

# **Gender Stereotyping in Technical Education: Experiences of High School and Tertiary Home Economics Students in Masvingo, Zimbabwe**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study sought to establish the experiences of Masvingo high school and tertiary Home Economics students in relation to gender stereotypes. A descriptive survey based on the qualitative paradigm was used to collect data. A sample of forty participants was conveniently selected from two high schools and two tertiary institutions in Masvingo urban. Ten participants were chosen from each institution. Focus group discussions were used to gather data from all the participants. The findings from the present study indicated that gender stereotypes were counterproductive in Home Economics subjects. The common gender stereotypes revealed were those stereotypes which were labelling one to be of having traits of the opposite sex. All students from high school and tertiary institutions expressed that they were not comfortable with nicknames and labels which depicts opposite sex persona. Gender stereotypes were noted to cause non subject takers and drop out as students succumb to the stereotypes. Subject drop out enhances the vicious cycle of poverty among females who dominate the field of Home Economics. This study recommends that the government of Zimbabwe sponsor technical subjects with the aim of alleviating poverty among women and attracting men to the female dominated field. Non-governmental organisations may also fund campaigns which promote technical subjects and fight gender stereotypes.

**Key Words :** Gender, Gender stereotypes, Technical subjects, Experiences, Home economics

## **INTRODUCTION**

Gender stereotyping in technical education have impacted negatively on sex balanced workforce in most industries across the globe (OECD, 2019; Mpofu, 2014; Ndarezima, 2012). Career choices in developing and developed countries are based on the primary and high school subjects as well as passes attained. Fluhr (2014) avers that members of both sexes have plenty to gain from a gender balanced workforce. Career and technical education course taking and its subsequent impact on an individual future career choice is not just on issue that offers a small subject of students but also affects the country's economy and globally as well (OECD, 2017; Yang, 2016). Skilled manpower in technical subjects is a

backbone of most economies in developing countries. According to Institute of Physics [IOP] (2018) gender stereotypes shape self-perception, attitudes to relationships and influence participation in the world of work and in a school environment, they can affect a young person's classroom experience academic performance, subject choice and well-being. Subject takers and drop outs are in most cases on based on how people rate the subject.

Technical institutions in Zimbabwe are skill based hence need for high school passes as a technical related pre-requisite for entry to tertiary institutions. Technical subjects at high school level are a pre-requisite of future courses and degrees. Choice of subjects has a bearing on future prospects and enrolment in the world of work

(Hadjar & Aeschhmann, 2015; Chiweshe, Edziwa, Jumo & Chakamba, 2013; Mutekwe & Modiba, 2012; Gray & Leith, 2010). Students who drop the technical subjects at high school level may fail to be enrolled if they decide to do the subjects at tertiary level. The interdependence of high school and tertiary curriculum in relation to career choices has significantly affected the job market of technical subjects in most developing countries (Mupinga, Burnett & Redmann, 2005). In Zimbabwe, some technical subjects at tertiary level fail to secure subject takers as some of the pre-requisites are not met which may lead to a compromise where they may enrol students without the pre-requisites as they try to avoid the situation whereby the subject is obsolete.

Gender stereotypes are so ingrained in our different societies that different cultural groups are often surprised to realise how early children internalise them (Ndarezima, 2012; Watkins, 2000). Gender stereotypes are over simplified and or unfair belief or idea that groups of people have particular characteristics or that all people in a group are the same. Gender stereotype is a widely held belief or generalisation about the behaviours and characteristics attributed to women and men (IOP, 2018; Gray & Leith, 2010). These may also provide ideas about how people will act, based on the group to which they belong. Gender stereotypes in education specifically technical subjects, are heavily biased to the female student. The language used in the schools in regard to subject selection such as female and male subjects is also in most cases indicative of gender stereotypes. The world of work has conformed to gender stereotypes as often men are pilots who can solve the difficult equations and women are air hostesses who will be doing their easy caring jobs. Men are also carpenters and females are cooks (OECD, 2019; Watkins, 2000; Ford, 2002; Rao, 2004).

Text books as part of the curriculum and language reinforces gender stereotypes (OECD, 2017; Seshamani & Shalumba, 2010). A female nurse in white uniforms and a male doctor in a white jacket are pictures which portray gender codes and stereotypes. Female students are caught up in stereotypical notions of gender which may harm their self images and how they may interact (Yang, 2016). Male students who are involved in the so called female dominated subjects may also be caught in a situation whereby they are associated with female personality. Mupinga, Burnett and Redmann (2005) suggest that there have been perpetuated gender stereotypes in both secondary and tertiary education in

Zimbabwe.

Gender stereotypes in technical subjects are often visible in the curriculum both formal and hidden as jobs are said to be male or female dominant fields (OECD, 2019, Hadjar & Aeschhmann, 2015). The curriculum is biased towards the existing societal values and norms related to gender issues hence perpetuating gender stereotypes (Mpofu, 2014; Ndarezima, 2012). Practical subjects have many advantages as most of them are linked to real life for example, garment construction is a subject that caters for a human basic need of clothes. Males who may want to join female dominated subjects at tertiary level may be as a result of failure to secure jobs or have discovered how important and relevant the subjects maybe (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015; Fluhr, 2014). Most clothing industries in Zimbabwe are dominated by males but surprisingly very few male workers attained diplomas or higher diplomas in clothing technology. That discrepancy has been attributed to by so many factors including gender stereotyping

Governments and educationists in particular may make conscious efforts to eradicate gender-imbalance and stereotypes but even with the best of intentions gendered stereotyping can sometimes go unnoticed and unchallenged (Gray & Leith, 2010). Careers remain as gender segregated as ever before with most cases so heavily skewed that they can still be easily identified as either male dominated or female dominated occupations (OECD, 2019; Fluhr, 2014). This may imply that gender stereotypes have become part of the mainstream culture of most societies. Technical subjects are also influenced by school practices that put pressure on boys and girls to conform to stereotypes. The unequal distribution of boys and girls in technical subjects studied at high school and its consequent unequal distribution of men and women in tertiary education and then occupational structure suggest some failure by schools and teachers to minimise the impact of gender stereotypes (Mutekwe & Modiba, 2012). The pressure can be felt by students as they choose technical subjects. Girls and boys will stick to female or male dominated subjects respectively. Those who choose contrary to the norms may feel the heat of being against the norm of traditionally stereotyped as feminine or masculine subjects.

The society and school cultivate and nurture gender stereotypes as they instil gender roles of children from tender age (OECD, 2017). Stereotypes that reinforced gender roles such as girls are smarter than boys reign

forces the cleaning roles on the girl child while on the other hand the boy child is considered to be strong for heavier duties. In school settings such stereotypes greatly influence subject choices by both girls and boys. Studies have shown that gender stereotypes about social roles concretely exist in education and career settings (Yang, 2016; Cha, 2013). This may imply that females are less intelligent than males and the implication is that women will continue to be marginalised.

Gender stereotypes in practical subjects have enhanced the division between male and female dominated subjects such as needlework or fashion and fabrics for females and woodwork for males (Mollaeva, 2018, Yang, 2016). In Zimbabwe, the common demarcations are between the traditional male and female dominated subjects such as cookery or nutrition for girls while building studies is for males (Manwa, 2014; Mutekwe, 2007). This form of segregation keeps females in the kitchen and males in heavy work. Female or male students will have to endure the stereotypes associated with the result of taking up of technical subjects associated with the opposite sex.

In Zimbabwe, Home Economics has a history of a stereotypical image of girls busy cooking, serving and cleaning the home like a nurse as a female who cares. This portrayed it as a dull and socially conservative discipline that is fundamentally narrow and for females. The negative attitude of some learners towards technical subjects is a cause for concern in Zimbabwe (Chiweshe *et al.*, 2013, Mutekwe & Modiba, 2012). The enrolment figures of technical subjects in tertiary institution are dwindling as people focus on the subjects which are labelled for the highly intelligent such as maths and science subjects. Teachers and lecturers in Home Economics may see this as job security threat hence the need to look into experiences of students which are related to gender stereotypes.

The current study was guided by the following objectives:

- a) To find out the nature of stereotypes encountered by high school students in technical subject
- b) To establish the influence of gender stereotyping in the teaching and learning of home economics subjects.

## METHODOLOGY

The study of gender stereotypes is qualitative in nature hence the use of a descriptive survey to solicit

data for the current study. The qualitative approach was chosen as the study involved real life situations based on human experiences. Creswell (2012) avers that human experiences are best studied qualitatively in order to cater for feelings and emotions of the participants. A sample of forty participants was selected from a population of about one thousand learners from two high school and two tertiary institutions. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) a sample is a segment of the population to be studied as it is very expensive to study the whole population. From the two high schools only four males were undertaking home economics subjects while only two males were from the two tertiary institutions. Ten participants from each of the four institutions were conveniently sampled as those who were willing and readily available were selected. Data was collected using focus group discussions. Focus group discussions gather data from a number of participants at once, hence economic and time saving (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2011). Two focus groups consisting of five students in each group were conducted at each institution. Students were willing to share their experiences as the discussions were done in a relaxed atmosphere. Data were recorded on interview schedules and also using a smart phone.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Data were presented based on objectives and the actual experiences of the high school and tertiary students in home economics.

### Nature of stereotypes encountered by high school and tertiary home economics students:

This study revealed that all the students from the four institutions encountered gender stereotypes which were similar in nature and which were mostly along gendered codes. The common stereotypes which were mentioned by most participants were a label indicative of characteristics of the opposite sex, for instances you are a real man while referring to a female or vice versa and being labelled as not normal or a rebel of the norm. Males in the case of being called a female were more affected than females who were labelled men. One male tertiary student expressed that it hurts when some male students label him as a female in a male body. Students who major in other so called powerful subjects seemed to have an upper hand at both institutions. It seems that gender stereotyping is more intense at high school level

as compared to tertiary level.

Yang (2016) asserts that women's endorsement of gender stereotypes are significantly more likely to report having agentic characteristics compared to men. Another male tertiary student participant submitted that being labelled a woman reduced his manhood and was painful. This may imply that to be labelled a male is like being upgraded and a female downgraded. It seems the stereotype that females are inferior to males have taken a toll on males as they want to remain stronger and superior to females. It is not unique to human beings but some animals also behave the same. Males are more dominant and females subscribing to a subservient role. This scenario can also be visible when males are in female dominated fields. Some participants submitted that males tend to be dominant even in female dominated fields. One female tertiary participant said that males in female dominated subjects have a tendency of being bully. Stamarski and Son Hing (2015) assert that gender discrimination and harassment against women occur more in environments dominated by men. It was also noted that males mostly perform better than females in all fields regardless that they are engaged in female dominated subjects.

The attitude of females towards male students' behaviour was of mixed views. Most females were not happy about the dominant behaviour of males while some were accepting the status quo. One female high school participant said that females lack the muscles hence more vulnerable than males. Such beliefs which are based on the truth is difficult to dispute because science has proved that muscles of males are attractive to females such that being associated with strengths is quite a motivating and encouraging event. Males feel degraded when associated with females (OECD, 2019; Erel, 2011). Such attitudes and stereotypes may also be one of the many reasons why there are a few males in female dominated fields. Studies showed that students' attitudes towards technical subjects tend to become more negative during secondary school (Crawford, 2014; Potvin & Hasni, 2014; Barmby, Kind & Jones, 2008). In the Zimbabwean context, very few males take up subjects related to industrial sewing and catering at high school level. However, many males are in the clothing and catering industry. Hotels and clothing factories in Zimbabwe are flooded with male caterers and sewing machinists. The situation in the industries may be an indication that males do not want to be associated with female dominated fields during high school and

training. Most of them would prefer in-house training which is more of a private process. In-house training can disadvantage them when qualifications are a benchmark of remuneration.

Some participants were experiencing stereotypes related to domesticity. All home economics subjects are linked to the home (Special Eurobarometer 369, 2011). Nutrition and catering is related to cooking in the home while clothing courses are linked to clothes in the home. One male high school student said that the problem with other students think that cooking does not require skill but it is an art. The practicality aspects of the subjects have caused gender stereotypes such as cooking and sewing is for mothers in the home. Most participants felt that this was reducing the subjects to home making. There is a general belief that home making is for everyone and does not require high IQ. A female tertiary student participant echoed that cooking and serving of food requires knowledge and skill.

The stereotype that home economics is for the less gifted was hounding most students at both levels. The school curriculum inherited post-independence Zimbabwe was modelled on the English system (Wolpe, 2006), with Zimbabwean girls being educated for domesticity whilst boys were prepared for employment and the role of family head and breadwinner (Mutekwe & Modiba, 2012). In Zimbabwe this stereotype largely emanated from the colonial F2 system of education which was streaming students as F1 (academic oriented) for the gifted while F2 (technically oriented) for the less gifted. This background dampens the motivation of most students. Mupinga, Burnett and Redmann (2005) state that the colonial regime led by Ian Douglas Smith introduced the F1 (for academic orientation) and F2 system that allowed the 'non-academic oriented' students to focus on handwork. Some tertiary students submitted that the terms which were used such as handwork and crafts were linked to the demand of cheap labour force and blue collar jobs. This mindset has gone through generations since it was transmitted through history and experiences of the older generation. The introduction of new terms such as practical and then technical subjects were meant to match with the importance attached to the subject in order to change the mindset of people. All participants were appreciating the changes of names as they were like an antidote of gender stereotypes linked to the history of technical subjects.

### **Influence of gender stereotypes in the teaching and learning of home economics subjects:**

The influence of gender stereotypes was considered by all participants as affecting the emotions, feelings, mental and physical being of an individual. This may imply that all the domains namely the affective, cognitive and psychomotor are negatively affected by stereotypes. Mollaeva (2018) claims that gender stereotypes leave some residue that create psychological images which influence the emotions of individuals. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is affected as the issues of self esteem, a sense of belonging and job security are negatively affected. One male tertiary student participant stated that it is sometimes embarrassing to say his career at a social gathering. He further mentioned that it reduces his self esteem and also affects him psychologically. The psychomotor domain is affected when one, for instance, is hiding his cooking skills at a party when it can be an opportunity for one to display the talent and to refine skills. Gray and Leith (2010) postulate that gender stereotypes influence the attitudes and decisions towards subjects.

Most participants were concerned about the major effect of gender stereotypes of having a dwindling trend of home economics subject takers at both high school and tertiary levels. There was a general consensus among participants that stereotypes reduce the motivation of doing home economics subjects. One male high school participant described his experiences as bad and very stressful since some were calling him a maid or 'food kill me' since he was specialising in Food and Nutrition. Generally nicknames which were mentioned were either reducing one's self esteem or an unpleasant label such as cowboy or mama for the female and for the male respectively. Stamarski and Son Hing (2015) posit that both the objective disadvantages of lower pay, status, and opportunities at work, and the subjective experiences of being stigmatized, affect women's psychological and physical stress, mental and physical health. Most male participants were saying that it is all about endurance based on the knowledge of the importance of the subject which keeps them in the female dominated subjects. One female tertiary student confirmed that males in home economics subjects endure discouraging stereotypes. Special Eurobarometer 369 (2011) confirms that most people in tertiary education choose subjects basing on how important they are in life. It was interesting to note that one male participant was in the process of marrying

a home economics student in the same field. The female student confided to the researcher and said that her fiancé was intending to marry her since they shared the same passion and was also intending to man a home economics department together. The couple was for the idea of inspiring the younger generation which shun technical subjects.

Most participants were blaming stereotypes for the high rate of subject dropout which soars every other year in all institutions. The male high school students who participated in the current research revealed that they were a substantial number of males at the beginning but most dropped the subject due to stereotypes from their peers. One male high school participant was not happy to what happened to his friend who was labelled and gave up and stopped pursuing his dreams of being a lecturer in Clothing and Textiles. A female high school participant also had a similar experience of having a nephew dropping Fashion and Fabrics due to stereotypes. This study established that many students aborted their dreams due to pressure caused by gender stereotypes. Mutekwe (2007) confirms that gender stereotypes when not addressed may cause many students to venture in areas they are not gifted. There was a general consensus among participants that the numbers of subject takers which are dwindling are cause for concern for those who love Home Economics.

Limited career choices for the home economics students were cited by most participants as another influence of gender stereotypes. Two participants from one high school and another from one tertiary institution submitted that some careers such as nursing when they advertise for posts include a caption that states that five 'O' level subjects including Maths, Science and English but Fashion and Fabrics is not considered as a subject. This implies that a pass or merit in Home Economics is not an added advantage or is not counted as the fifth subject. Most tertiary students who were part of this study were saying that technical subjects are not favoured by other careers such as Maths and Science. All participants had a general consensus that there is a belief that there are other subjects which are considered more prestigious than other ones. Kollmayer, Shober and Spiel (2016) assert that the world of work has labeled other jobs as more superior and prestigious than other jobs which are considered inferior. These discrepancies are negatively affecting career choices that land good job opportunities with high remuneration for students in technical subjects.

The curriculum needs to be gender sensitive or balanced as opposed to being gender blind to the plight of girls and women if it is to empower girls to be on an equal footing with boys and to compete for equal opportunities in life (Mutekwe & Modiba, 2012). It was confirmed by most tertiary students that most jobs related to home economics subjects are less rewarding and cannot be compared with medical and engineering practitioners. This may imply that since Home Economics is a female dominated discipline the vicious cycle of poverty impinge on the marginalised women more than their male counterparts. According to OECD (2019) education is one of the major tools to eradicate poverty among women but because of gender in balance it is an uphill fight. All the participants in the current study admitted that they were marginalised due to the stereotypes attached to the subject.

### Conclusions:

Based on the findings of this study it can be concluded that gender stereotypes in technical subjects are hounding males more than females. Names and labels which were portraying the characteristics of the opposite sex were discouraging and also in some cases embarrassing. Gender stereotypes were among the major causes of subject drop out and a reduction in subject takers. Gender stereotypes in this study were mostly affecting males more than females as it was noted that females in male dominated fields are associated with power and prestige. In the case of home economics subjects most males feel degraded as they join women. Home economics is a female dominated field which is in most cases less paying hence disadvantage the already marginalised women.

### Recommendations:

The following are the recommendations from the present study:

The government and non-governmental organisations should jointly sponsor and support a gender sensitive curriculum which may be the first step towards reducing the impact of gender stereotypes in practical subjects.

Technical subjects should be well represented at all forums as misconceptions and stereotypes are spread through different platforms.

Government sponsored campaigns by subject specialists in Home Economics are critical in instilling knowledge on the importance of technical subjects.

Literature on the importance and effects of gender stereotypes are essential in reducing negative attitudes towards technical subjects.

Students who venture into opposite sex dominated fields may be given sponsorship in order to motivate them and in turn improve gender balance in the world of work.

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