

Factors Affecting Female Students' Career Choices and Aspirations: A Zimbabwean Example

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ABSTRACT The study sought to investigate the factors affecting female students' career choices and aspirations in selected Zimbabwean schools. The study adopted a qualitative approach and used focus group interviews with a convenient and purposive sample size of 20 high school girls. Data were analysed through content analysis as emerging key issues led to themes that guided the analysis and discussion. The study revealed that career choices and aspirations for girls are influenced by a whole range of factors most notable of which are gender role socialization, parental expectations, teacher attitudes, the gender-typing of school subjects studied as well as the gendered occupational landscape in which they exist. The study concluded that there is a strong need for significant others, especially parents and teachers, to help girls and females by deconstructing the gender-role stereotypes or perceptions of roles society considers appropriate for girls or boys. The researchers thus recommend that female students be empowered to aspire for a stake in occupations or careers traditionally regarded as male-domains. The school curriculum, teachers, parents and older siblings need to be supportive of the need to minimize gender stereotypes in school subjects and career choices.

INTRODUCTION

From as early as the first grade, learners are often asked about their future occupations. The way students often answer this question reveals the inherent societal biases typical of their backgrounds (Dorsey 1996; Gordon 1995). It also reflects the way they are socialized in their families and epitomizes the gendered nature of their society. One can only imagine the kind of ridicule and mocking a young African girl in the fifth grade would suffer if she were to say publicly in class that after school she wanted to be a builder or a bus driver. Some female learners may simply disregard certain career fields because of stereotypical perceptions. Perera and Velummayilum (2008) observe that according to theories on gender, roles and work, masculinity is characterised traditionally as dominance and competitiveness, while, in contrast, women select careers that have regular hours of work to enable them to fulfill family obligations. It is also suggested that women prefer work that is predictable, subordinate and less financially productive, with low stress levels, and they do not aspire to engage in leadership and decision-making positions. The foregoing argument buttresses the fact that career choices are usually a product of one's socialisation since society's gender role

socialisation determines what roles males and females should aspire. In many African societies there are careers that are deemed male or female domains and society strives to inculcate this mindset in boys and girls during socialization (Momsen 2000). It is in this light that Gutek (1998) posits that throughout the world, work is gender-segregated as women tend to occupy jobs that are often less superior to those of their male counterparts. Gutek cites the fact that women are forced to occupy gender-defined roles and that though they are free to occupy any position they want depending on their ability, they are often afraid of negative consequences associated with a woman engaging in what is often deemed gender-role-deviant behaviour. The fact that women who succeed academically and thrive professionally are deemed deviant (Momsen 2000) shows the controlling effect of gender socialization on female students and the career options available to them.

The issue of career choice and aspirations is aptly expressed in curriculum scholarship concerned with school subjects (Jansen 2003), which focuses on their nature, design, and organization, effects on learning and teaching, and attitudes among various categories of learners (Momsen 2000; Gordon 1995; Nyagura and Riddell 1994; Marira 1991). According to Gordon (1995), this

implies that even though schools may offer girls and boys the same school subject options, girls still tend to opt for the subjects perceived as feminine and those formerly offered to girls only. Jansen (2003) adds to this argument by asserting that in Southern Africa, school subjects remain a powerful organizational reality in post-colonial institutions because of the way they channel learners into various career trajectories. Despite various initiatives towards integrating subjects or attempts towards inter-disciplinary curricula, some school subjects continue to enjoy a superiority complex while others endure an inferiority complex (Bernstein 2000; Gordon 1995). Studies of school subjects are often fragmented and proceed with the insular discourses of the discipline. These studies also tend to be conservative, focusing on technical limitations or deficiencies in teaching, learning and curriculum and assessment within the context of a particular school subject or discipline (Nziramasanga 1999; Nyagura and Riddell 1994). Examples of curriculum scholarship on this theme include the gender-typing of school subjects and their relative importance and suitability for boys or girls, thus setting the stage for the perpetual gender stereotyping of occupations (Dorsey 1996; Marira 1991). Other themes in this curricular literature also include the content analyses of gender stereotypes (Mutekwe 2008; Nhundu 2007), racial and colonial content embodied in school text books (Gati et al. 1995) and syllabuses that define a school subject in Zimbabwe (Marira 1991). Certain subjects were deemed a male or female domain. Gordon (1995) and Dorsey (1996) concur that in Zimbabwe the general perception among educators on the nature and power of subjects is that Mathematics and Science subjects are a preserve for boys while languages and humanities are considered a female domain.

Contextual Background to the Zimbabwean Occupational Landscape

In Zimbabwe currently industry and commerce are predominantly the domain of men, who own most businesses in virtually all sectors (Chengu 2010). The level of women's participation in industry, commerce and business entrepreneurship continues to be unacceptably low. As it stands, black women who suffered the double-edged discrimination as women and as

black people, have not been sufficiently prioritized in the various spheres of the society such as in education and the economy. Prior to colonization, the significant value of Zimbabwean women's productive labour in producing and processing food created and maintained their rights in domestic and other spheres- political, cultural, religious or social. However, with the creation of the colonial economy came the marginalization of the position of the majority of women, in several ways: firstly, the advent of title deeds made men the sole owners of land. Women could not hold title deeds since they were considered minors and part of the property owned by men (Chengu 2010).

Consequently, as women lost access and control of land they became increasingly economically dependent on men. This in turn led to an intensification of domestic patriarchy, reinforced by colonial social institutions such as the labour market. Secondly, as colonialism continued to entrench itself on the Zimbabwean soil, the perceived importance of girls and women's agricultural contribution to the household was greatly reduced, as their vital role in food production was overshadowed by more lucrative male-dominated cash crop cultivation for the international market (Dorsey 1996; Marira 1991). Finally, the introduction of wage labour affected girls and women by uprooting boys and men from villages to work in urban areas causing both negative social and economic impact on women. They were not considered worth of any wages from their village duties because all proceeds belonged to their husbands since they were part of men's property by virtue of the *lobola* paid for them (Gordon 1995). Three decades after independence the occupational structure is still mired in the transitional problem of creating an equitable environment in which girls and boys or men and women can express their autonomy in career choices across all sectors of their economy. When brute strength mattered more than brains, men had an inherent advantage. Now that brainpower has triumphed, the two sexes are more evenly matched. However, gains in women's economic opportunities continue to lag behind, especially in matters of agency (Giddens 2001) in terms of career choices within their social structures. It is misgivings such as these that have led Dabengwa (2010) to argue that since independence in 1980, the extent to which the colonial economic system created conditions for the exploitation of

women's labour and dependence on men in Zimbabwe has not been adequately redressed.

Aims of the Study

The aim of this study was to establish the factors affecting female students' career choices and aspirations in selected high schools in Zimbabwe. The study sought to answer the following two questions: What are the factors that affect female students' career choices and aspirations in Zimbabwean schools? How can schools help deconstruct the gender role stereotypes and perceptions affecting career choices for girls and women in Zimbabwe?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach involving focus group interviews as the instrument for data collection. In this exploratory case study (Holliday 2001), the epistemological position held was that using focus group discussions to solicit data from participants enables group interaction and generates a wide range of responses by activating details of perspectives and releasing inhibitions (Dzvimbo et al. 2010). The instrument thus helped elicit rich texts as participants tended to build on each other's ideas and comments to provide in-depth and value-added insights on their perceptions of factors affecting Zimbabwean girls' education and career trajectories upon their graduation from schools. A focus group as described by McLafferty (2004), cited in Dzvimbo et al. (2010) is a semi-structured group discussion, moderated by a discussion leader, held in an informal setting, with the purpose of obtaining information by means of group interaction on a designated topic. In using focus group discussion as a data collection tool, we also drew from the insights of Geertz (1993) who asserts that this technique is capable of unearthing crucial issues regarding a people's culture or systems of beliefs and practices embedded in their structured human social relations. Participants in the focus group interviews were 20 schoolgirls from the sixth form, the level at which the school-leaving General Certificate of Education at the Advanced Level of study in Zimbabwe (GCEAL) is awarded. They were drawn from 4 schools conveniently sampled as the sites for the study. They were then organized into 4

focus groups, with each group being interviewed for about 30 to 45 minutes.

Focusing on the curriculum as what Pinar (2004) describes as a 'complicated conversation' that occurs in classrooms to reflect how, where, when and why helped us expose the norms of conduct informing teachers' behaviour. The evidence was then drawn on to discover (Merriam 1998) how their attitudes and expectations nudge or predispose girls or women wittingly or unwittingly into the gendered occupational world in which they find themselves engaged.

Sampling

In terms of the sample, the study utilized a convenient and purposive sample size of 20 participants chosen as a cross-section of the larger target population of sixth form girls in the province. Firstly, all 6th form schools in the district were identified and classified in terms of type (rural or urban). By means of stratified random sampling technique, they (schools) were categorized in order to ensure that the sample was representative of the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of the population, capturing variables such as location and socio-economic status as determined by parental occupation and residential areas of the participants. They were then systematically arranged (the units' names) in alphabetical order and coded from 1-40 on the sampling frame with codes assigned to each one as a sampling unit and chosen in multiples of 10 to ensure that each and every sampling unit has an equal chance of being included in the study.

The second stage was to produce a register of all sixth form girl students in the selected schools. Among the modalities used in drawing up the sampling frame were the uses of postal code address files, class registers, or the students' social records kept by their form teachers. These considerations partly helped in establishing the students' socio-economic backgrounds, a variable considered important in this study. Apart from allocating sampling units to these variables, the girls within these schools were divided by class to ensure that the resultant stratified random sample represented their diverse socio-economic backgrounds. This also helped to control the fundamental variables for the study (Hesse-Biber 2004).

The research community chosen for this study's population was well placed to provide

insights about how the curricular provided to girl children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds draws them towards particular careers. It was able to provide useful evidence, as it is a district in which the diversity of the Zimbabwean society is represented. In this district, it is possible to produce typologies, sets of categories defining the career aspirations pursued by the different girl children in Zimbabwe. By uncovering the different social meanings attached to the different school subjects and occupations by girls, the influence of the educational curricular provided by schools as social structures were examined. As one of the industrialized provinces of Zimbabwe, the research community consists of people of diverse socio-economic backgrounds, working, middle and upper classes. The schools in the district are also positioned to cater for children from the diverse socio-economic backgrounds. There are private schools meant to serve children of the affluent middle and upper classes and governmental and mission schools, which normally serve children from the lower and or non-affluent social classes. The study thus utilized a combination of systematic and stratified random sampling techniques (Clark and Creswell 2008) to identify girl participants in the selected schools. The systematization of the sample was in the way the schools themselves are selected and ensure that the sample was truly representative of the target population. Special attention was given to ensuring that the chosen schools reflected the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of the girl participants for the study

Ethical Considerations

The interviews unfolded with the researcher clarifying the purpose of the research and the interview as well as guaranteeing participants the principle of confidentiality for their interview responses. The researcher had to obtain all the necessary ethical clearance for the permission to conduct the study from the Provincial Education Department, district and school principals before going into the schools as part of his advance protocols. The participants had to be at ease before the interview proceedings commenced, especially in the face of a voice or audio recorder that was used to record the data. This was done by publicly making them aware of the gadget's presence as opposed to privately recording their

responses. The principle of informed consent was taken into consideration in doing this and participants derived a great deal of motivation from the realization that their responses were audio-recorded. Participants were made aware of their freedom to withdraw from the research at any time should they felt the need to. However, none withdrew. All the interview proceedings were voice recorded for later transcription and analysis.

Data Management and Analysis Process Adopted for the Study

Guided, in particular, by Dey's (1993:10) assertion that data management and analysis in case study research ought to be conducted in terms of meanings mediated through language and action tied to a particular context, a descriptive and interpretive mode of data presentation and analysis was adopted involving plotting graphic data presentations, using summary tables, excerpts from interviews voice or tape-recordings, narrative vignettes and direct quotes. In line with Tesch's (1990) advice that one of the most important tasks of data analysis is the identification of patterns, commonalities, differences and processes, the researchers focused on breaking down the data into separate parts, examining it and making comparisons between emerging themes from the pupils' perceptions of factors that influence their educational achievement and career prospects in an effort to detect patterns of similarities or consistencies and differences in the gathered data. The analysis of participants' views was carried out according to the themes emerging from the responses as discussed below.

RESULTS

The results discussed and analyzed in this section of the study evolved out of the focus group interviews held with the research participants. As indicated in the interview guide, the questions designed for the sixth form girl participants were categorized into four sections (A-D) with questions in each section focusing on the research questions for the study. The purpose of the interview guide was to keep the interview sessions focused (Patton 2000). Questions in the first section of the focus group interview guide

were meant to solicit the data on the role of the school in orienting girls to specific school subject choices and career aspirations. The rationale was to try and establish the link between subjects studied by the girls and the career aspirations they eventually follow upon graduating from school. Four questions were thus posed to the participants as follows: State the subjects you are studying for your GCE Advanced level school certificate; What career do you wish to follow upon leaving school?; Why did you choose to study the subjects you mentioned?; How has your school contributed towards your choice of school subjects? Participants' responses to the above questions are summarized in Table 1

Asked to motivate their choice of subjects and career preferences, the following were some of responses of the participants' during the focus group interviews sessions:

Interviewer: *What do you want to do when you leave school?*

Respondent 1: *Well, I am going to join the merchant navy. My uncle was in it. He enjoyed it.*

Respondent 2: *I am going for an apprenticeship to be an electrical engineer. I told the careers man that my dad works in ZESA (Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority) as a sparks and he says I might as well go that road.*

Respondent 3: *Since I am studying Arts subjects (Divinity, History and Shona), these can only enable me to become either a teacher or lawyer if I pass in my GCE advanced level school certificate.*

Respondent 4: *I am an arts person and hoping to become either a teacher or social worker.*

Respondent 5: *My sister is already preparing me for an internship in accounting in her firm Ernest and Young. She says if I pass my GCE Advanced level accounting, she will organize for me to join her firm as a trainee CA following her footsteps. She is the one who advised me to study accounting. She earns a lot of money there and does not even intend to get married because men who earn less than their wives often become abusive of them.*

Respondent 6: *According to the information we received from the careers people (occupational psychologists) who visited the school twice last year, as girls we need to choose from any of the following careers; nursing, teaching, hotelier, cosmetologist, lawyers, social workers, accounting and pharmacists. Professions such as engineering, architecture and others in the automotive industry are ideal for men because of their physical strength and endurance.*

An interpretation of the above responses reveals that while occupational psychologists help in making available the necessary information on possible careers girls and boys can follow upon graduating from school, it appears they still need to make girls conscious of the fact that they can do the same jobs as their boy counterparts instead of simply presenting a list of the professions or careers without helping in the deconstruction of gender role biases or prejudices. One of the thematic views evident in the participants' responses is that of parental influence and the influence of older siblings.

Table 1: Summary of participants' responses

Subjects studied	No	Preferred careers	Responses %	Reason for choice of career
Accounting	5	Accountant	25	Well paid, requires my knowledge and skills
Art	4	Artist/sculptor	20	Like it/interested, suits my education
Biology	3	Doctor/nurse	15	prestige /suits my education ability
Chemistry	3	Pharmacist/cosmetologist	15	Help fellow people
Divinity	12	Teacher/lawyer	60	Long holidays/white collar
English lit.	14	Lawyer/teacher	70	like it, interested, security, holidays
Economics	7	Economist/entrepreneur	35	Requires my knowledge, suits education ability
Geography	7	Navigator/town planner	35	Travel,prestige,well paid
History	13	Teacher/lawyer	65	Security, requires knowledge, interest, opportunity for further studies
Mathematics	4	Architect	20	Employment possibility, prestige and well paid
MOB	6	Hotelier	30	Serving people, easy interest and pleasant
Music	9	Musician	45	Entertaining, travel
Physics	4	Engineer	20	Prestige, well paid, suits education ability
Sociology	8	Social worker	40	Help fellow people
Shona	11	Teacher	55	White collar, security, and opportunity for further studies

Parental Influences on Girls Career Choices

According to the girls' responses, parental occupations and those of their older siblings have an enormous influence on their resultant career choices as the following two responses indicate:

Respondent 2: *I am going for an apprenticeship to be an electrical engineer. I told the careers' man that my dad works in ZESA (Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority) as a sparks and he says I might as well go that road.*

Respondent 5: *My sister is already preparing me for an internship in accounting in her firm Ernest and Young. She says if I pass my GCE Advanced level accounting, she will organize for me to join her firm as a trainee CA following her footsteps. She is the one who advised me to study accounting. She earns a lot of money there and does not even intend to get married because men who earn less than their wives often become abusive of them.*

The above responses clearly show the influence of the family on girls' career choices, particularly the influence of parents and siblings' careers, which have been cited as a contributing factor in determining the girls' career trajectories and overall life chances. Many of the girls reported during the focus group interviews that when they marry they would prefer jobs that would allow them to stay closer to their families than would jobs like trucking, a stereotypically masculine job that often entails spending several days away from home. It was clear these gender-typed perceptions regarding jobs that are deemed appropriate for married women, were attributed to the home environment and society at large, which generally express social disapproval of women who pursue careers that interfere with their social role of child rearing. Such gendered perceptions are consistent with those reported by Helwig (1998), who ascribed the gendered perceptions of a sample of 2-6 graders regarding employed married mothers of preschool children to the gender role socialization of the home environment and the broader society, which tends to promote values and messages of the 'stay-at-home-mom' for mothers with preschool children. Another theme that emerged from the girls' responses in the focus group discussion concerns the relationship of school subjects to careers choices.

The Relationship between School Subjects and Career Choices

This theme emerged from the focus group discussions and clearly revealed that there is a positive relationship between the subjects studied by the girls and the career trajectories they eventually follow upon graduating from school as shown on Table 1. From the focus group interviews it was revealed that school girls who follow the arts subjects' curriculum tend to follow career in areas such as law, teaching, hotel and catering and general social work. The evidence from the focus group interviews show that 14 of the 20 girl respondents (70%) interviewed and whose studies included English literature aspire to join helping careers as teachers, solicitors or lawyers. Twelve girls (60%) constituting the focus group interview participants whose studies included divinity also claimed they aspire to become lawyers because divinity is considered one of the fundamental subjects for one to study for a Bachelor of laws Degree in a Zimbabwean university. The 13 girls (65%) studying subjects that included history cited professions such as teaching as their preferred careers. The same response was given by the 11 girls (55%) studying subjects that included Shona. The 7 pupils (35%) studying Economics cited a desire to become economists or general entrepreneurs. Only 7 respondents (35%) whose subject domains included Geography mentioned careers such as joining the merchant navy or town planning as their preferred occupations. The 5 girls (25%) who chose accounting as a career claimed to have gotten the inspiration from their parents and older siblings already in the profession and doing well. The 6 girls (30%) studying subjects that included Management of Business (MOB) cited a desire to work in the hotel and catering industry as hoteliers or entrepreneurs in sales and marketing. Careers such as architecture, medicine, pharmacy and cosmetology were also cited by girls studying pure sciences such as mathematics, biology, physics and chemistry. Four of the girl participants (20%) studying mathematics and physics cited a desire to become architects, while 3 girls (15%) studying subjects that included biology said they intend to be medical practitioners as either nurses or doctors. Four girls (20%) whose subjects included chemistry cited pharmacy and cosmetology as their preferred careers should they pass their studies at the GCE Ad-

vanced school level. Eight of the girls (40%) studying subjects that included sociology claimed to be geared towards people oriented careers such as social work, while 4 girls studying art (20%) cited a wish to join sculpture or art as their preferred careers.

When asked to explain the reason(s) why they are still attending school when others of their age and gender have since left (question 5), 11 participants (55%) cited a desire for highly paying jobs on the assumption that the higher the qualifications achieved, the higher will be the likelihood of them being able to compete with their male counterparts on the job market. Nine girls representing 45 percent of the 20 girl participants in the study were of the opinion that remaining in the school up to GCE advanced level would provide them with an opportunity to venture into careers and occupations traditionally construed as masculine domains since challenging patriarchy in the occupational world requires girls and women of academic and professional substance.

Some of the questions for the interview focused on an enquiry of reasons why some girls have dropped out of school; whether or not their teachers had something to do with this; whether or not they have ever missed school or failed to submit an assignment on time due to gender-based constraints; whether or not it is rational to view a woman's position as being basically in the home and what different tasks parents assign to them as girls compared to their brothers in the homes. The purpose of these questions was to try and establish the question of the impact of gender role stereotypes on girls' career prospects. Among the many and varied factors given by the interviewed girls as to why others have left school were the issues of academic under achievement, sexual harassment and parental attitudes towards girls' education and careers. These factors along with the question of the different tasks allocated to girls and boys in the home are discussed as part of the emerging themes in the subsequent section.

DISCUSSION

It emerged from the study that female students' career choices and aspirations are largely gender based. This finding is consistent with findings from a similar study by Sikora and Pokropek (2011) that also discovered that career aspira-

tions of boys and girls differed on the grounds of their society's gender role expectations. These finding further buttress those by Morgan et al. (2001) who found that women were significantly more interested in careers associated with serving men, nursing men and children as well as working with people and generally helping others.

The study also revealed that parental and teacher expectations were a critical factor in female students' career choices and aspirations. Such results corroborate findings by Otto (2000) who observed that parents often put pressure on their children as regards the nature of their future occupations. This is consistent with Knowles' (1998) findings that families play a critical role in their children's career development. Knowles even contends that parents' occupations influence children's career aspirations. The study confirms Knowles' notion that it is a truism that parents and older siblings overtly or covertly influence children's education, career choices and aspirations. Gender role socialisation, which begins in the family and is perpetuated by schools, thus plays an influential role in promoting a gendered occupational world. This idea also confirms Taylor et al.'s (2004) contention that if parents value education very highly and have high expectations of their children, their children tend to aspire for high status occupations.

The study also revealed that teachers are an important factor in female students' career choices and aspirations. Such a finding supports claims by Farmer (2001) that as teachers interact with learners in schools, they influence them towards certain careers just as the family does. Teachers may even talk to learners and advice them on future careers. This in a way influences the learners' view of different careers and the resultant choices they make. The influence of teachers, in the form of teachers' expectations of and support for students, has been recognised as an important factor affecting students' career choices. Teachers may also serve as career role models for some students in school (Farmer 2001). Adolescents rank the influence of teachers on their career choices behind that of parents or peers (Paa and McWhirter 2000). Taken together, it is suggested that perceived teacher support may play an important role in adolescents' career planning and development.

It was also revealed through the study that peers play a role in some students' career choices

and aspirations. This finding confirms the view that supportive friends have a crucial influence on the career planning of students and making key life decisions (Felsman and Blustein 1999; Mau et al. 1998). Students' career choices and aspirations are not only influenced by the overall supportive mindset of their friends or peers but also by the opportunity to learn from them (Fisher and Griggs 1995). Wilson-Sadberry et al. (1991) reported that peers do directly influence the future career aspirations and other future plans of students. Therefore, the fact that female students in the study confirmed that they were influenced by their friends into certain careers is not unique to the study alone. The combination of subjects studied at high school level was also found to be an important determinant of the type of career trajectory one would end up engaged in. This finding buttresses Onoyase and Onoyase (2009) who contend that there is a strong relationship between a learner's subject combination and the final career options available to him or her. Onoyase and Onoyase (2009) actually state that all careers have their subject combination requirements. Therefore, in selecting subjects students should have foresight in terms of career aspirations.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that there are a plethora of factors affecting female students' career choices and aspirations and these range from gender-socialized roles and perceptions of careers considered appropriate for girls and boys or women and men. The study also concludes that gender role socialization coupled with teacher attitudes, parental expectations and the influence of peers as well as learners' subject combinations have an enormous impact on the learners' resultant career trajectories. Through gender role socialization girls and boys tend to acquire early beliefs about their social roles and this has been found to exert significant influences on their education and career aspirations and choices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above findings and conclusions, the study makes the following recommendations:

- The school curriculum should be shaped in

such a way that gender stereotypes in subjects and occupations are discouraged.

- Female students should be encouraged and supported to venture into the traditionally male dominated careers.
- Career counseling should be an integral part of the school curriculum and students should be taught on gender equality in terms of career prospects.
- Parents should allow some degree of flexibility in their children's career choices and avoid imposing careers on their child-ren.
- Teachers should be aware of their influential positions in schools and advise students well on career choices.

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