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Keywords: *affirmative action, academic staff, female students, perception, higher education.*

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I. Introduction

a) Background of the Study

Gender equality is at the heart of democratic, equal and prosperous societies. It is expected that women and men should equally benefit from similar rights and chances (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2014). Women are half part of the society. Women, on an equal basis as their male counterparts, are part of the essential human resource support of every state that takes part to its fight and continued development. In a country like Ethiopia, where male dominate and patriarchal societal exist as well as unequal treatments on the basis of sex has been a practice of the recent past. Therefore, the goal of producing highly qualified, motivated and innovative workforce with a view to change Ethiopia into a middle income nation by the year 2025 is impossible without engaging both women and men equally in higher education. To this end, ensuring equitable distribution and improving access to higher education for disadvantaged groups, including females, is underlined as a goal in Education Sector Development Program (ESDP) IV (MoE, 2014).

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Affirmative action is a widely challenged topic that gets frequently discussed in the absence of a nuanced understanding of its goals and policies (Fried, 2014). The term originated on March 6, 1961 with an executive order signed by President John F. Kennedy to ensure that applicants are treated equally without regard to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin and the term was intended to endorse non-discrimination in the United States (Gerber, 2015). After that, various scholars have tried to define the term affirmative action. Wasson (2004), for example define affirmative action as a program that serves to rectify the effects of supposedly past societal discrimination by assigning works and chances to minorities and women. For Wang are (2009) as cited in Eva (2015), affirmative action is a policy or program for correcting the effects of discrimination. In general, the definitions given above by two scholars have some similarities. They give more attention to reduce disparities observed between women and men due to race, and gender.

Several government institutions have been implemented affirmative action policy since 1965 to redress disparities in education and employment. It is thus imperative to understand that affirmative action is not only an effort to "stable the scales" for previous disparity and unfairness's that ethnic minorities and women in this nation have confronted. Rather, affirmative action searches to deal with existing patterns of freedom and domination that even stay in our society today (Fried, 2014). Despite its limitations, affirmative action has been the only comprehensive set of policies that has given women and people of color opportunities for better paying jobs and higher education access that did not practiced before (Yee et al., 2015). Its overall aim is to reduce discrimination and promote equality of treatment as well as to balance the gaps between males and females by levelling the playing field. In this regard, the University of Massachusetts Amherst forbids bias happened because of sex, age, race, religion, colour, marital status, mental or physical disability, political belief or affiliation, and national origin, gender (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2014).

Unarguably, females in Ethiopia had been highly disadvantaged in many aspects within the society and not least of all in relation to educational

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opportunities (Asegedech & Tesfashbamlak, 2012). Therefore, affirmative action is designed as a strategy to increase the level of women participation in Higher Education. Affirmative action strategies are also specified in the Ethiopian constitution with the aim to give special attention to expand female participation by addressing gender inequalities. Furthermore, Higher Education proclamation (FDRE, 2003) gives preferential treatment of the existing disadvantageous groups, including women, and states in its Article 33:1 that

> Entry assessment or entrance processes planned for any female, disabled students, a student who has completed the high school education in developing region and is native of the nationality of such region or student from the nationality whose contribution in higher institution is near to the ground shall be different from others. They shall, during their stay in the institution, obtain particular support; specials of such support shall be determined by the ministry.

The current Education and Training Policy (TGE, 1994) equally elaborated the need to tackle gender disparity and unfairness based on the constitution, and stated: *"considerable emphasis will be given to women and to those students who did not get educational opportunities in the formulation, distribution, and use of educational support input"* (TGE, 1994; Article 3.7.7). Hence, the government of Ethiopian has clearly shown its commitment by providing opportunities to women education through its constitution and education and training policy of the country.

As to Brest and Oshige (1995), an affirmative action program tries to find the significant under-representation of members of definite ethnic, racial, or other groups through measures that take group membership or identity into account (Tierney, 1997). Taking this into account, the Ethiopian Government has introduced policies and strategies on affirmative action that are intended to redress this situation. These policies and strategies favor female students in order to ensure access, equity and relevance in education. Besides, gender and education is given higher priority in ESDP document as one of the cross cutting issues and focus areas of both the Millineium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA). The ESDP-IV also identifies the four key dimensions to affirmative action: access, support, gender-friendly environment and harassment (Higher Education Strategy Center, 2014) which are the focus areas of this research. This study thus, explores the perception of academic staff towards female affirmative action in Wolaita Sodo University.

The government of Ethiopia has put adequate emphasis on implementing affirmative action policy targeting gender, persons with disability and students who have completed their high school in developing region. However, there are still challenges in changing the policy in to effect. According to ESDP IV, women's education is constrained by economic problems such as parents' inability to cover food and shelter costs. Socio-cultural problems including, harassment, traditional division of labor in homes, early marriage and marriage by abduction are among the socio-cultural factors that hinder women's education (MoE, 2010). Although improvements have been registered during the implementation of ESDP III, females' attrition and graduation rate in Science Faculty were low in comparable with their male counter parts. For example, female students' dismissal is still high in higher education. Study results revealed that in 2009/10, out of 705 female students' enrolled as first year students in Aksum University 332 (47.1%) were dismissed. In the same year, 40.9% female students were dismissed from Kotebe College. On their expected year of graduation, 2010/11, it was also found out that the graduation rate of these female students was only 18.88% of the total Science graduates (Asegedech & Tesfashbamlak, 2012).

Although communities' attitude towards women education and gender equality is improving, the main challenges of female education and gender in higher education are still uncontrolled among higher education institutions. Gender gap is still considerable at all levels of education, especially in preparatory and secondary high school, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and in higher education. The curriculum needs to be completed more constantly gender-sensitive. Community attitude towards girls' education is low and there is still gender based violence in and around schools and higher learning institutions (MoE, 2010). These challenges have been also discovered by many studies conducted on affirmative action around the globe.

Numerous researchers have conducted studies on affirmative action and gender in Ethiopia and outside Ethiopian context. These studies were conducted on different themes of affirmative action at different places, sectors and levels of education. For example, Asegedech and Tesfashbamlak (2012) conducted a research entitled "Assessment of the Effectiveness of Female Affirmative Action in Ethiopian Public Higher Education Institutions". The results of the study indicated that both male and female student enrollments in the PHEIs have progressively increased in the years 2007/08-2011/12. The proportion of female students during this period increased steadily from 28% of the total in 2007/8 to 33% of the total in 2011/12. Despite such increase, the author argues that the progress in gender gap is not substantial. The study also identified the challenges faced in implementing affirmative activities. These challenges include misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of affirmative actions among most University community members at all levels; poor

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accessibility of academic guidance and counseling services; the creation of dependency syndrome in some female students who were beneficiaries of the affirmative activities; and unwillingness of female students to participate in some affirmative action activities.

Molla and Cuthbert (2014) investigated on "Qualitative difference: Experiences of women in Ethiopian higher education". As to the study, affirmative action policies that slightly benefit females at entry point, however, gender inequality continues in qualitative forms. Prejudice against women and sexual harassment are stated as main expressions of qualitative gender inequalities in the two Universities. It is contended that public universities in Ethiopia are male-prevailed, hierarchical and hostile to women. Furthermore, Tsigereda (2010) conducted a study on attitude and the practice of affirmative action for female students: the case of Mekelle University. It was found that both instructors and students of Mekelle University have a positive attitude towards the practice of female students' affirmative action. However, the contribution of affirmative action in increasing the number of female students has been insignificant. Moreover, female students' dismissal because of harassment, poor organization and support for female students, female students' problem of adjusting to campus life, language, financial challenge, poor high school educational background, lack of sufficient role model females' instructors to inspire and motivate female students, shortage of reference materials, stress during exams and low confidence were identified as challenges that impede the academic performance of female students.

In general, all the above research findings revealed that respondents have positive attitudes towards affirmative action. However, as study results also reveal women have encountered many challenges that impede them not to actively engage in various affirmative activities and complete their education successfully. There are still gender inequalities, sexual violence, female students' dismissal and completion problem, stress, shortage of reference materials, poor support and facilities observed in higher institutions particularly in developing countries. Though there were studies conducted on female affirmative action, studies conducted in academic staff's perception towards female affirmative action in Ethiopian context are few. Obviously, the role of academic staff is high in interacting with their students and make many decisions on students' result and their competence. In connection to this, Flores& Rodriguez (2006) strengthened the above idea by describing that faculty members make daily decisions concerning students' achievement in the school and judgments regarding their competence. Further, academic staffs especially are expected to play leading roles in cultivating, teaching, guiding, supporting and treating females' students. This is because their overall teaching methodology, approaches, classroom management, and continuous assessment will contribute positively or negatively to female students' participation, continuity or discontinuity of their education, and overall academic performance. Therefore, academic staff has greater roles in implementing female affirmative action. Understanding academic staff perceptions towards the overall affirmative action is therefore, the main purpose of this study. Hence, the study tried to answers the following basic research questions

- How do academic staff members perceive female students' affirmative action policy?
- How do academic staff' perceive female students access to education and resources?
- How do female students perceive academic staff support in Wolaita Sodo University?
- How do academic staff perceive gender-friendly environment in Wolaita Sodo University?

The major focus of the study was to explore the perception of academic staffs towards affirmative action in Wolaita Sodo University. More specifically, the study has the following specific objectives:

- To explore academic staff's perception towards female students' affirmative action policy
- To assess academic staff' perception about female students access to education and resources
- To examine female students' perception towards academic staff support
- To explore academic staff perception towards gender-friendly environment in Wolaita Sodo University

II. Research Design and Methodology

Case study was used as research method for this qualitative research. I used both primary and secondary sources of information to generate the required qualitative data. The primary data were generated from 22 respondents (10 academic staff, 8 female students, 1 gender office coordinator and 3 gender focal persons). All the research participants were selected purposively and contacted for in-depth data collection. The above respondents were selected on the basis of their experience, willingness to participate in the study, responsibilities in the University and closeness to the issue. Secondary sources of information were documents from Ministry of Education (MoE), University Registrar's office, Gender office, policy documents like Education and Training Policy (ETP) and gender reports of the University.

I used face to face interview, focus group discussion (FGD) and document reviews to obtain the required information from the respondents. I conducted face to face interview with academic staff, gender focal

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persons, and gender office coordinator to collect relevant information related to their perceptions towards affirmative action. In the interviews, 14 respondents were participated. I applied focus group discussions with 8 female students to collect additional qualitative information about their opinions; attitudes and knowledge of female affirmative action. Out of the eight, five of them were enrolled through affirmative action. I developed a semi-structured interview guide to direct the focus group interview.

Once the relevant qualitative information was generated from individual interviews, FGDs and document reviews, the description, classifications, and associations of the information was carried out based on the major themes of affirmative action. Such analysis technique was adapted from the work of Bazeley (2009), where he noted the ideas of thematic analysis (three key strategies), including description of data, classification of data, and seeing how concepts interconnect. Therefore, I first described the information as they are, then categorization of information was conducted based on similarities and difference next to the affirmative action's themes. Lastly, I made the connection between and among concepts described and classified in order to have the full picture of the study.

III. Results and Discussion

a) Views on Female Affirmative Action Policy and its Implementation

Countries have developed affirmative action policy in their own education system to reduce gaps between male and female students and to eradicate gender discrimination. Concerning the respondents' awareness of affirmative action policy, half of the respondents confirmed that they have clear understanding about affirmative action policy. However, the remaining respondents did not know about affirmative action policy at all. As consolidated by Eva (2015) people come to know about the policy by chance. The affirmative action policy is not well known to many, it is like a secret and even some people in Makerere University don't know about it. Some people are too 'mean' with information. As reported by research respondents, they have different views on affirmative action policy. One of the respondents assured that the University did not aware the staff about the policy. Another reason raised by one of the respondents was that the academic staff has an obligation to know about government policies and strategies on affirmative action by their own effort. In relation to this, respondents were asked whether they oppose or favor of female affirmative action policy and one of the respondents strongly opposed the idea of female affirmative action by saying:

> "I completely oppose female affirmative action because as to me everybody is born equal. The difference between the two sexes came from their effort, attention given to their education, understanding of the subject matter, and through hard work. Giving affirmative action only for female students is unfair and degrading of female students. As to me, I believe that female can compete equal to their male counter parts without any support. But affirmative action designed only for female students is totally discrimination of disadvantaged weak male students."

A respondent with four solid year experience in teaching on the other hand stated it in a bit different way,

> "I am in favor of affirmative action programs designed for university students. But, I believe that the focus should not be female students only. Any person who is weak academically should get this chance. Students must treat equally and fairly".

As pointed out by Schuck (2015), affirmative action is justified to counter past discrimination against minorities and women in society. In the United States, as cited in Combs and Nadkarni (2005) affirmative action, in clean terms, is based on the elimination of education and employment inequities for specific ethnic, racial and sexual category (Guerrero, 2002; Nacoste, 1987). In general, almost all respondents except two completely have positive attitude towards affirmative action program designed for female students at University level.

Pertaining to the implementation of affirmative action, respondents reported various responses. One of the respondents described that academic staff has highly engaged themselves in implementing affirmative action. Another respondent also added that:

> "According to my department, it has been implemented well though there are some irregularities among academic staff participation. Most often, tutorial program has been given for first year female students only. Second and third year female students were neglected. I think, this is completely wrong because it must be given for second and third year female students too."

As is argued here, others also strongly opposed the above idea. For instance, a coordinator of gender office who served for four years viewed the implementation of affirmative action as follows:

> "The execution of affirmative action is below my expectation at departmental level. Only some academic staff has been participating in providing support for female students through tutorial program. Preferably, our gender office has provided relevant material support like piece of paper, photocopy services, pen, sanitation materials etc for female students to assist their learning."

The experience in India is a bit different from our experience. India's affirmative action as cited in Combs

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and Nadkarni (2005) is referred to as compensatory discrimination in that its primary goal, as a minimum at beginning, was to compensate affected castes for subjection to past discrimination and oppression (Prior, 1996). Further, one of the respondents also consolidated the above idea as follows- *as to me the implementation of affirmative action was seemed irregular across departments and academic staff. It has been given by some academic staff to capacitate female students' competence.* Another respondent strengthened this idea, and stated that all academic staff has not the same level of understanding about female affirmative action. Some academic staff gives tutorial program but others do not.

The above idea has been assured by female students in the FGD too. They all stated that only few academic staff are interested to support female students in different forms. But others academic staff even do not want to hear about female affirmative action. Their perception towards female affirmative action is not positive. As believed by many scholars, over the previous 30 years, scholars such as Francis (1993), Crosby (1989), and Sandler (1975) have articulated three justifications for the formation and implementation of affirmative action. The first, compensation, refers to addressing previous discrimination. Correction, the second underlying principle, relates to the change of current discrimination. And the third, diversification, concerns the importance of creating a society of several culture (Tierney, 1997).

b) Respondents Views on Gender Friendly Environment

Gender-friendly environment is simply creating an atmosphere, which is physically safe, emotionally secure, and psychologically enabling. Learning institutions need to actively challenge and work to change negative gender stereotyping, gender inequalities, foster gender equality, and healthy gender identity (Pulizzi & Rosenblum, 2007). Therefore, creating conducive learning environment is worthwhile for all students to make them learn safely and freely. Pertaining to this issue, respondents were requested to react on the issue "Do girls feel safe from bullying? Discrimination? Abuse? While they stay in their campus?" and respondents stated two different views. One group of respondents indicated that the university is not safe for both boys and girls.

On contrary, the other group of respondents reported that the university is safe for both male and female students. One of the young respondents strengthened the safeness of the University for female students. There is no discrimination in the university. However, there is bullying and abuse in the University to some extent. Another experienced respondent highlighted his idea like this,

> "Nowadays, the situation in my university has been improving from the past. Discrimination, abuse and bullying have been decreasing rapidly. In addition, gender focal person has been assigned to each college who seriously follows female issues, provide the necessary support for female students and give immediate solutions for female students' problems."

Pertaining to the views on girls' protection in the University, respondents again clearly stated two different views. One of the respondents noted that there are policemen and security guard who protect girls from any danger. On contrary, most of the respondents vibrantly explained that the protection for female students was not strong as such. As pointed out by one of the respondents,

> "There is no sufficient guard for female students. The problem seemed very severe around female dormitory. Female students face so many challenges in the campus and they often don't come out from their dormitory at night especially when there is no light in the campus."

Respondents further consolidated the above issue. One of the respondents reported that *the protection for female students is not adequate. There was no fence between male and female dormitory before. However, now it was constructed few months ago.* Another respondent also strengthened the previous idea like this; *Sometimes, people come to female dorm through the fence from outside.* A study conducted in Jimma found out similar results. The study discovered that the University is unsafe to walk from study rooms to dormitories late at night and particularly unsafe when electricity goes out accidentally (Aseresash, et al., 2002).

In general, as vividly stated by majority of the respondents, the campus is not as such a safe and conducive place for girls to ensure a healthy, hygienic, secured and safe learning environment. There are still unsolved problems related to the availability of adequate water and sanitation facilities for girls particularly around their dorm. Aseresash, et al. (2002) study results strengthened the above idea. There are problems in dormitory such as shortage of facilities (e.g., water, toilet, and so forth), theft and badly trained proctors who are unable to offer appropriate support.

In addition, female students were asked about University and classroom facilities, peace and security of the campus in the FGD, and they confirmed that adequate clean water is not available and accessible for all students in the university. Other problems identified include lack of electric service during night time, lack of well-equipped medical services, lack of separate female library, lack of adequate and recent books, lack of learning materials, lack of smart classrooms, lack of conducive learning environment, and lack of internet services.

In conclusion, majority of the respondents vividly explained that their perception towards gender

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friendly environment was found prejudice and hostile. They assured that the campus is not gender friendly that promote gender equality in resource sharing, and providing adequate facilities and services. Both the physical and social environment is not conductive to the female students as expected. Unarguably, a hostile learning environment as manifest in prevalent sexual harassment has critical consequences on the progress and success of female students in HE. According to the finding of Molla & Cuthbert (2014), most of the female students who took part in the discussions stressed that the library services and dormitory conditions were not favorable to study. Male students can go to the library anytime they like and do their assignments while their female counterparts face various obstacles to doing so.

c) *Respondents Views on Female Access to Education & Resources*

Higher education is indispensable to produce and establish a productive citizenry (Giroux, 2002). The enrolment rate of female students has been also showing fast progress in higher education. As indicated in the interview, majority of the respondents assured that female enrolment rate has grown rapidly in Wolaita Sodo University. Document reviews from the University register indicated that the trend in the female students' access to education has been increasing. Female enrolment rate was 31.3% in year 2013 and now it reached 34.5 % of the total in 2014/2015. Therefore, female access to education was found promising. As stated by Asegedech and Tesfashbamlak (2012), from year to year the proportion of female students entering University studies increased steadily from 15,770 (28% of the total) in 2007/8 to 31,608 (33% of the total) in 2011/12. The problem these days is in completing their education successfully within the specified period of time. According to the interview responses, majority of the respondents vividly stated that the completion rate of female students was found low. According to the university registrar office, the graduation rate was found 595 (31.3 % of the total students) in the years 2011/12-2014/15 in Wolaita Sodo University. As Kabesiime (2010) notes, it has also been observed that completers do not match with enrolment due to high dropout rates.

Regarding the interest and choice of department selection at University level, respondents viewed this issue into two categories. Most of the respondents indicated that department selection has been determined based on the national exam result rather than the interest of the students. One of the respondents disclosed that the department selection was merit based. As a result, most female students have joined the department they did not like to join it. The study result was consistent with the study of Wudu and Girma (2009), who discovered that most students in the University were placed in different departments without considering their interest in to account and this led most of the students to lose their motivation to learn. As a result, they failed to study hard and this directly affects their academic performance negatively. On contrary to this, the study conducted in Mekelle University revealed that 20% reservation is given to female students in every department; thus, they have a better chance to join the field of their first choice (Tsigereda, 2010). This trend is also practiced in Dilla (30%) and Haramaya University (25%) for department placement. The practice is somehow different from India. As cited in Combs & Nadkarni (2005), affirmative action implementation procedures in India suggest that merit is a necessary but not sufficient criterion to address historical injustices (Boston & Nair-Reichert, 2003).

Some respondents reported that the University will give quota for female students in department selection though the percentage differs. Some respondents said that 10% quota is given for females and others said 40 %. This implies that respondents have varied perceptions about quota system in the University. In support of the above idea, another key respondent reported that special quota was given for female students and for those who came from underdeveloped regions. In relation to this, Boston & Nair-Reichert (2003) and Jain et al., (2003) have clearly cited in Combs & Nadkarni (2005) that as compared to the United States, the execution of affirmative action in India is to a certain extent different. Affirmative action policy in India is a system of quotas and reservations. Both need statistical description for each of the disadvantaged groups believed to include little access to employment and education.

As female students also stated in FGDs that they were placed in departments which they were not of their choice-particularly those assigned in College of Natural and Computational Sciences and in social science and Humanities college due to their low GPA. Most of these female students develop anxiety and lose their interest to continue their study because of the departments they are assigned to.

On contrary, the remaining respondents strongly opposed the above idea by saying that the department selection was merit based. Due to the above fact, academic performance difference has been observed between male and female students in the sample University. With regard to this issue, one of the respondents reported that,

> "There were practical performance differences between male and female students two years ago. Now, the gap has been narrowed. Last year, there were female students who graduated with great distinction. The highest grade scorers were females in my department for the last three years."

Obviously, the gap has reduced between male and female students' performance recently. As extracted from the qualitative information of the respondents, in

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many departments top outstanding students were females. However, they were finger counted. Generally, males scored higher grades and survived better than their female counterparts survive.

Additionally, respondents were requested to react on the issue "What is your view about female students' access to resources such as female library, equal laboratory access, books, text-books, and internet? Accordingly, majority of the interview respondents reported that access to resources was found inadequate for both male and female students. One of the respondents supported the above idea and assured that there is no female library, adequate books and internet services for female students. On contrary, only one respondent opposed the above idea partially by saying that although there are shortages of facilities and services, books are now available in adequate number for all students. The findings of Asegedech and Tesfashbamlak (2012) in two Universities are not consistent with the finding obtained in their sampled University. In Aksum and Gondar Universities, there are separate libraries with internet service provided only for female students but not here in the study University.

Furthermore, female students were asked about access to resources and department selection in the FGD. Majority of the respondents indicated that it is difficult for them to get their own department choice, internet services, adequate clean water, adequate recent books, separate female library, and modern medical services so as to do their assignments, to study without disturbance, to keep their personal hygiene and to check their health status.

d) *Participants' Views on Female Students Support in the University*

Female students in public Universities need strong support from the University community, in general and from academic staff and leaders at various levels, in particular. Continual and sustainable support provision for female students may make them strong and academically competent like their male counterparts. In connection to this, respondents were asked about the types of support provided for female students in their University and participants boldly explained their views in almost similar ways. One of the key respondents reported that tutorial support, make-up class, financial and material supports were given for female students. Another respondent also strengthened the idea by mentioning the support provided for female students such as training, consultancy service, material support such as soap, female cleaning materials or sheets, and piece of paper. Besides, counseling and psychosocial support was offered for them as reported by one of the respondents. Other supports given by gender office for female students were photocopy services, sanitation materials, financial and material support though it is not adequate and strong. Similar results obtained in the study of Tsigereda (2010) that majority of the key respondents confirmed that tutorial class has been given for female students; thus, they can cope up with their academic challenges; Guidance and counseling service has been given in the University to give advice to females students; thus, they are able to deal with academicals and social difficulties; The photocopy service is one of the opportunities given to female students by the University so that they can easily duplicate books and handouts. It also reduces the costs they spend for duplication; in taking consideration of the economic challenge of some female students, the university used to give sanitary napkins. On the other hand, other research findings revealed that in two out of seven universities covered in the study, valuable activities were carried out, while three out of the seven universities only nominally planned activities, with no practical support, existed (Asegedech & Tesfashbamlak, 2012).

Furthermore, departments in collaboration with gender office of the University have offered various trainings in different issues. Respondents have disclosed almost similar views. They reported that the gender office in collaboration with counseling and psychosocial support center has given gender related trainings for female students on life skill, study habits, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, and assertive skills. However, as one of the respondents indicated that some female students were unwilling to participate in these trainings because of fear of exposed to others, and lack of confidence. The study results are almost similar with the study conducted by Asegedech and Tesfashbamlak (2012) with few exceptions. According to them, wherever such support existed, the supportive activities carried out by some (30%) of the Universities (as mentioned by the respondents) were the following: Providing training on assertiveness, reproductive health, study skills, communication, and life skills; Provision of economic support to economically disadvantaged female students, and other financial support systems – for example the provision of shops for the use of the female students association by renting them (only Aksum University); Providing guidance and counseling service to students facing socio-economic and academic problems; Award systems in order to encourage high achieving female students and preferential readmission opportunities for dismissed female students with the provision of English language training (only Haremaya University).

In relation to the contribution of female students' support to minimize female dropout rates, roughly all the research respondents indicated that female support has brought change particularly in minimizing dropout rate, dismissal or/ and attrition rate. This result has been obtained as a result of tutorial and other supports provided for female students. For instance, in Wolaita

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Sodo University, female dropout rate was 0.98 % in the year 2013/14 and now it reduced to 0.6 % in 2014/15 almost below 1%. As compared to other universities, the achievement obtained so far is by far better and promising. As indicated by Asegedech & Tesfashbamlak (2012), in the year 2010/11 out of 1386 female students enrolled in Hawassa University at the end of that academic year, 288(20.8%) of them dropped out. Whereas in the same year and University out of 6,705 enrolled male students only 8.1% of male students dropped out. In the year 2010/11 out of 515 female students enrolled in Kotebe College 194 (37.67) female students and out of 250 male students only 3 (1.2%) of them were either dropped out or dismissed at the end of that academic year.

With respect to female student affirmative action, more than half of the respondents did not accept affirmative action and any support provided only for female students as a good policy option. In connection to this issue, one of the key respondents reported as follows:

> "I feel bad because I do not support tutorial program provided only for female students. This may hurt female students themselves by developing inferiority complex. Therefore, there should be free treatment for both male and female students. In general, affirmative action should be given for both male and female students who are weak academically."

On the other hand, one of the respondents expressed the view like this:

> "I do not support affirmative action provided only for female students. However, based on their past discrimination, focus must be given for female students. I believe that academically weak male students must also get this support like their female counter parts."

Alternatively, few respondents accepted the support given for female students only. Their rationale was based on the assumption that, females are subjected to many obstacles within and outside their campus. To compensate their past discrimination, they must get various supports from university and family.

Female students in FGD also stated that the support obtained from their university is not adequate. Only few academic staff is voluntary to help us in tutorial program and formal classroom teaching. They treat us unequally as compared to male counter parts. Some academic staff do not have positive attitude towards female students. Wudu and Girma (2009) supported this idea that teachers perceive girls to be less intelligent and thus treat boys and girls differently. Accordingly, male students receive more attention from their teachers, given more time to talk in class and ultimately are given more praise than girls in the classroom. As a result, there is no self-esteem for the girls because they are meant to be subservient, to be quiet and sit at the back of the classroom. As indicated by female students in FGD, the support obtained from gender office is by far better than the University community support even from academic staff. In general, academic staff perceived female students support in to two different ways. Some perceived it positively and have tried to assist them in their spare time whereas others perceived it pessimistically and did not offer any support for them.

IV. Conclusion

The major aim of the study was to explore academic staff's perception towards female affirmative action in Wolaita Sodo University. Majority of the respondents believed that female affirmative action is important as it improves female students' personal and educational capacity as well as their academic results. It was observed that academic staff had good attitude concerning the definition and benefit of female affirmative action. Some academic staff was extensively engaged themselves in providing tutorial program for female students even if the support is incomplete and incoherent but others do not. On the other hand, what practically found that some academic staff's engagement in implementing affirmative action in to effect was found to be not adequate because of their prejudice attitude towards affirmative action. Therefore, the implementation of affirmative action in various departments considered in this study-tended not to be regular and consistent.

Besides, the information obtained from respondents clearly indicated that, some academic staff had prejudice attitude towards female affirmative action program. They associated it with unfair treatment and discrimination of others disadvantaged and low achiever male students. Their views towards it differ between male and female academic staff and among students. Except few, majority of the key respondents have good understanding about the policy of affirmative action.

Concerning respondents' views on gender friendly environment, respondents reported two different views. One group of the respondents noted that the university is not safe for boys and girls and not gender friendly. On contrary, half of the respondents reported that the university is safe for both male and female students.

Concerning the perception of academic staff towards female students' access to education and resources, majority of the interview respondents reported that access to female education in Wolaita Sodo University was found high. On the other hand, access to resources is not adequate for both male and female students. As indicated by research respondents, there are no services like female library, adequate books and internet services for female students. There is also

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challenge for female students in department placement. The chance of female students to join the department they want to join was found low and limited.

Results of this study reveal that academic staff perceived female affirmative action in different ways depending on their experience, and exposure to it. Their perceptions and understanding about affirmative action concept, tutorial and other supports are partial and restricted to a narrow perspective. It can be argued from this study that academic staff opinions concerning the definition and importance of female affirmative action were found positive in general. It can also be said that support provided for female students only, creating gender friendly environment, and access to various resources and female students' department placement were found inadequate and lacked greater attention of the academic staff and the University management.

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