

# Gender Studies and Internet Portal in the Universities: Lessons for Developing Countries

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## Abstract

*Gender issues are the most outspoken in recent years. However, gender inequalities are still the most visible phenomena in all spheres of human beings' activities all over the world, but with varying degrees. It goes without saying that the role of women in our universe is curtailed mainly to taking care of the household and raising children more than that of playing key roles in decision making positions. Gender disparity remains unsolved despite numerous national, international, private and governmental initiatives efforts made against gender inequalities. Worsening the situation, the recently prevalent “digital divide” brought by rapid development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has become new area of concern with respect to gender issues.*

*This paper introduces the concept gender issues; reveals problem areas to substantiate why gender studies is vital; highlights initiatives and undertakings; analyzes the prospects and challenges with regard to elevating gender disparities. Furthermore, points related to “digital divide” are overviewed. At last, a case study of Internet portal for Gender and Queer studies in the higher education institutions in Hamburg - Germany, is added. The Internet portal coordinates the activities and information need to the learners and researchers in these institutions. The paper looks into the replication possibility of the Internet portal in tertiary education and research institution in developing countries, particularly in Ethiopia.*

## 1.) Introduction

Gender issues have become points of discussion and fields of research everywhere – at national and international level. On one hand, researchers are engaged in revealing areas of problems with real causes, while on the other hand, yet demanding, they are striving to provide means to end disparities, if not to minimize. In line with this there are quite many initiatives [Emebet, et al, 2004] and undertakings supported by governmental and non-governmental, national and international institutions. In some cases there are joint and networked efforts, whereas in other cases activities are distributed and run on

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individual basis. The Gender and Queer Studies initiative in Hamburg higher education institutions is one which tries to coordinate and network gender studies and researches in Hamburg.

This paper discusses issues with regard to gender disparities in general and the 'digital divide' in particular. The main focus will be the experience gained by the project team of "Internet Portal for Gender and Queer Studies in Hamburg Higher Education Institutions" at three leading Universities (University of Applied Sciences, Technical University of Harburg-Hamburg, and School of Economics and Political Science).

The goal of the project is to establish and enhance an Internet portal for gender studies to coordinate the resources and research activities of female professors, researchers and students of universities and other higher education institutions. The project team applied solely Open Sources Software (OSS)<sup>3</sup> or simply Open Source for the development of the portal. Thus, the application programs used can be easily replicated to similar projects.

Technically, the paper gives emphasis on the main components, the content management system, the database, and other utilities. The software developed is also discussed. In line with this the possibilities of replication of the "Internet Portal" for gender studies in developing countries in general and in Ethiopia in particular is also presented.

## **2.) Gender Issues and 'digital divide'**

The prevalent problems in gender disparities necessitated the need to study Gender issues. Gender inequalities have posed hindrance to the society to effectively utilize approximately half of the potential resource, i.e., by curtailing women's engagement in all sectors.

To serve the purpose of this paper, two main aspects of gender issues are classified. The first aspect is the conventional type of gender inequalities prevailed in different forms and poses problems for the majority of women in searching employment, securing equal position and payment, education, etc. The overall effect is thus reflected as gender disparities in the socio-economic, cultural, political spheres. The second aspect is the 'digital divide', which is a recent phenomena brought by the ICT development. Due to limited scope, the paper discusses only the later aspect.

### **a.) 'Digital divide'**

Simply put, the 'digital divide' is the wide division between those who have access to ICT and are using it effectively, and those who do not<sup>4</sup>. The 'digital divide' is a complex

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<sup>3</sup> OSS is a freely available source code, with contributions from thousands of programmers around the world. OSS is the spirit of the software revolution. As result it has grabbed the computer industry's attention

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bridges.org/digitaldivide>

issue, often clouded by heated debate and hype. Thousands of small initiatives are underway to address it, both "on the ground" and at policy levels<sup>5</sup>.

The gender disparities triggered recently by the ICT growth, is remarked as one of the 'digital divide'. The gender 'digital divide' in the developing countries, more specifically in Africa, is worse than in USA, Europe or other developed countries. One of the main hindrances is opportunity given to girls to go to schools is limited and thus the number of illiterate women in Africa is by far greater than the men and thereby limited Internet access. A Table is depicted to exemplify the percentage of women Internet user in some selected countries.

**Table: Women's Internet use in selected developing countries**

Country	Women as % of Internet users, 2000	Total women Internet users in '000s	Total no. Internet users in '000s	Internet users as % of total population	Population in '000s	Female prof. & tech. workers % of total	Female literacy rate	Female GDP per capita (US\$)	GDI Rank 1/174
Philippines	51.0	76.5	150	0.6	11,726	65.1	94.3	2510	65
South Africa	51.0	645.6	1,266	4.2	42,835	46.7	83.2	4637	84
Brazil	43.0	1,075	2,500	2.1	169,807	63.3	83.9	3813	67
Croatia	42.0	63	150	4.3	4,672	n/a	96.4	3557	50
Mexico	42.0	567	1,350	2.5	98,553	45.2	87.9	4594	48
Estonia	38.0	57	150	14.1	1,421	66.8	99	4236	49
Russian	38.0	4,560	12,000	1.8	146,861	n/a	98.8	3503	61
Zambia	37.5	1.13	3	0.2	9,461	31.9	67.5	753	125
Uganda	31.5	4.73	15	0.1	22,167	n/a	35	944	131
China	30.4	6,840	22,500	0.7	1,265,530	45.1	74.5	2485	79
India	23.0	115	500	0.2	983,377	20.5	39.4	902	112
Poland	18.7	295.6	1,581	5.4	38,607	61.2	99	5061	40
Belarus	17.5	14	80	0.1	6,667	38.4	98.5	3909	54
Ethiopia	13.9	0.83	6	0.1	58,390	n/a	29.2	349	172
Slovakia	12.0	60	500	13.0	5,393	59.7	99	6366	39
Czech Republic	12.0	48	400	6.8	10,286	54.1	99	7952	34
Senegal	12.0	.90	7.5	0.3	9,723	n/a	24.8	1253	127
Lithuania	10.0	7.0	70	2.9	3,600	67.5	99	3323	55
Jordan	6.0	3.7	60.8	1.8	4,435	n/a	81.8	1429	n/a
Colombia <sup>16</sup>	n/a	n/a	350	0.0	38,581	45.6	90.8	4725	51
Peru	n/a	n/a	200	1.5	26,111	39.4	83.7	2335	71
Turkey	n/a	n/a	450	2.3	64,567	33	73.9	4681	73
Thailand	n/a	n/a	200	1.3	60,037	54.5	92.8	5000	58
Indonesia	n/a	n/a	300	0.2	212,942	40.8	79.5	2359	88
Pakistan	n/a	n/a	61.9	0.1	135,135	21.0	25.4	701	116
Vietnam	n/a	n/a	10	0.1	76,236	27.6	89	1385	91

Source: HafTag, 2001

According to Hafkin (Hafkin, 2002), women are less likely than men to own communication media, such as radios and televisions, or to access them whenever they want to, in the case of household possession of the technology. When it involves paying for information access, such as at a rural information centre or a cyber cafe, women are

<sup>5</sup> ibid

less likely to have the disposable income to do so (or hesitates to use family food, education and clothing resources for information).

Furthermore, Hafkin (Hafkin, 2002) categorized the 'digital divide' in two aspects, namely the physical access to the infrastructure and socio-cultural factors.

Physical access to infrastructure or (real access) includes: Appropriate Technology, Affordability, Capacity, Relevant Content and Integration.

The other aspect is cultural. In this case ICT is gender bias in attitudes towards women studying or using information technology. Throughout the world, there are problems in attracting young women to science and technology studies. The problem is worse in Africa than in any other region. At tertiary level in Africa, young girls make up only 2.1 and 1.6 percent of students in engineering in Ghana and in Kenya respectively (Hafkin, 2002).

Nonetheless, gender issues in relation to the field of ICT gained their first international foothold at the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. (Hafkin, 2002). It could also be foreseen that if the awareness, readiness, allocation of necessary resources and issuing supportive policies are in order, ICT can provide unique and immense opportunities to young women. This could simply be deduced from the analogue that women are mainly engaged in office secretariat job. Thus with office automation, women should have been benefited more from ICT.

Opportunities such as provisions for ICT supported distance and life long education could benefit women, who otherwise are unable to attend face to face (regular) classes due to variety of reasons. Moreover, ICT facilitates tele-work by making homes offices.

## **b.) Gender Issues in Ethiopia**

Gender issues can be seen from different point of view in Ethiopia. In ancient time Ethiopia it was considered quite natural that a woman should have held supreme power. Here was a woman to whom courage and endurance were attributed, who had intellectual and spiritual interests, and was willing to endure hardship in search of knowledge (Pankhurst, 1991). On the other hand, though there have been few studies concerning women in Ethiopia, many observers have commented that Ethiopian women traditionally have suffered socio-cultural and economic discrimination and have had fewer opportunities than men for personal growth, education, and employment (Lewis).

What could be observed at this time is gender disparities is high, revealing in social and traditional phenomena like women's economic dependency and lack of access to education, health service, etc. For instance, in the year 2002, the rate of adult literacy for women was 34%, while it was 49% for men (MOE, 2002, pp.7-9). Moreover, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) by gender shows that the ratio for girls was 51.2% and for boys 71.7%, implying that more girls are out of the school system than boys (Emebet, et al, 2004).

The gender inequality in education widens as one goes up higher in the educational ladder. In the academic year 2001/2002, among the students who managed to enter colleges at diploma level, only 24.9% were women. This figure goes further down for females in undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs of various higher education institutes; only 15.0% in undergraduate and 7.3% postgraduate degree programs were females. If one sees the percentage share of females in higher education teaching staff it is on the average 5.73% (Emebet, et al, 2004).

Recently, gender issues Ethiopia have got attention, though not that significant. Zebebeworke and Rahel state that in recognition of the historical legacy of inequalities and discriminations suffered by women, the Ethiopian Constitution includes affirmative action as a remedial measure. However, to date, the government has not devised any measures that would facilitate the equal participation of men and women in economic, social and political lives of the country (ZeneRahe, 2004).

### **3.) Gender Portal of the Higher Education Institutions in Hamburg – Germany**

#### **a.) Background**

The Gender and Queer study organized by a group of higher education institutions in Hamburg undertook a project to develop an Internet portal for gender studies. The objective of the project is to establish and enhance an Internet portal for gender studies and thereby to coordinate research activities of female professors, researchers and students of universities and other higher education institutions<sup>6</sup>.

Using this Internet portal, different courses-specific to gender and queer studies are offered to learners and researchers in various higher learning institutions in different geographic areas. The portal is a virtual place, which bundles all information, documentation, research projects and study programs located in different areas of Hamburg. Information (course title, session type, instructor, place, remarks, etc) on both current and previous lectures is available online for all types of study programs. The interactivity of elements makes the portal a central point for communication and collaboration among participants.

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<sup>6</sup> Coordinating and teaching/learning universities and institutions

1. University of Applied Science (HAW)
2. Technical University Hamburg Harburg (TUHH)
3. School of Economics and Politics (HWP)

The remaining under listed are sites for teaching/learning.

4. University of Hamburg
5. University of Music and Theatre (HfMT)
6. Evangelical College of Social Pedagogy (Ev. FH)
7. School of Public Administration (FHÖV)
8. School of Arts (HfbK)
9. Helmut Schmidt University of Federal Defence (HSU HH)

The working group<sup>7</sup>, which established to design the portal, carried out the task of the project with different ideas and suggestions. A use case method is applied for designing and developing the Software.

## **b.) Portal Development**

### **i.) The Concept**

Internet portal, commonly referred to as simply a *portal*, is a web site service that offers a broad array of resources and services, such as e-mail, forums, search engines, and on-line shopping malls. It has been originated after mid 1990s as the librarians of the web, used to catalogue the available content from the Internet, acting as a 'hub' from which users could locate and link to desired content. On the other hand the concept defined as the word 'portal', meaning 'door', has been used to characterize web sites commonly known for offering search and navigation tools<sup>8</sup>.

### **ii.) Functions and Resource**

Vital aspects of the gender portal consist of the following functionality and resources.

- Interactive element (community function) – mailing list, discussion forum
- Administrative element – user administration
- Form – for the online course catalogue and person profile
- Session calendar
- Document archive system as – PDF, DOC, PS

The portal seized those selected technologies under a surface together. A community can be built using mailing list or discussion forum to give users the possibility of discussion over a topic at any time and any place. The combination of mailing lists with discussion forum will increase the interest and motivates participation by sending information to those users, who aren't participating in the discussion forum.

The main resource components (which are all open source) are:

- TYPO3 – Content Management System
- PHP – Programming language
- MySQL – Database development and management system
- APACHE – a web server
- LINUX – Operating system

## **c.) Content Development and Content Management System (CMS)**

Until the introduction of Content Management System, processing information for Internet site was always linked with the HTML code. One can separate the content of a site from the HTML-code with a use of a CMS. By this separation information can be

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<sup>7</sup> Project manager, head of coordination centre, students, representatives of students, equal opportunity commissioner and representatives of universities

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.princeton.edu/~rundle/PrincetonPortal.htm>

used several times and different versions of contents can be stored. Later returning to a certain version of the website is thus ensured. Instead of creating each time a new document, contents are picked out from a data base by means of template, formatted and issued. Templates support standard design across internal and external web site.

Content development or production is nothing, but what authors do routinely in supplying their services/products for their audience. ICT has provided different tools to harness content development, of which most important is, what is known as the content management system.

### **i.) Content Management System**

CMS is software that enables one to add and/or manipulate content on a web site. Typically, a CMS consists of two elements: the content management application (CMA) and the content delivery application (CDA). The CMA element allows the content manager or author, who may not know HTML, to manage the creation, modification, and removal of content from a web site without needing the expertise of a webmaster. The CDA element uses and compiles that information to update the web site. The features of a CMS system vary, but most include web-based publishing, format management, revision control, indexing, search, and retrieval<sup>9</sup>.

With the wide range of CMS solutions that exist on the market, it is very difficult to find a product which fulfills all the requirement one need. It is very important to specify the needs and the requirements of the organisations which should determine the choice of CMS.

The IT infrastructure, content and user requirements are important for choosing a CMS. These requirements have been taken into consideration as Typo3 was chosen.

### **ii.) Features of Typo3**

- It is browser based CMS. Typo3 doesn't need to be loaded on to every PC and can run from the server. Since the instructors (content contributors) are distributed geographically this feather is suitable.
- It offers easy to use in-context editing for technical and non technical users.
- An Application Program Interface (API) is available for functions like user access management, uploading and managing files/images.
- It is developed with open source database program – MySQL, a web server APACHE and PHP script language.

As shown in diagram 1, the main components of Typo3 are the Server Layer with the PHP scripting language, MySQL database and the Apache web server; the backend and front-end engine for displaying the web site content and to administrate the content respectively. The extensions contain plug-in, modules, application logic, etc. and the core includes install tool, database, authentication, visual interface, API, framework, etc.

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<sup>9</sup> [jhmcs.jhmi.edu/standards/webguidelines/glossary.cfm](http://jhmcs.jhmi.edu/standards/webguidelines/glossary.cfm)

The course catalogue is implemented as an extension for managing lectures and courses. It consists of list of files and a database. It offers the possibilities of search, input and managing of lecture and associated data in the database.

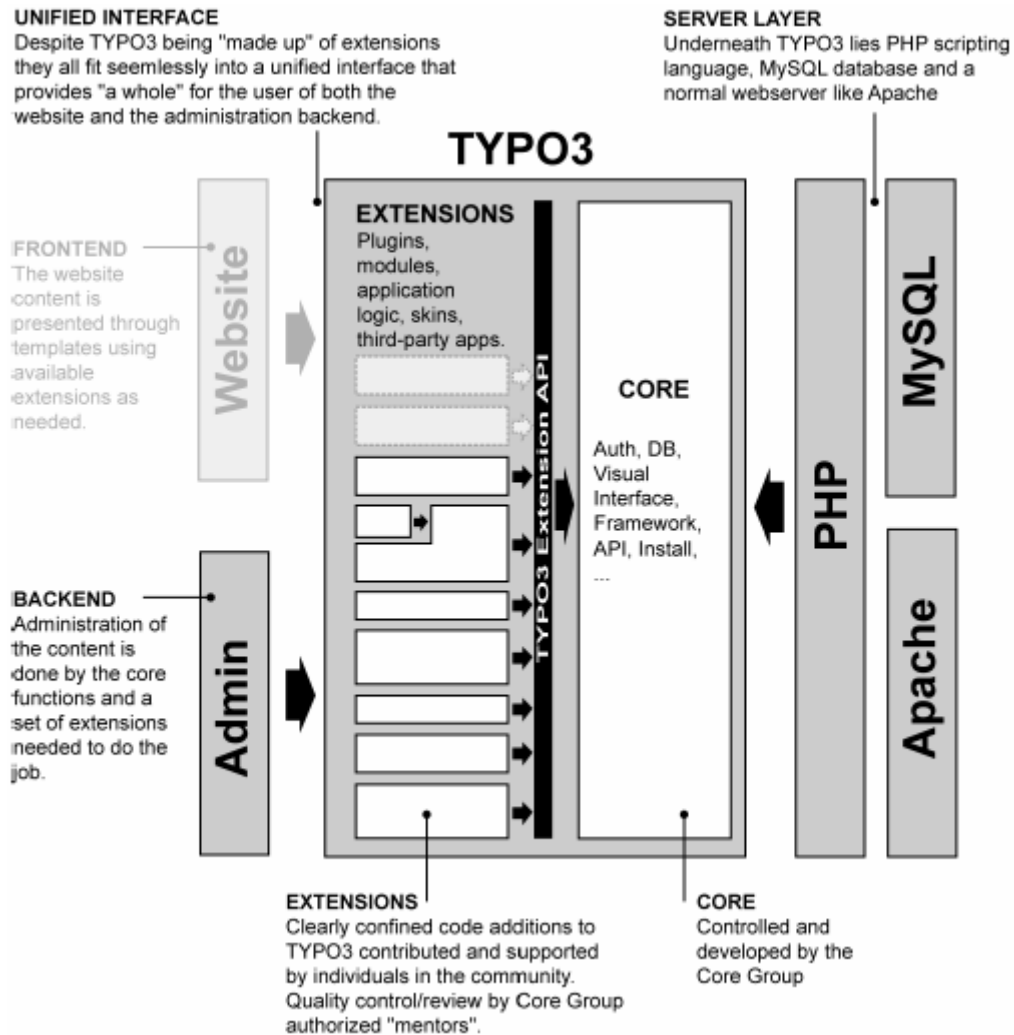


Diagram 1: Structure of Typo3

## Search for the course catalogue in the database

The search will be done using a dialog field with entries: instructor, time, date, universities and institutes, semester, master, minor subject or courses for women studies. These fields can be selected individual or in combination with each other. If nothing is selected or no value is written on the search field, all current courses will be displayed.

Search Mask	
Search Word <input type="text"/>	
Instructor ... Achilles-Baumgärtel, Janine Anbuhl, Silke Baisch, Katharina Bauer, Robin	Major field of study ...
Time ...	Minor field of study ...
Date ...	<input type="checkbox"/> open to Female learners and Guests
Session Type ...	
University ... ...	
Semester Wintersemester 2004/05	
<input type="button" value="Search"/>	

Diagram 2: Search Mask

## Search result

The search result displays four columns: the university which held the course, the instructor of the course, title of the course and the time. It can be ordered by the university, instructor, title or time. By clicking the linked text detailed information will be displayed. By selecting the radio button detail information of the course will be displayed.

Display Search Results				
	University	Instructor	Course Titel	Date
<input type="checkbox"/>	Uni HH	<a href="#">Baisch, Katharina</a>	<a href="#">Gesetz, Gattung und Geschlecht: Über Suizid in der Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts (Grundlagen der Gender Studies)</a>	Donnerstag
<input type="checkbox"/>	Uni HH	<a href="#">Götschel, Helene</a>	<a href="#">Science Wars - Kontroverse zwischen Naturwissenschaften und Wissenschaftsforschung</a>	Mittwoch
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ev. FH	<a href="#">Panwitz, Sabine</a> <a href="#">Rose, Barbara</a>	<a href="#">Theorien zur geschlechterspezifischen Arbeitsteilung mit dem Schwerpunkt auf helfende Berufe (Care-Berufe)</a>	Montag

Diagram 3: Display Search result

## Course Detail

The course detail contains all needed information for the course. Some of them include course title, Session type, instructor, place, remarks, time, room etc. as displayed in diagram 4.

Course detail			
<b>Course Titel</b>	Theorien zur geschlechterspezifischen Arbeitsteilung mit dem Schwerpunkt auf helfende Berufe (Care-Berufe)		
<b>Session Type</b>	Seminar	2004/05 (WS)	
<b>Instructor</b>	Dipl.-Soz.-päd. Sabine Panwitz (97) Prof. Barbara Rose (110)		
<b>Place</b>	Montag, 12:45 - 14.15, 2 SWS	<b>Room</b>	s. Aushang
<b>Time:</b>	04.10.04		
<b>Remarks</b>			
„Kerstin ist Erzieherin, Sven ist Heimleiter“ Trotz Gleichberechtigung und zunehmender Erwerbsquote von Frauen bleibt die Arbeitswelt nach wie			
<b>Prerequisite</b>	Leistungsschein: regelmässige aktive Teilnahme, Hausarbeit (10-14 Seiten), Referat (bis 20 Minuten) und Verschriftlichung.		
<b>last update</b>	2004-09-15 15:35:19		
<a href="#">Back</a>			

Diagram 4: Course detail

## Input a new course catalogue

With the help of the input form diagram 5, all information which is necessary for the course catalogue will be added in the database. It is only accessed by the administrator or instructor.

The diagram shows a web form titled "Input" on a light green background. The form contains the following fields:

- Instructor \***: A dropdown menu with a scroll bar, showing a list of names: Achilles-Baumgärtel, Janine; Anbuhl, Silke; Baisch, Katharina; Bauer, Robin; and Becker, Britta.
- Course Titel \***: A text input field with a scroll bar on the right.
- University**: A dropdown menu with a scroll bar, showing a list of university names (partially visible as "...").
- Date and Time**: Two rows of time selection. The first row is labeled "From" and the second "Until". Each row has two dropdown menus for hours and minutes, followed by "(hh:mm)". Both rows show "07" for hours and "00" for minutes.
- Remarks**: A large text area with a scroll bar on the right.
- Save**: A button located at the bottom left of the form.

Diagram 5: Input Mask

### d.) Vision

Easy accessibility, fast updating and maintenance of the portal for the involved participant is assured. Thus gender portal contributes to produce information corporately and to network the institutes and universities with the integration of the new media.

The gender portal can easily be extended to learn management system with the standard feature to administrate learning content. The integration to another learning system is not excluded.

With the rich experience harvested from the Internet portal project, the learning and research higher education institutions foresee to continue developing an e-learning platform. This will open new opportunities to women to boost up their chance of learning at a distance, anytime, anywhere, and without burden of fulfilling requirements to go to traditional learning institutes. The special feature of gender portal for distance and open learning emanates from due consideration of existing drawbacks put on by the 'digital divide' and opting to render specific services to women learners.

Equally, the department foresees the replication of the project to other higher learning institutions, anywhere. This makes the kin decision of the project team in choosing open source system which could be without any proprietor hurdle either implemented as it is or customize to serve ones purpose.

#### **4.) Lessons: Replicating the Gender Portal to Ethiopian Higher Education**

Despite the fact that ICT has created gender disparities, i.e., 'digital divide', there are opportunities for Ethiopian female learners and researchers to take advantage of the new media (ICT). To mention but a few, the computer network and the Internet service at Addis Ababa University, the Ethiopian Higher Education Network (EthRNet), and the SchoolNet and WoredaNet at the national level are vital resources.

The notion behind the 'Internet Portal for Gender and Queer Studies' in Hamburg, could be easily replicated in Ethiopian higher education institutions and even to other African countries higher learning societies.

The gender portal developed by the 'Gender and Queer Studies' project team in Hamburg is open source. The technologies used are also based on the OSS. Thus from the technical point of view, there is no problem to replicate that system in Ethiopia higher education and research institutions.

The authors recommends women in Ethiopia higher education and research institutions to establish a forum and network of women professors, researchers. This forum will be an important platform to audit the resources, the requirements and what should be done, out of which a project could be developed.

#### **5.) Conclusion**

Gender issues are equally question of equality and equity. Any sort of socio-economic development is unthinkable without the participation of women. In some economic sectors women even constitute a proportionally larger group of the labour force than men. However, because their participation in the economic, social and political sphere a society has not been valued, women's potentials have not utilized properly in all societies, though the degree varies.

The revolution brought by ICT has been hope to elevate gender inequality, however, it has also brought a new form of disparity know by 'digital divide'. This calls women, particularly those in higher education and research institutions to act swiftly and make use of this technology as much as their counterparts. A gender Internet portal can be one of the solutions to network their activities and resource available and can play a coordination role.

The portal developed at Hamburg serves as a coordinator and collaborator for the participants; ranging from vital notice to course catalogue and proceedings of conference will be published on this platform. The project idea and the software developed can be replicated in similar institutions in other countries, like Ethiopia.

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