexts. In 2022–2023, primary enrollment rates in Addis Ababa exceeded 110 percent for both male and female students, while the Amhara and Sidama regions recorded significantly lower rates. At the secondary level, the disparities were even more pronounced, with female enrollment in Amhara and Sidama remaining substantially below primary levels. Similar variations were observed in the 2021–2022 data, indicating that regional discrepancies persist across different implementation periods.

These patterns suggest that the formal policy commitments outlined in the NAP and education sector frameworks do not translate uniformly across regions. Factors such as administrative capacity, socioeconomic conditions, and local institutional practices contribute to these varying educational outcomes. The ongoing lower secondary enrollment rates for girls in certain regions indicate that informal norms and structural constraints continue to impact policy implementation, despite formal alignment with established institutions (UN Women Ethiopia, 2023).

These findings reveal a gap between the formal articulation of policies and their substantive implementation. While programs and policy frameworks show institutional commitment, the differing outcomes suggest that implementation is still influenced by factors like administrative capacity, resource allocation, and entrenched social norms.

Norm Diffusion and Formal Incorporation

The findings demonstrate that gender equality norms have been integrated into Ethiopia's education governance framework through a formal alignment between the NAP (2021–2023) and UN Women's Strategic Note (2021–2025). This alignment is evident in the allocation of administrative responsibilities, the establishment of inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms, and the

inclusion of gender-responsive targets within sectoral education planning. Through technical assistance, policy advisory support, and programmatic coordination, UN Women has facilitated the translation of Women, Peace, and Security principles into regulatory language and institutional procedures. From a Feminist Institutionalist perspective, this stage represents formal norm incorporation, where gender equality is embedded within administrative responsibilities, coordination mechanisms, and reporting structures.

However, formal articulation does not equal institutional transformation. While policy frameworks show procedural alignment, operational specifics and enforcement mechanisms vary across different administrative levels. This indicates that norm diffusion establishes structured commitments, yet institutional consolidation remains uneven. Conceptually, the process unfolds in three interconnected stages: diffusion introduces gender norms into formal rule systems, embedding integrates them into bureaucratic routines, and mediation demonstrates the filtering effect of informal gendered institutions that shape the depth and durability of change.

Institutional Embedding and Informal Mediation

After formal incorporation, gender norms became embedded in sectoral governance through leadership training initiatives and safeguarding mechanisms, including the PSEA Campaign, community-based interventions, and climate-resilient education programming (UN RC/HC Ethiopia, 2021). In Feminist Institutionalist terms, this phase reflects the operationalization of formal commitments into routine administrative practices. Budgeting processes, coordination frameworks, and bureaucratic procedures increasingly began to correspond with gender equality objectives. Thus, institutional embedding signifies a shift from policy articulation to procedural integration (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010).

However, embedding occurs within institutional environments influenced by entrenched informal norms and gendered power hierarchies. Persistent practices, such as early marriage, socioeconomic vulnerability, and gender-based violence, illustrate that education policy operates within broader structural constraints. These informal institutions serve as mediating filters, shaping how profoundly formal mandates influence bureaucratic behavior and community-level outcomes. As a result, implementation reflects negotiated

adaptation rather than uniform institutional transformation (africa.unwomen.org, 2024).

Institutional embedding can be observed in capacity-building initiatives, such as the Leadership for Results Programme and the Second Education and Community Development Project. These programs translate normative commitments into leadership development, administrative routines, and localized educational advancements (UN Women, 2022). From a Feminist Institutionalist perspective, embedding involves integrating gender norms into institutional procedures, authority structures, and accountability mechanisms. The presence of gender focal points, training systems, and coordination bodies indicates partial institutionalization rather than comprehensive structural change.

Structural constraints continue to influence girls' educational trajectories beyond formal policy commitments. Recent data showing high rates of early marriage underscore the persistence of deeply embedded social norms that prioritize marriage over schooling. Economic vulnerability and indirect education costs further exacerbate exclusion for girls from rural and low-income households. Additionally, gender-based violence within educational spaces challenges the assumption that schools inherently serve as safe environments for empowerment (UN Women, 2022).

The findings reveal a staged causal mechanism that directly addresses the research question. First, UN Women contributes to norm framing through its Strategic Note, which is then incorporated into the National Action Plan and sectoral education policies. Second, these norms are formalized through administrative mandates and coordination mechanisms, while informal institutions mediate their practical implementation. Ultimately, the outcomes of implementation depend on the degree of alignment between formal regulatory frameworks and entrenched gendered norms. (UN Women, 2022).

This mechanism shows that UN Women's influence operates indirectly through domestic institutional configurations. The gap between articulation and enactment highlights not just technical shortcomings but also the structural interaction between formal and informal institutions. While gender equality norms may achieve procedural incorporation, they do not necessarily lead to full transformation. Thus, institutional change remains contingent

upon the reconfiguration of underlying gendered power relations (UN Women, 2024).

Implementation Gap

The persistence of Gender Parity Index disparities, particularly at the secondary level (UNESCO, 2023) illustrates the articulation-enactment gap central to Feminist Institutionalism. Even though formal policies and programmatic expansion have generated incremental improvements, structural and normative constraints continue to limit transformative change. These implementation gaps reflect not merely technical shortcomings but also the interaction between formal regulations and the gendered informal institutions embedded within Ethiopia's governance system. The evidence suggests a mediated process of institutional change rather than a linear one (UN Women Ethiopia, 2023).

UN Women aids in the diffusion of gender equality norms by aligning its Strategic Note (2021–2025) with the NAP (2021–2023) and sectoral education policies (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2021)–(UN Women Ethiopia, 2023). These norms are institutionalized through leadership training initiatives, safeguarding mechanisms, community development programs, and climate-resilient education strategies. However, institutional embedding does not automatically produce uniform transformation across all administrative levels. Instead, formal mandates interact with entrenched informal norms, bureaucratic hierarchies, and unequal resource distribution, resulting in varied implementation outcomes (UN Women, 2022).

While improvements in Gender Parity Index data suggest gradual progress, persistent disparities at the secondary level demonstrate that norm diffusion alone is insufficient to overcome structurally embedded gender constraints (UNESCO, 2023) Therefore, the causal mechanism operates as a mediated process shaped by the interaction between formal incorporation and informal institutional filtering. This finding reinforces the Feminist Institutionalist argument that formal reform coexists with informal power structures. Institutional change remains dependent on deeper shifts in gendered authority relations and resource allocation (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010).

Although the National Action Plan serves as a means to institutionalize commitments to gender equality, its basis in the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)

framework requires critical examination. The WPS framework primarily focuses on security, emphasizing protection and participation in contexts related to conflict (UN Women, 2022).

When applied to the education sector, this focus might prioritize protective measures, such as PSEA campaigns, over necessary structural transformations that address governance and economic inequalities. As a result, while the framework may carry normative legitimacy, it does not necessarily lead to comprehensive reforms in the education sector.

The cross-sectoral design of the National Action Plan also poses a risk of being broadly articulated without equally detailed implementation in specific policy areas. Although gender commitments are formally included in education policy, the enforcement mechanisms and implementation guidelines vary across different administrative levels. This indicates that while the framework provides institutional visibility for gender equality, it fails to fully tackle the structural drivers of educational exclusion, such as socioeconomic vulnerability and local gender hierarchies. Therefore, the National Action Plan operates as a partial institutional tool, with its transformative potential depending on domestic power dynamics and governance configurations (UN Women, 2024).

This study contributes to Feminist Institutionalism in three key ways. First, it demonstrates how international organizations influence domestic governance by aligning with formal institutional mandates, rather than solely promoting norms. Second, it reveals that the embedding of these institutions varies across policy sectors, highlighting how contextual factors affect the translation of global gender norms into practice. Third, it reinterprets the gap between articulation and enactment as an institutional phenomenon that arises from the coexistence of formal reforms and informal gendered power relations (UN Women, 2022).

By empirically examining the interaction between UN Women's programming, Ethiopia's National Action Plan, and educational outcomes, this study illustrates that the implementation of gender equality is neither linear nor merely normative. Instead, it is shaped by complex institutional configurations where formal rules, informal norms, and structural constraints continuously interact (UN Women, 2024). This analysis extends

Feminist Institutionalism beyond theoretical discussion by showing its practical relevance in sectoral governance. It emphasizes the importance of viewing implementation as a mediated institutional process rather than a straightforward policy outcome.

In response to the research question, formal institutional structures in Ethiopia provide the regulatory and administrative framework for implementing gender equality under the NAP. However, informal institutional dynamics and structural constraints influence how these commitments are enacted in practice. UN Women's interventions facilitate the diffusion of norms and partial embedding of these principles within the education sector. Nevertheless, the outcomes of implementation are still influenced by persistent gendered power relations and contextual vulnerabilities.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of gender equality under Ethiopia's National Action Plan (2021–2023) is a non-linear process influenced by the interplay between formal mandates and informal domestic structures. While formal frameworks successfully integrate WPS commitments into education, deeply rooted bureaucratic hierarchies and informal norms continue to be the primary factors affecting actual outcomes. Therefore, even though international actors like UN Women are effective in promoting norms, the effectiveness of institutions is ultimately determined by local dynamics.

The synthesis of findings reveals a pattern of "institutional filtering" that impedes policy integration. Although gender norms have been adopted into official training and frameworks, persistent regional disparities suggest that institutionalization remains inconsistent. This confirms that when formal frameworks conflict with informal barriers, the outcome is often only incremental adjustments rather than the transformative systemic change envisioned by the NAP.

Theoretically, this research enhances Feminist Institutionalism by framing the implementation gap as an institutional issue rather than merely a technical failure. It broadens the theory's application from political representation to the governance of education. The findings indicate that the influence of international organizations is heavily dependent on how international norms align with existing, gendered institutional environments.

In terms of policy implications, reform should prioritize institutional coherence and enforcement capacity rather than simply aligning with normative standards. Strengthening regional accountability is crucial to address gaps in secondary-level retention. Without targeting informal socio-cultural dynamics, formal commitments risk becoming merely procedural, failing to bridge the gap between policy statements and transformative social realities.

This study has limitations due to its reliance on national-level aggregate data, which may overlook sub-national nuances. Future research should include localized case studies and longitudinal analyses to track how institutional mediation evolves across diverse contexts. Additionally, comparative studies are needed to clarify how WPS frameworks interact with various models of sectoral governance to achieve meaningful institutionalization.

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