

## Graduate Research Through the Rebirth of Social Work Education in Ethiopia: Trends, Geographic Distribution, and Thematic Areas

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**Abstract:** *The research activities of graduate students of social work at Addis Ababa University (AAU) have not been documented and analyzed in a way that it could be published. This article explores and examines social work graduate research from 2006 to 2019. Data and our unit of analysis included 580 theses and dissertations listed in graduation books and another 280 electronically stored master's theses and dissertations from the AAU Institutional Repository. The total graduates in the program (2006-2019) were 752, of which 65% (484) were males. Further analysis was made based on review of 280 master's theses and doctoral dissertations. The study site for 73% of these theses and dissertations was in Addis Ababa. The rural-urban comparative analysis indicates that 84% of research projects were carried out in urban areas. In terms of the methodological orientations, 81% employed qualitative methods. From the fifteen thematic categories identified in our study, the five most researched thematic areas which covered 67% of all master's thesis and PhD research projects include issues of children; women and gender; health and healthcare services; community and community development, and family, marriage, and divorce. This article concludes that the rebirth of social work education at AAU in 2004 paved the way for the expansion of graduate social work research. The urban bias of the research demonstrates a limitation of social work graduate research.*

**Keywords:** *Research, Ethiopia, social work, education*

Researching and recording the origins and development of academic programs and research activities has been a tradition at the College of Social Sciences (CSS), Addis Ababa University (AAU). Such publications in the Departments of Sociology and Anthropology are good examples (Admasie & Yntiso, 2006; Shigeta & Yntiso, 2005). Mehari (2018) reports on research activities of anthropology graduate students from 2006 to 2016. Other scholars have published articles on social work education in Ethiopia (e.g., Baynesagn et al., 2021; Kebede, 2019). Nonetheless, an analysis of the research activities of graduate social work students at AAU has not been published. This article explores and examines social work graduate research from 2006 to 2019. The analysis is particularly important because graduate social work education began for the first time in Ethiopia in 2004. This article briefly describes the historical background of social work in Ethiopia, emphasizing the role of an international partnership in the development of graduate education. The article analyzes enrollment and graduate trends, as well as thematic areas of master's theses and PhD dissertation research in social work. The purpose of this work is to evaluate the trends of graduate research in the School of Social Work (SSW), make

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the findings available for action during curriculum review, and reveal information for further discussion to improve research trends and methods.

### **The Expansion of Higher Education in Ethiopia**

Ethiopia has a long history of traditional education closely tied with the introduction and expansion of Christianity (4th century) and Islam (7th century). More specifically, Saint (2004) notes that Ethiopia “possesses a 1700-year tradition of elite education linked to the Orthodox Church” (p. 84). The introduction of modern education in Ethiopia is associated with the arrival of Christian missionaries in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and began with the establishment of Menelik II School in Addis Ababa in 1908. Most students came from upper class families including the royal family. Haile Selassie I, the last Emperor of Ethiopia (1930-1974), was one of the first students in the modern school (Zewde, 2002).

Until 1991, Ethiopia had only two universities, AAU first established as Haile Selassie I University College in 1950, and Asmara University founded in 1958. In 1991, Eritrea, the home of Asmara University, seceded from Ethiopia. Although there were several colleges and institutions in Addis Ababa and other major cities, AAU remained the only university in a country of approximately 28.4 million people in 1970 and 49.6 million people in 1990.

In 1994, the democratically-elected government embarked on an ambitious university expansion program (Saint, 2004), which radically altered the landscape of higher education. By 2005, the number increased to nine public universities, collectively known as first-generation universities, followed by 12 second-generation universities in 2006. Between 2007 and 2014, 12 third-generation universities were added. In 2012, there were 47 public universities including 11 fourth-generation universities and three universities founded for specific purposes, a metropolitan university, and two civil service universities. Consequently, the overall enrollment and graduation of university students has increased profoundly. At the end of 1980s, fewer than 10,000 students were enrolled in Ethiopian higher education institutions. By 2009, the number of students enrolled in higher education increased to 210,456 (Abye & Butterfield, 2012). This type of development and investment in higher education is similar to what occurred with the passage of the Morrill Acts that set aside land and funding for development of universities. Commonly called the land grant period, more than 70 universities were established and built from the ground up between 1862 and 1890 in the United States (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2022).

Historically, the overall trend of the enrollment and graduation of master’s and doctoral students at AAU was extremely low. For example, from 1978 to 2006 (for 28 years) only 3,000 master’s and 60 PhD students graduated. In 2011, enrollment of master’s and PhD students increased to 9,000 and 1,300, respectively (Abye & Butterfield, 2012). The graduate program expansion activities in AAU started with the support from Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). As the result of expansion activities, the number of graduates from master’s and PhD programs increased, for example, in 2020, 3,372 students (3,128 master’s and 244 PhDs) received their degrees. More than 2,000

graduates received a master's degree from the CSS where social work is located, between 1993 and 2016 (Mehari, 2018).

### **A Brief History of Social Work Education in Ethiopia**

The history of social work education passed through different routes during three regimes ruling Ethiopia since 1950s. Revolutionary changes and subsequent shifts in the macro political landscape in the country heavily influenced the history of social work. These include its introduction and early development (1959-1974) and the closing of social work education (1974-2004).

Social work was introduced during the Imperial Period, during which it flourished and successfully upgraded from a diploma to the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) level. Initially, the introduction of social work education in Ethiopia was not linked to higher education. The SSW was established in 1959 through joint efforts by the Ministry of Public Health and the United Nations Technical Assistance Board. Its purpose was to address the demand for trained medical social workers. The school started with a nine-month training program, which subsequently developed into a two-year diploma program. After seven years, in 1966 the School of Social Work started as a four-year BSW program at the Haile Selassie I University (Sedler, 1968a). According to Rozanne F. Sedler, during its early development, the inadequate number of Ethiopian academics was one of the main problems for social work education in Ethiopia. The school had three teaching staff until 1965, one of which was Rozanne F. Sedler, who spent three years as a social work faculty while her husband was sponsored by the Ford Foundation to help set up a new law school at the university (Lessenberry, 2021; Wayne State University, 2009). To manage the shortcomings of teaching staff, the School of Social Work mainly relied on foreigners as part-time instructors from international organizations. The other challenge was lack of employment opportunity for graduates. To solve the problem, the school engaged in advocating for the potential contribution that social work graduates could make in public sector offices (Sedler, 1967, 1968a, 1968b).

The steady progress of social work education at Haile Selassie I University was terminated immediately after the September 1974 Ethiopian Revolution. In its last days, the monarchy attempted to introduce reforms to contain the revolution but in vain. Amidst the confusion and uncertainties brought about by the popular uprising, the military regime, known as the *Derg Military Junta*, came to power. With the coming to power of the Socialist Regime, social work was labelled as a Bourgeois profession and was forced to close. The Derg grabbed Marxist-Leninist ideology, declared a socialist government, and emerged as a military dictatorship. Zewde (2002) portrayed the situation as follows:

The disaster started when the Derg tried to combine Marxism and Nationalism. Desperate to hang on to power, it imbibed the dominant Marxist-Leninist intellectual discourse as the only guarantee of preserving its political ascendancy. But it appropriated the dogma rather than the spirit of Marxism. It followed in the footsteps of Stalin rather than Marx or even Lenin. The result was a reign of terror that became its hallmark.... (p. 274)

Taking revolutionary measures, the military regime transformed the political, social, and economic landscape of the country. The radical measures taken by the military government include the confiscation and nationalization of domestic and foreign private firms; the 1975 Land Reform Proclamation which abolished private land ownership and related rights such as selling and leasing of rural land; and the nationalization of urban land and extra houses. Initially, these measures enabled the government to mobilize the masses (Gudina 2003; Zewde, 2002). Moreover, the military regime considered itself a patron of the working class, the urban poor, and the peasantry, which assumed collectively that the state would take care of its people in all aspects of life. Its solidarity with the socialist world led by the former Soviet Union brought the government into conflict with the Western world. The contradiction between the socialist-revolutionary regime and the Western world had negative implications for social work education.

The education sector, from primary to higher levels, experienced major changes. For instance, Haile Selassie I University was renamed AAU. It was closed and reopened with major structural changes including the dissolution of the Faculty of Arts, which was replaced by the College of Social Sciences, and the introduction of Marxist courses in the departments of philosophy, political science, sociology and anthropology. Labeled as reformist and bourgeois, the School of Social Work was closed, with sociology, social anthropology and social work merged into the Department of Applied Sociology (Admasie & Yntiso, 2006). Elements of social work education were maintained at AAU largely through the effort of two Ethiopian social work educators, Drs. Seyoum Gebreselassie and Andargachew Tesfaye, who managed to “hide” six social work courses in the applied sociology curriculum (Johnson Butterfield, 2007). Though a trace of social work remained alive, decisions of the socialist-military government led to a three decade-long interruption of social work education in Ethiopia from 1974 to 2004.

Similar to the way that the change from a monarchy to a military ended formal social work education in Ethiopia, the fall of the military government paved the way for its rebirth. Defeating the military regime in guerilla warfare, the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) captured the state power in 1991. The EPRDF government institutionalized ethnic federalism and cancelled the Marxist educational policy of its predecessor. It expanded primary and secondary education, and as noted, increased the number of universities, and encouraged the expansion of graduate programs. In the context of this progressive educational policy, the rebirth of social work education in Ethiopia was developed through an international higher education partnership.

### **Social Work Education and International Higher Education Partnership**

The process of re-establishing social work education was part of a dynamic university-to-university partnership (Abye & Butterfield, 2012), which also coincided with the government’s plan to expand graduate programs in Ethiopia. In 2004, the social work program at AAU was launched through an international university-to-university partnership named The Social Work Education in Ethiopia Partnership (SWEET, 2024). Through the partnership, AAU launched the MSW program in 2004, and after the first cohort of MSW students graduated, 8 MSW graduates were admitted to the PhD Program

in Social Work and Social Development. As the university's capacity increased through resident students in its new PhD program, sustainability increased. AAU opened a BSW program in 2008, and two additional master's programs, an extension program involving evening and weekend classes in 2011, and a distance education program started in 2014.

Project SWEEP was successful for various reasons. The commitment of AAU's top leadership contributed a lot to its success. Professor Andreas Eshete, the then president of AAU, personally supported the Graduate School of Social Work. President Andreas appointed Dr. Abye Tasse, AAU's vice president for international partnership, as the first dean of the school. The commitment of President Eshete and Dr. Abye was critical. The mantra of everyone involved was adopted from Dr. Abye's "can do" attitude. We would all work together to start the School of Social Work with or without money, with or without resident faculty, with or without books, with or without office space and computers. We would all work together, tapping into our international networks, and moving forward with our common vision (Johnson Butterfield et al., 2009, p. 61). As planning moved forward, these two top officials of the AAU strengthened the graduate school by providing materials, computers, library space, offices, classrooms, and so on for master's students, including dormitory space for PhD students. Overall, support from the top of AAU administration provided the graduate school with an independent working environment and a semi-autonomous status, which enabled the school to accomplish its activities without passing through the various bureaucratic structures of university administration.

At the programmatic level in Ethiopia, leadership was anchored in the work of two senior Ethiopian scholars -Associate Dean Melese Getu of the CSS at AAU and Dean Abye Tasse, who at the time was also the president of the International Association of Schools of Social Work. On the US side, the collaborative partnership was led by Professors Alice K. Butterfield and Nathan Linsk of the University of Illinois Chicago. Project SWEEP mobilized human and material resources from a wide range of international networks of prominent scholars and institutions. For instance, using their global connections, Dean Abye and Professor Butterfield rallied scholars from different corners of the world to serve the newly established graduate school. No one was paid to participate. Voluntary service included teaching master's and PhD courses, chairing and examining theses and dissertations, providing training and giving seminars. Professors from universities in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Norway, Israel and Tanzania were involved in teaching graduate courses until AAU had qualified academic staff to sustain the programs. Professors teaching PhD courses came from world-class universities such as SUNY Albany, Indiana University, University of Illinois Chicago, University of Michigan, University of Missouri, and Australian Catholic University (Johnson Butterfield et al., 2009).

Another factor that created the success of Project SWEEP was its innovative and pragmatic approaches. The block teaching model introduced to the partnership by the US faculty allowed professors to come to Ethiopia to teach courses during their vacation, semester breaks or sabbaticals. Course offerings were supplemented by international seminars and short-term trainings offered and facilitated by professors from well-known institutions around the world. The efforts made by Project SWEEP were not limited to mobilizing scholars and facilitating formal teaching and learning activities. It also involved

mobilizing other resources including books and other reading materials. For example, Professor Butterfield used her international networks to collect thousands of academic books and through collaboration with Books for Africa, three containers of books were shipped to AAU, Bahir Dar University, and the University of Gondar. Guest professors supported PhD students by bringing books and other reference materials and assisted them in publishing their research (e.g., Adamek et al., 2024; Minaye, 2012).

One of the major contributions of the rebirth and expansion of graduate school of social work at AAU is building the capacity of academic staff. The school had no Ethiopian staff when it reemerged in 2004. Currently in 2023, the School has 15 PhD and four Ethiopian staff with master's degrees. Fourteen of the 15 PhD holders received their doctoral degrees from AAU's PhD Program in Social Work and Social Development. With 19 academic staff, the School of Social Work is ranked second in the College of Social Sciences after the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, and leads in the number of female academic staff. Three of the seven PhD-holding female staff of the College Social Sciences are in the School of Social Work.

The development of the PhD Program in Social Work and Social Development at AAU has had a spiraling effect on the expansion of social work education in regional universities across Ethiopia. The social work PhD program launched at AAU in 2006 attracted young instructors from newly emerging regional universities. As of January 2018, 18 staff of regional universities received their doctorate degrees. Moving back to their home universities, PhD graduates have been instrumental in establishing social work programs at Bahir Dar University, University of Gondar, and Jimma University. Bahir Dar University and University of Gondar, both located in the Amhara Regional State, have emerged as regional centers of social work education. Gondar has a BSW, MSW and PhD program. They also play an important role in sharing their experience with other regional universities. Jimma University introduced social work education establishing the Department of Sociology and Social Work, which later became independent departments. Other public universities launching social work programs in various years include Ambo University, Mizan Tepi University, Arsi University, Jijiga University, Nekemte University, Wollo University, and Mekele University (e.g., Kebede, 2019). At present the SSW at AAU functions independent of international support from any available or specific national and international partnerships. Faculty members at the SSW provide support in the areas of teaching, student supervision and research to other emerging social work graduate programs in Ethiopia.

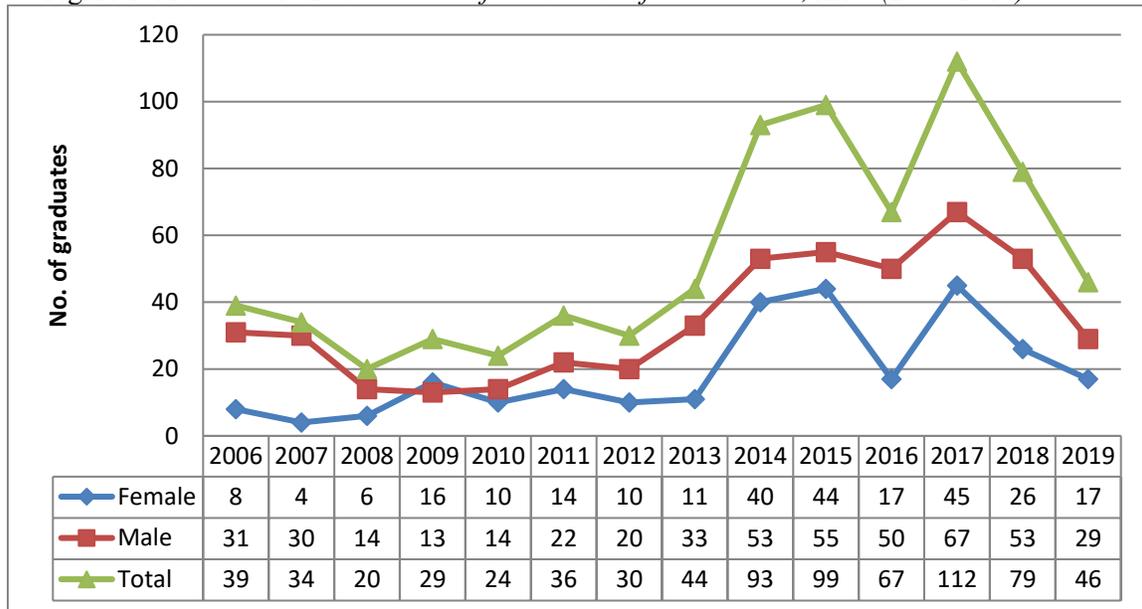
### **Key Findings**

Data for this study were generated from graduation books published for a 14-year period. These official lists included titles and abstracts of theses and dissertations (AAU, 2006-2019). Our data included the graduation book lists of 580 theses and dissertations and 280 electronic theses and dissertations available in the Institutional Repository of AAU (2023). The data analysis paid attention to the trends in number of graduates, gender distributions, thematic areas of research, the rural-urban distribution of research sites, and the methodological orientation of research projects. Thematic areas of research were

identified from expanded abstracts required for theses and dissertations, key words, and executive summaries. Categories were identified and tabled so that thematic areas could be cross-checked. Data analysis was carried out by the first author. Data from the Registrar Office provided an overall picture related to trends of student enrollment and graduation. The geographic distribution and methodological orientations of the research projects were analyzed based on the data obtained from the AAU online repository. Key findings are presented on student enrollment and graduation, geographic distribution of research activities, and thematic areas of research. Data from Registrar were useful to examine the overall student enrollment and graduation trends of students.

Figure 1 summarizes the number of social work students who successfully defended their master’s theses and doctoral dissertations from 2006 to 2019. The numbers of graduates fluctuated. For example, between the 2006 and 2012 graduation years, the highest number of graduates was 39 in 2006 and the lowest number was 20 in 2008. Over 14 years, the school had its highest number of graduates, 112, in 2017. The increase in the number of graduates since 2013 was due to the opening of evening and distance classes in the MSW program. These programs expanded the opportunity for those pursuing graduate education while staying employed in companies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or government offices.

Figure 1. MSW and PhD Graduates of the School of Social Work, AAU (2006-2019)



Source: AAU, Graduation Books. Office of the Registrar (2006-2019).

In 2015, the curriculum was revised to feature three specific concentrations, Community & Social Development, Health Social Work, and Families, Children & Youth. This allowed students to focus on specific fields of social work practice after taking foundation courses, and allowed the School to admit greater numbers of students. After 2019, the authors have observed that due to COVID-19, the number of graduates declined.

COVID-19 created a situation that did not allow in-person classes. Online formats were not easily acceptable due to inaccessible internet bandwidth as well as a lack of student access to computers. Based on the faculty roles in the School of Social Work of two authors, admissions as well as degree completion suffered. Consequently, data analysis for this article comprises 2006-2019. Nonetheless, although the number of graduates in 2019 was only 46, the number is still highest compared to all departments in the College of Social Sciences.

### **Gender Composition**

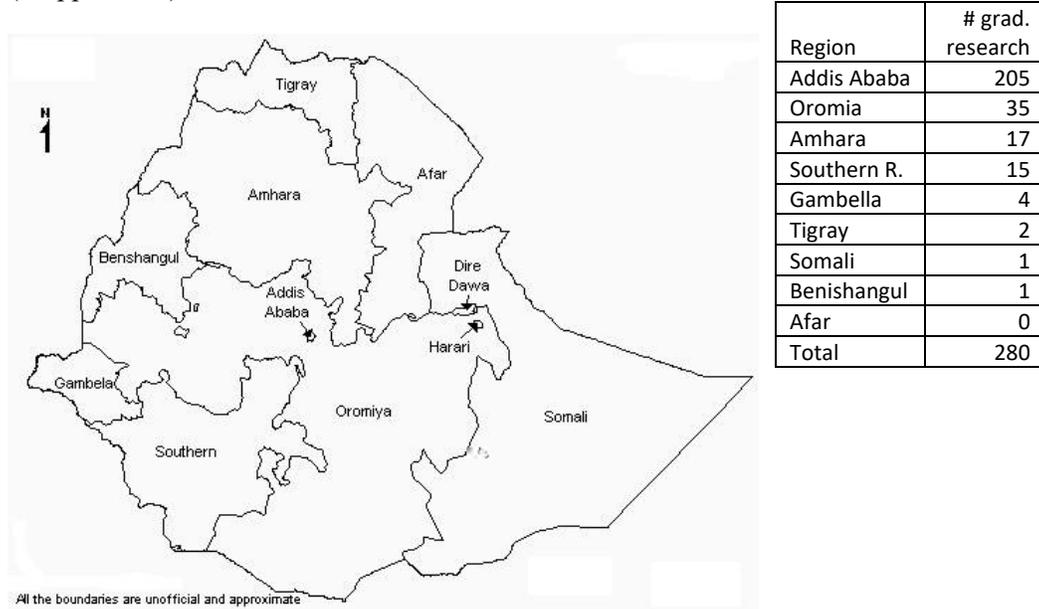
Figure 1 throws light on graduation trends and proportion of female and male students. Traditionally, social work has been a female profession. This is true in Western Europe and North America. The demographic characteristics of social work education in the United States from 1974 to 2000 demonstrate an increasing involvement of women in graduate programs. The proportion of women MSW graduates increased from 65% in 1974 to 85% in 2000. Similarly, the percentage of females receiving their doctoral degree increased from slightly less than 36% to about 73% in 2000 (Schilling et al., 2008). The Ethiopian experience shows a different pattern. About 64% of the 752 graduates who received their MSW and doctoral degrees from SSW between 2006 and 2019 were male. The gender dimension of social work education reflects the Ethiopian context where higher education is dominated overwhelmingly by male students. However, the percentage of female graduate students in the SSW is higher compared to, for example, female graduates from the Department of Social Anthropology in the College of Social Sciences. According to Mehari (2018), about 85% of the 175 MS and PhD graduates from 2006 to 2016 and all 11 PhD graduates were male.

### **Geographic Distribution**

Figure 2 shows the map of Ethiopia and summarizes the regional distribution of social work graduate research. The analysis of regional coverage and rural-urban distribution indicates that the majority (73%) were carried out in Addis Ababa. Graduate research carried out in Oromia Regional State, the biggest regional state in terms of geography and population, was only 12.5%. Research in Amhara Regional State, the second largest population region accounted only for 6%. Altogether, only 23 (8%) of research projects were carried out in other regions.

The rural-urban comparative analysis indicates that 84% of MSW and PhD research projects were carried out in urban areas. Mehari's (2014) earlier analysis of 187 MSW theses in the social work library found that 89% were carried out in urban areas, indicating an urban bias of graduate research. Despite the fact that nearly 80% of the Ethiopian population live in rural areas, rural communities and issues are marginalized.

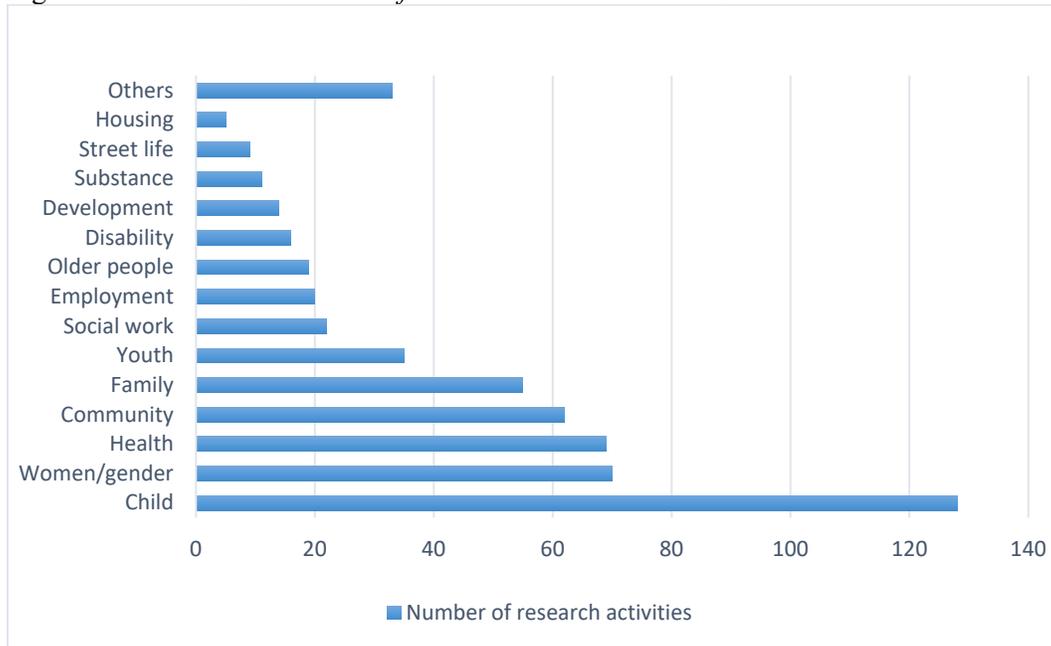
Figure 2. *Map of Ethiopia: Regional Distribution of MSW and PhD Research Activities* (Mappr, 2025)



**Methodological Orientation and Thematic Focus**

The 15 thematic areas listed in Figure 3 are ranked from the most researched theme to the least. The great majority, 81%, employed qualitative methods, with only nine percent employing quantitative methods and the remaining 10% applying mixed methods. At the same time, these graduate research activities focused on a wide range of socio-economic, psychosocial, and development issues, with some thematic areas attracting large numbers of graduate research. Five of the most researched thematic areas cover 67% of all thesis and PhD research projects. These are children (22%), women and gender (12%), health and healthcare services (12%), community and community development (11%), and family, marriage, and divorce (10%).

Thematic areas, ranked from 6 to 10, comprise 112 projects or 19% of the total. These include youth-related issues, social work education/practice, aging/older people, employment/unemployment/ livelihoods, and disability-related topics. The remaining five themes, ranked 11 to 15, consist of 47 graduate research projects (8%). The topics in these five themes include development, substance abuse, street life/displacement/resettlement, and condominium houses. The remaining 33 (6%) examined diverse issues including micro-finance and credit, the impacts of government policies on the operation of NGOs, corruption, revenge killings, the social exclusion of people with leprosy, commercial sex work, and teenage pregnancy.

Figure 3. *Thematic Distribution of SSW Graduate Research Activities*

*Child-Related Studies.* Child-related research was carried out through 128 social work masters' and doctoral research projects. A total of 23 theses explored the lives, experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of street children. Issues include the lived experiences of female street children, rehabilitation and reunification, sexual and reproductive health problems and coping mechanisms to survive street life. Research also addressed the influence of drug abuse on psychological wellbeing and the resilience and coping strategies of street children engaged in shoe shining as a means of livelihood.

Ten theses explored child migration and child trafficking. These studies examined the lived experiences of rural-urban migrant children in urban settings including shoe-shining and lottery vending in Addis Ababa. The studies also focused on the relationship between rural-urban child migration and child labor in urban settings. They explored issues such as child domestic workers trafficked to Addis Ababa and the implications of child trafficking for their wellbeing. Child labor, a widely observed phenomenon in both rural and urban areas of Ethiopia (Borko, 2017; Sorsa & Abera, 2006), was also covered. Six graduate students examined problems related to child labor including its impacts and child labor's relation to child migration, commercial farming, child wellbeing, and school attendance of children engaged in weaving in Addis Ababa.

Social work graduate research also explored child abuse and neglect, child vulnerability, and child health. Seven MSW theses focused on sexual abuse, including the sexual abuse of male children, sexual abuse practices in child rehabilitation centers, and the traumatic experiences of abused children. Other research topics include orphaned and vulnerable children, child-headed households including children who lost parents due to

HIV/AIDS, child rights, health issues such as mental illness, children with autism, children affected by HIV/AIDS, and child sex workers.

*Women and Gender.* The second major thematic area is women and gender. This theme attracted more than 12% of the social work graduate research. Seventy of the 580 research projects examined diverse issues related to women, including health and healthcare services (23 projects), gender-based violence including sexual abuse of domestic workers (15 projects), women's empowerment (13 projects), migration and trafficking of female domestic workers to the Middle East countries (4 projects), and migration of domestic workers from rural villages of Ethiopia to Addis Ababa (8 projects).

*Health and Healthcare Services.* Social work graduate research on health and healthcare services is ranked third. This thematic area embraced 12% (69 projects). Under this thematic area were HIV/AIDS-related studies (20 projects), sexual and reproductive health (12 projects), and cancer and non-communicable diseases (11 projects). HIV/AIDS-related research explored single mothers and other people living with HIV/AIDS, and the vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS. Some projects focused on HIV/AIDS among commercial sex workers and among men having sex with men. Other research focused on child-related issues such as vulnerability of children to HIV/AIDS and caregivers and orphaned children. Several graduate students conducted their research on cancer, including breast cancer, cervical cancer, and non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, an emerging health problem in Ethiopia. Other research topics included mental health including family caregivers' experience, women living with HIV/AIDS who were experiencing mental illness, the socio-economic impacts of mental health, and mental health services.

Fourteen graduate research projects examined various reproductive health issues such as lived experiences of women with obstetric fistula, a widespread health problem affecting thousands of Ethiopia women as well as women in developing countries who have very limited resources. Other issues were parent-adolescent communication on sexual and reproductive health issues, reproductive health problems of women with disabilities, and abortion. Research also explored youth reproductive health services and integration of adolescent sexual and reproductive health issues in high school education.

*Community.* The strong emphasis on community-related research is the fourth major thematic area. This can be seen as contributing to the knowledge base of community social work in Ethiopia. Sixty-six students (11%) conducted research on three major sub-themes: community development, community health, and community policing. Community development resulted in 18 projects including volunteerism, social capital, and corporate responsibility. Other topics include the contribution of local NGOs and international organizations to community development, university-community partnerships, and community-based research for sustainable development. Some graduate students conducted their research on Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), including ABCD with farmers, and community radio and community-based organizations in mobilizing community assets and promoting ABCD activities.

Community health and community policing were the other sub themes. Nine students conducted research on community health, mainly on topics of community participation to

curb the spread of HIV infections, community role in care and support of people living with HIV/AIDS, the effects of solid waste on community health, and community health insurance. Graduate students also studied community policing, a new area of research in the Ethiopian context. The notion and practice of community policing has been introduced and expanded in urban areas of Ethiopia, including Addis Ababa, as a means of controlling crime through community-police partnerships. Focus areas were the role of local community assets in promoting community policing, community policing and gender violence, and community policing as a new paradigm.

A few students studied social exclusion and the marginalization of minority groups, but in general, this area was overlooked. Social justice, one of the principles of the social work profession, requires challenging - discrimination and exclusion on the basis of gender, age, culture, and so on. One of the core purposes of the profession is working to assure social justice and the inclusion of marginalized, vulnerable and at-risk populations. Although social exclusion and marginalization of minority groups are major areas of research and practice in the Western World, very few social work graduate students studied these issues. Only two students studied social exclusion, with one study on leprosy-affected people and another on the social exclusion of the Manja community, a marginalized group in southern Ethiopia.

*Family, Marriage, and Divorce.* Much attention was given to family, marriage, and divorce. Fifty-five research activities (10%) focused on family-related matters, including 23 projects on family structure and juvenile delinquency, family structure and child sexual abuse, and extended family support mechanisms for older people. Other topics included child-family reunification, family resilience and child protection, professional family mediation, foster family care, and foster parenting. Seven projects examined divorce-related issues including causes and impacts of divorce, child marriage and divorce, pre- and post-divorce experiences of divorced men, and the psycho-social conditions of divorced men and women.

Studies conducted on family, marriage and divorce paid attention to child marriage, a practice that affects the lives and wellbeing of younger girls living in rural areas of Ethiopia (Harper & Marcus, 2018; Jones et al, 2018). According to the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) of Ethiopia, 8% of Ethiopian girls in the 15-19 age-category were married before the age of 15 years old. The prevalence of child marriage is much higher in the Amhara region (Central Statistics Authority CSA of Ethiopia and ICF International, 2012).

*Youth.* Graduate research on youth-related issues is ranked 6<sup>th</sup> with 6% of the total number (35 out of 580 projects). Major topics include youth unemployment, drug abuse, youth street life, and reproductive health. Employment-related research focused on unemployment reduction efforts implemented by government agencies and other stakeholders, including job creation and capacity building interventions, and micro and small-scale entrepreneurship programs. Youth unemployment and vulnerability of unemployed young people to illegal migration were other topical issues.

Drug and substance abuse issues have become a widespread problem in private and public universities in Ethiopia (Keno Tulu & Keskis, 2015; Kumesa et al., 2015). Female youth living on the street, contraceptive use, and having children were studied. Research

also explored the reproductive health of female youth working in flower plantations, and reproductive health services for the youth.

*Social Work Practice.* Social work education and practice is the seventh major theme. Of the 23 projects, nine examined the role of social workers in the provision of social support for disadvantaged children, and the service provided in federal and regional courts of law. Some studied services provided by social workers to physically abused children in the federal court of law, and the role of social workers in the juvenile justice system. Others assessed challenges and prospects of social work practice in hospitals and other healthcare facilities, including models of practice dealing with youth affected by substance abuse, the role of spirituality and religion, and social work practice with children as victims of crime at the Ministry of Justice.

*Employment, Unemployment, and Livelihoods.* The eighth thematic area focused on employment and livelihood issues. Topics include the role of savings and credit/microfinance associations in empowering women and enhancing self-employment, the role of micro and small-scale enterprises in reducing youth unemployment, and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, including visually impaired women and university graduates with disabilities. Other projects focused on the unemployment on urban refugees, and the social impacts of unemployment on family relationships. Some explored the impact of urban agriculture on household improvement, the livelihoods of urban street vendors, and industrial waste and its implications for the livelihoods of smallholder farmers. Additional topics include child out-migration, agricultural cooperatives, and rural women, and begging as a livelihood strategy of older people in urban settings.

*Aging and Older People.* Aging and older people, the ninth thematic area, accounted for slightly more than 3% of the total. Nineteen research activities were conducted, including the lived experiences of older people in rural farming, abused older people, homeless older people, their living conditions and coping strategies, and lives of older veterans of Ethio-Italian war (1935-1941). Others examined the effect of institutional care on the lives of older people, community-based care systems for older people in the egalitarian rural Awramba community, and service delivery for older persons in public hospitals in Addis Ababa.

*Disability.* Sixteen research projects, nearly 3%, examined issues related to persons with disabilities, the tenth thematic area. Among the topics explored were experiences of family members caring for a child with a disability, problems of accessibility of social services, and coping mechanisms of parents caring for children with intellectual disabilities. Others included employment opportunities, reproductive health problems of women with intellectual disability, and violence against women with disability.

The third set of five research themes, ranked from 11 to 15, accounted for 8% (47 of 580) of the projects. These thematic areas, listed in descending order, explored development-related issues (2.4%), substance abuse (1.9%), street life (1.6%), displacement and resettlement (1.4%), and housing (0.9%). Research projects that are not included in the fifteen research themes are labeled as "others." These projects accounted for slightly more than 6% (33 of 580) of the entire graduate research. Topics included living

conditions of inmates and their rehabilitation and reintegration in post-prison life, and corporate social responsibilities of business firms such as hotels.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This section discusses graduate research carried out through the School of Social Work at AAU. The data for this study did not consist of a survey or interviews with students regarding their theses or dissertations. While the data reported were obtained from AAU, all three authors have been involved in teaching and theses/dissertation research since the start of the program in 2006. Consequently, author comments should be viewed as contextual observations and experiences with students and their research. Reflective comments on the data are based on the extensive 16-year experience of the authors. Comments are offered to make sense, explain, contextualize and offer understanding of the data per se. Critical findings include the geographic coverage of research, its methodological bias and the sustainability of social work and its expansion.

#### **Geographic Coverage**

Of 580 master and PhD research projects reviewed, 73% were conducted in Addis Ababa. As professors and deans at the School of Social Work at AAU, the authors have observed and heard concerns regarding the difficult financial situation that students face in carrying out theses and dissertation research. Financial limitations and time constraints are repeatedly reported by students as major barriers to conducting their research outside of Addis Ababa. The authors have observed this common problem—one which has plagued the SSW for many years. Private students have no access to university funds to conduct their research. Government-sponsored students, although they have access to research funding from the university, claim that the funds are inadequate to travel great distances to research sites. In addition to limited research funds, time is another constraint reported mainly by MSW students. MSW students are given a semester, which is about four months, to launch and complete their thesis projects. On the other hand, PhD students are given four and half years in total for course work including the one-semester requirement to take bridging courses from the MSW program. Doctoral students also prepare and defend a portfolio, develop a research proposal, conduct their research, pass through blind review and review by examiners, and also publish two journal articles. Therefore, fearing such time constraints, many students are not eager to risk travel to distant or rural areas to conduct their research. This gap demonstrates the contradiction with AAU's vision which is "to be the leading advocate for higher education in Africa, with the capacity to provide support for its member institutions in meeting national, continental and global needs" (AAU, 2024, p. 1). Research projects by social work researchers need to ally with the university's vision statement to advance national needs. This is not the case of the present status of social work graduate research projects. The geographic skewness of urban settings represents a small proportion of the country's geographic and population proportions.

Other authors report similar concerns as well as additional barriers. For example, Pierce and Scherra (2004) note the utility of tools developed for urban settings, environmental barriers, and ethical considerations related to conducting research in rural

settings as among the many challenges related to conducting studies areas far from urban settings. Ritter and Stillman (n.d.) further describe the limited resources, transportation, the lack of best practices for rural research, and limited funding as some of the critical challenges for data collection in rural areas.

### **Methodological Bias**

Methodological challenges also require discussion. Among the 580 reviewed theses and dissertations, 81% of them applied qualitative methods. Only 9% applied mixed methods and only 10% used a quantitative methodology. Our participation in supervision informs us that many students pre-determine the methodology they select based on their confidence and try to twist the research agenda towards their methodological interest, skills or expertise rather than the other way round. In many instances, students lack confidence in applying quantitative methods and fear applying statistical tools and analysis. They also wrongly perceive that qualitative methods are easier than analyzing quantitative or mixed methods. Methodological skills of faculty members are another dimension that needs scrutiny. Like the methodological bias towards qualitative research demonstrated by students, many faculty members appear to lack confidence in supervising research projects that apply quantitative or mixed methods. However, this issue requires a more systematic review of the methodological skills and interests of faculty.

Students are also influenced by the social sciences discourse arguing that human behavior and day-to-day experiences are best explained by qualitative information compared to numeric presentations Tong et al. (2012) explain that “qualitative research aims to provide an in-depth understanding into human behavior, emotion, attitudes and experiences” (p. 1). Ezer and Aksüt (2021) gathered opinions of graduate students in the field of social studies about the use of qualitative methods. The authors analyzed and reported various reasons ascribed by their study participants regarding the use of qualitative methods. These include methodological appropriateness, strength and limitations, importance of qualitative research in social studies, and challenging stages while using qualitative methodology. Most social work students in the SSW at AAU believe, however, that qualitative methodology is more appropriate for their study, and has the strength to generate new facts they hope to reveal.

Looking at the profession at-large in terms of social work research, social work researchers have leaned toward qualitative methodology. It is not a surprise, then, that the majority of graduate students in the School of Social Work at AAU have applied qualitative methodology. Thelwall and Nevill (2021) report that qualitative research utilizing interviews, case studies, focus groups or ethnography became “more common in all broad fields between 1996 and 2019” (p. 1). In part, the use of quantitative methods is constrained by the fact that only few of the faculty members are trained in quantitative research methods and thus have the passion and commitment to assist students who show interest in applying quantitative methods. For example, when students are assigned a faculty supervisor for their thesis or dissertation, topical areas of the proposed research are used as the main criterion for assigning supervisors. Once students are assigned, supervisors align students to their methodological expertise or else students are recommended to change

supervisors. Therefore, in fear of the challenges of moving from one supervisor to the other, and knowing that faculty supervisors are colleagues, students stick to the interest of their supervisors which is not necessarily what the research area requires.

### **The Sustainability of Social Work and its Expansion**

The sustainability of the social work program at AAU was grounded in a homegrown faculty development strategy. The school was reopened in 2004 by launching a MSW program. The school recruited graduates from the MSW program and launched a PhD program in 2006, and at the same time employed seven of its doctoral students as faculty members. In addition, some students admitted to the PhD program in 2007 were employed as staff of the school. This strategy ensured the sustainability of social work education over time, including teaching, research and community service. The gradual replacement of visiting and short-term international faculty by Ethiopian PhD holders has not only contributed to the sustainability of AAU's social work programs but also to the expansion of social work education. For example, once a PhD holder at the School of Social Work at AAU reaches the associate professor rank, he or she can now teach in the doctoral program. As more social work faculty were promoted to the rank of associate professor, this has strengthened the school's capacity, enabling it to completely take responsibility, not only for its BSW and MSW programs, but for its PhD program as well.

The graduate programs in social work at AAU have played an important role in accelerating the expansion of social work education across regional universities in Ethiopia. The government wisely required that students admitted to doctoral study in social work had to be employed already as a lecturer in the broader university system. These lecturers were supported by their home universities while obtaining their PhD degrees and were required to return after receiving their degree. New and regional universities sent their young faculty members to study social work. Upon returning to their home universities, almost all were given the charge to start social work education, sometimes at the bachelor's level, and in some cases immediately at the master's level. This process spread social work education across the country. Thus, it was the graduates of social work, at the MSW and PhD levels, from the reborn AAU School of Social Work that played an essential and critical role in opening social work education throughout the country. As of 2023, 17 universities, 12 public and 5 private, operate social work programs at various levels. All of the 17 universities have a BSW program. Two public universities run three levels (tiers) of training at BSW, MSW and PhD levels. Another public university that currently operates BSW and MSW programs is at the stage of designing curricula to open a PhD program.

### **Conclusion**

The development of social work research in Ethiopia is closely associated with the expansion of social work graduate programs at AAU. Although social work education was introduced to Ethiopia in the 1950s, it was limited to undergraduate training until it was interrupted in 1974 because of the Ethiopian revolution and subsequent regime change. Social work graduate research has been flourishing after the AAU School of Social Work was reopened in 2004. The rebirth of social work education at AAU paved the way for the

expansion of graduate research. Social work graduate research at AAU exhibited a stunning growth in terms of number and thematic areas covered since 2006. Social work graduate research explored a wide range of issues including health, family, community, employment, and housing. Moreover, graduate research projects examined issues related to marginalized groups (e.g., children, women, and older people) and emerging themes such as disability, street life and substance abuse. Despite these strengths of the social work post-graduate research, the following issues require further research and programmatic evaluation by the School of Social Work and the CSS at AAU. These include the urban bias of social work research in Ethiopia. This urban-rural imbalance marginalizes Ethiopia's rural populations and precludes knowledge development through social work research. A second issue is the methodological gap, especially in the quantitative skills of faculty and graduate students. A third limitation is the misalignment of social work research in the AAU's vision statements. Consequently, social work education should revisit its curricula to fit national research interests. Efforts should be made to provide faculty with advance training, particularly in quantitative methods. This would improve the competency of both students and faculty in applying all research methodologies, without prejudice.

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