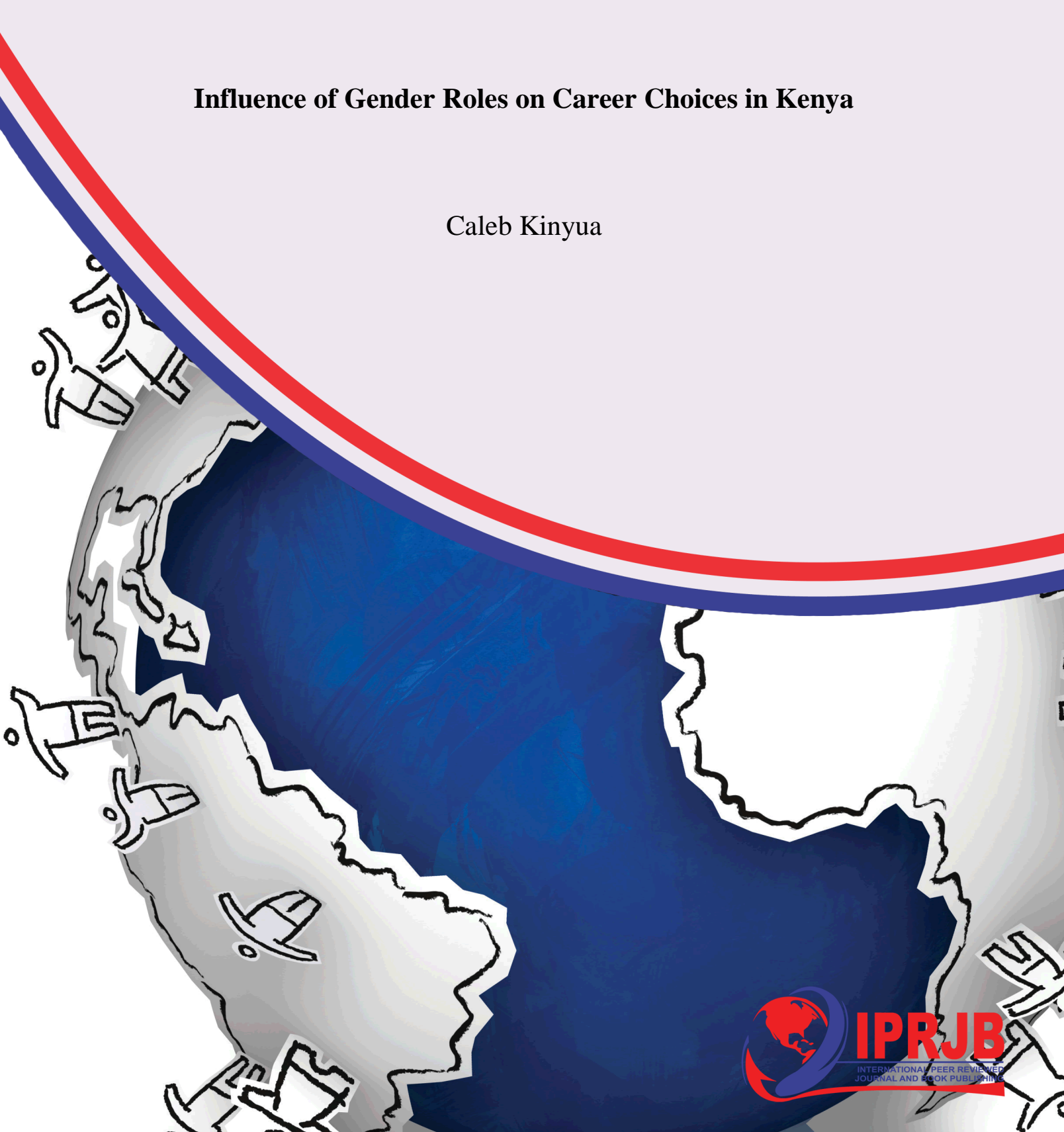


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Influence of Gender Roles on Career Choices in Kenya

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to analyze the influence of gender roles on career choices in Kenya.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Traditional gender roles in Kenya steer men toward fields like engineering and leadership, while women gravitate toward caregiving roles such as teaching. Societal norms and limited access to education, especially in rural areas, reinforce these stereotypes. A 2021 study found 70% of participants felt gender expectations shaped their career paths. Efforts like STEM programs for girls are challenging these norms, but progress is slow. Achieving equitable career opportunities requires breaking these stereotypes and promoting choice based on ability and interest.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social role theory, gender schema theory & expectancy-value theory may be used to anchor future studies on analyze the influence of gender roles on career choices in Kenya. Practically, educational institutions must implement gender-neutral career counseling programs that provide all students with equal opportunities to explore a wide range of career options, irrespective of their gender. Policy interventions should focus on addressing systemic gender inequalities in the workforce

Keywords: *Gender Roles, Career Choices*

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INTRODUCTION

Influence of career choices across developed economies such as the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom, career choices are significantly influenced by individual interests, economic demands, and cultural factors. In the United States, for example, the growing demand for professionals in technology and healthcare sectors has led many students to pursue these careers due to their lucrative salaries and economic opportunities (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Japan has similarly seen shifts in career preferences, particularly with a growing interest in healthcare to accommodate an aging population (Nakagawa, 2020). The UK reflects trends toward creative industries and digital technology as part of the evolving economic landscape (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2020). These trends demonstrate how career choices are highly responsive to societal needs and economic forces. Furthermore, in Australia and South Korea, technology, educational policies, and labor market demands also play pivotal roles. In Australia, the healthcare and social assistance sector has become the largest employer due to an aging population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Meanwhile, South Korea has seen a rise in students pursuing engineering and IT-related fields, reflecting the nation's emphasis on technological advancements (Korean Statistical Information Service, 2020).

Germany and Canada offer additional insights into how career choices are influenced by economic demands, educational systems, and cultural values. Germany's dual education system prioritizes vocational training, with about 52% of students opting for technical and skilled trades (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, 2021). In Canada, technology and healthcare are increasingly popular career sectors due to advancements in technology and the aging population, with employment in scientific and technical services growing by 14% from 2015 to 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2021).

In developing economies, career choices are heavily influenced by job security, family expectations, and the availability of opportunities. Research indicates that in collectivist cultures, family plays a substantial role in career decisions, with congruence between a child's career and parental expectations increasing career confidence (Ng & Allport, 2020). For instance, in South Africa, students' career decisions are shaped by societal norms, pushing them towards traditional fields such as law and medicine (Chikoko & Thobega, 2021). In Nigeria, the lack of job opportunities leads many young people to seek careers in the oil and gas sector, viewed as more stable and lucrative (Ogunyemi & Oduwole, 2021). These patterns highlight the complex interaction of cultural, economic, and social factors in shaping career aspirations in the developing world.

In countries like India and Bangladesh, socio-economic factors, educational opportunities, and familial expectations play a key role in shaping career choices. In India, a strong preference for engineering and information technology careers is driven by the booming IT sector, with engineering constituting 28% of undergraduate enrollments (All India Survey on Higher Education, 2020). Similarly, in Bangladesh, a large percentage of students aspire to secure government jobs for their stability and prestige, with a significant number also interested in business and entrepreneurship (Hossain, 2020).

Brazil and Indonesia present another example where career choices are influenced by economic development, educational access, and cultural norms. In Brazil, the preference for public sector employment is motivated by job security, with 42% of university students favoring public sector jobs (Journal of Economic Psychology, 2021). In Indonesia, economic diversification, particularly in manufacturing and services, has led students to pursue careers in business and management (Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019).

In sub-Saharan Africa, the limited availability of economic opportunities and resources constrains career choices. A study on the region revealed that many youths enter informal employment or entrepreneurship due to the lack of formal job opportunities (Chowa & Langer, 2020). In countries such as Kenya and Ghana, societal expectations further limit career choices, often steering youths toward traditional professions (Gacheri, 2021). Addressing these challenges is critical to improving career opportunities and expanding employment options for young people in these regions.

Similarly, in Nigeria and Ethiopia, educational opportunities, economic conditions, and societal expectations shape career choices. In Nigeria, professions like medicine, law, and engineering are seen as prestigious and financially rewarding, with 65% of secondary school students aspiring to these fields (International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Science Studies, 2020). In Ethiopia, agriculture remains the predominant career sector, as 70% of the labor force is employed in this industry, reflecting the country's agrarian economy (Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency, 2020).

Finally, in Zimbabwe and Kenya, educational attainment, economic opportunities, and societal factors also influence career choices. Urban-rural disparities in Zimbabwe affect access to diverse career options, with urban students having more exposure to varied professions (Mavhunga, 2020). Meanwhile, in Kenya, sectors such as ICT and healthcare are growing, with increasing opportunities for skilled jobs in areas like software development and digital marketing (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). These regional trends underscore the importance of geographical context in shaping career aspirations and decisions.

Perception of traditional gender roles refers to the societal norms and beliefs about the roles, behaviors, and responsibilities considered appropriate for men and women. Four key perceptions include: men as primary breadwinners, women as caregivers, men as leaders, and women as nurturers. These perceptions significantly influence career choices by shaping societal expectations and individual preferences. For instance, the belief that men should be breadwinners often pushes them towards high-paying fields like engineering, finance, or technology, while women may gravitate towards caregiving roles, such as teaching or nursing, due to societal reinforcement of their nurturing qualities (Eagly & Wood, 2016). These patterns not only perpetuate occupational segregation but also limit the diversity of experiences and talents in various professional domains.

Furthermore, the perception of men as leaders and women as nurturers continues to impact access to leadership roles and career advancement opportunities. Women often encounter challenges in male-dominated industries due to unconscious biases, while men may face stigmatization in caregiving roles, such as early childhood education (Bittman, 2018). The belief in traditional gender roles also discourages men and women from pursuing careers outside these norms, further

reinforcing occupational stereotypes. However, shifts in societal values, policy interventions, and increased awareness have begun to challenge these traditional roles, opening more inclusive career paths for all genders. This evolution demonstrates the potential to mitigate gendered career limitations, fostering a workforce reflective of individual capabilities rather than societal expectations (Charles & Grusky, 2020).

Problem Statement

The influence of traditional gender roles on career choices continues to be a critical issue, as it perpetuates occupational segregation and limits individual potential. Societal expectations often dictate that men pursue careers in leadership, technology, or engineering, while women are steered toward caregiving professions such as teaching and nursing, reinforcing gender disparities in the workforce (Eagly & Wood, 2016). These entrenched norms contribute to the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields and men in caregiving roles, hindering gender diversity and equity in various professions (Charles & Grusky, 2020). Despite increasing awareness and policy interventions to challenge these stereotypes, progress remains slow, with many individuals still constrained by societal perceptions of appropriate career paths based on gender. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive understanding of how gender roles shape career aspirations and decisions, alongside targeted efforts to dismantle these stereotypes and foster a more inclusive workforce (Bittman, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Social Role Theory

Social role theory, developed by Alice Eagly and Wendy Wood, posits that gender roles emerge from societal expectations regarding the division of labor between men and women. These expectations influence behaviors, skills, and aspirations, leading individuals to pursue careers that align with traditional roles (Eagly & Wood, 2018). The theory is particularly relevant to this topic as it explains how societal norms about gendered responsibilities shape career preferences, reinforcing occupational segregation. For instance, women are often drawn to caregiving roles due to their alignment with nurturing stereotypes, while men are encouraged to seek leadership or technical roles.

Gender Schema Theory

Proposed by Sandra Bem, gender schema theory suggests that individuals internalize societal norms about gender, forming cognitive frameworks that guide behavior and choices. These schemas influence career aspirations by creating a lens through which individuals view themselves and the roles they can or should occupy (Bem, 2020). The theory is relevant to this research as it highlights the cognitive processes that lead individuals to align their career choices with societal gender expectations, such as women avoiding STEM fields due to perceived incompatibility.

Expectancy-Value Theory

Originally developed by Eccles, expectancy-value theory posits that career choices are shaped by individuals' beliefs about their ability to succeed (expectancy) and the value they place on a given task (value). Gender norms influence these perceptions by shaping beliefs about competencies and appropriateness for specific careers (Eccles & Wigfield, 2019). This theory is relevant as it

explains why individuals are likely to pursue careers that align with societal gender norms, impacting gender diversity in fields like engineering and teaching.

Empirical Review

Bittman (2018) aimed to understand how gendered expectations steer individuals toward certain career paths, especially in caregiving versus technical fields. The researchers used a mixed-methods approach, gathering data through surveys and in-depth interviews with 500 participants from various industries. Their findings revealed that women were more likely to choose careers in nurturing professions such as teaching and nursing, while men were steered towards leadership roles or careers in engineering, IT, and business. This trend was found to be heavily influenced by family expectations and broader societal norms about “appropriate” work for each gender. Moreover, women reported facing greater barriers when attempting to enter male-dominated fields, such as a lack of support or mentorship. The study recommended that schools and universities provide career counseling programs that challenge these traditional gender stereotypes. They further suggested that educational institutions incorporate gender-neutral curricula, which would expose students to a wider array of career options. Employers were also urged to create recruitment strategies that promote gender diversity and inclusion, especially in fields like technology and engineering, where women remain underrepresented. Bittman concluded that addressing gendered expectations early in the education process would help reduce career segregation and promote equal opportunities. By providing both boys and girls with diverse role models and career options, Australia could achieve greater gender equality in the workforce. This research contributes to the growing body of work on how gendered career choices are shaped by external societal pressures, and it highlights the importance of policy interventions to challenge these norms. Finally, the study advocates for continued efforts to break down barriers that prevent women from entering male-dominated industries and vice versa.

Baker and Pugh (2020) investigated how traditional gender roles influence career decisions from childhood to adulthood. The purpose of the study was to track 1,200 participants over time, examining the factors that shaped their career preferences and whether these preferences aligned with societal expectations for their gender. The researchers collected data through regular surveys and interviews with participants, assessing how their career goals evolved during key life stages. The findings of the study revealed that from an early age, boys were encouraged to pursue careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, while girls were often directed toward social and nurturing careers, such as teaching or nursing. As the participants reached adulthood, many of the girls in the study reported feeling social pressure to pursue careers in these “appropriate” professions, while boys expressed greater interest in fields where men are traditionally dominant, such as engineering or business. The study highlighted that gendered expectations were reinforced by both family members and educational systems, which typically offered girls fewer opportunities to explore careers in male-dominated sectors. The researchers recommended that schools and universities adopt gender-neutral career guidance, providing students with equal opportunities to explore various fields regardless of their gender. In particular, they emphasized the need for more targeted efforts to encourage girls to pursue STEM subjects and careers. They also suggested that gender-inclusive policies in the workplace, such as equal pay for equal work and mentorship opportunities, could help address the career disparities between

men and women. The study concluded that early interventions and support programs aimed at challenging gendered career expectations could lead to more balanced representation in male- and female-dominated fields. Baker and Pugh's research contributes valuable insights into the ways that gendered career preferences are shaped by societal influences, offering concrete recommendations for change.

Glick and Fiske (2019) examined the role of gender-based discrimination in shaping career choices, focusing on how these barriers specifically impact women in male-dominated fields. The study used qualitative methods, including interviews with 250 women working in engineering, technology, and finance, to explore their experiences with discrimination and how these experiences influenced their career decisions. The researchers found that many women in these fields reported subtle forms of discrimination, such as being overlooked for promotions or not being invited to key networking opportunities. This often led to women feeling undervalued and discouraged from pursuing leadership positions or advancing in their careers. Despite this, some women demonstrated resilience by seeking out mentorship and support networks, which helped them navigate these challenges. Glick and Fiske's study revealed that such gender-based discrimination contributed to the underrepresentation of women in high-status and high-paying careers. They recommended that organizations implement mentorship programs specifically targeted at women to help them overcome barriers to career advancement. Additionally, the researchers called for workplace diversity training to reduce implicit gender biases and to create more inclusive environments where women feel empowered to pursue leadership roles. The study further suggested that educational institutions promote STEM programs and career pathways that encourage young women to enter male-dominated fields. Glick and Fiske also emphasized the importance of legislative reforms that require companies to adopt equal pay policies and monitor gender equity in recruitment and promotions. Their research highlights the critical role that workplace culture plays in reinforcing or breaking down gendered career barriers, calling for systemic changes to ensure equal opportunities for all genders.

Chen (2021) explored the influence of traditional gender roles on career aspirations among college students in China. The researchers surveyed 1,000 students from a variety of universities to understand how gendered expectations shaped their career aspirations. The findings revealed that, similar to other cultures, gender expectations in China strongly influenced career choices, with men favoring technical and business-oriented professions, while women were more likely to choose careers in education, healthcare, and administrative positions. The study also noted that family expectations were a major factor, as many parents encouraged their daughters to pursue "softer" career paths, while pushing their sons toward leadership or highly competitive fields. This study highlighted that, despite rapid modernization, traditional gender norms continue to play a significant role in determining career preferences in China. The researchers recommended that policymakers and educational institutions work together to promote gender equality in career counseling and educational programs. Specifically, they suggested that schools should offer workshops and career fairs that expose students to a wider range of professions, breaking down stereotypes about what jobs are suitable for each gender. Additionally, the study emphasized the importance of role models in challenging traditional gender norms, noting that when students see women succeeding in leadership or technical roles, it helps to change their perceptions of what is possible for them. Chen et al. also advocated for media campaigns to challenge stereotypes about

gendered professions, which could help shift public attitudes and broaden students' career aspirations. Their findings underscore the need for comprehensive strategies to address the impact of gender roles on career choices in both educational and familial contexts.

González and Sánchez (2022) examined how family expectations influence young adults' career choices, particularly in relation to gendered roles. Through a series of interviews and case studies with 150 students and their families, the study uncovered the strong role that familial pressure plays in shaping career decisions. The findings revealed that women were often steered toward careers in healthcare, teaching, or social work, while men were encouraged to pursue business, engineering, and technical careers. The research emphasized that these gendered expectations were deeply embedded in both the family and educational environments. Many participants reported feeling that their career choices were not entirely their own but were instead influenced by their family's beliefs about appropriate roles for men and women. The researchers recommended that universities and career counselors offer more gender-inclusive advice, encouraging students to explore non-traditional roles without fear of judgment or societal disapproval. Additionally, they suggested that family counseling programs be introduced to address gender biases and support more open discussions about career options. The study concluded that breaking the cycle of traditional gender expectations could lead to a more diverse and inclusive workforce in Spain. By encouraging young adults to pursue careers based on their interests and abilities rather than gender, society could foster a more equitable professional environment. González and Sánchez's work contributes important insights into the intersection of family influence and career choices, advocating for greater awareness and education on gender equality.

Ogunyemi and Oduwole (2021) explored how cultural norms shape gendered career choices, particularly among women. The research, which combined quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, involved 200 Nigerian women from various regions of the country. The study found that cultural expectations often limited women's career choices, with many women pushed into roles like teaching, nursing, or administrative work, while men were encouraged to pursue careers in engineering, law, and business. The researchers also noted that these expectations were reinforced by family members, who saw certain professions as more appropriate for women, thus restricting their professional aspirations. Ogunyemi and Oduwole recommended the introduction of gender-sensitive career guidance programs in schools and universities to encourage young women to consider a wider range of careers. They further suggested that cultural beliefs about gender roles should be addressed through community-based awareness campaigns and educational initiatives that promote gender equality. The study concluded that by challenging cultural norms and promoting non-traditional career choices, Nigeria could provide greater opportunities for women to contribute to all sectors of society. Ogunyemi and Oduwole's research underscores the importance of addressing cultural barriers to gender equality in the workforce, advocating for institutional and societal changes to break down these barriers.

Takahashi and Fujimoto (2020) explored how traditional perceptions of masculinity impact career choices among men in Japan, specifically in the context of caregiving professions. Through surveys and focus groups involving 300 men from different professional backgrounds, the researchers examined how the cultural association of caregiving with femininity influenced men's reluctance to pursue careers in nursing or early childhood education. The study revealed that men

in Japan viewed these roles as inconsistent with traditional masculine traits, such as strength and authority, and thus felt societal pressure to avoid these careers. The researchers recommended that public campaigns and educational programs focus on reshaping societal perceptions of masculinity and caregiving. They further suggested that schools and universities offer programs that encourage male students to explore caregiving professions without fear of stigma. Takahashi and Fujimoto concluded that by challenging rigid gender norms and promoting caregiving as a gender-neutral role, Japan could address its shortage of male caregivers. Their findings highlight the need for systemic change in both cultural attitudes and institutional policies to create a more gender-inclusive workforce.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Gap: While all the studies acknowledge the influence of traditional gender roles on career choices, there is a gap in the conceptualization of gendered expectations beyond binary categorizations of male and female. Most studies focus on the contrast between caregiving professions for women and leadership or technical roles for men. However, these studies do not sufficiently address the complexities of non-binary and gender fluid individuals who may experience different societal expectations. Future research could explore how these groups navigate career choices within the context of traditional gender roles, and how these roles affect their career development (Bittman, 2018; Baker & Pugh, 2020; Glick & Fiske, 2019; Chen, 2021; González & Sánchez,

Contextual Gap: Most of the studies emphasize the role of family, educational systems, and societal norms in shaping career preferences. However, few studies have explored how the digital transformation and the rise of gig economy work affect gendered career roles. In particular, the increasing role of remote work, freelancing, and digital entrepreneurship may offer new opportunities for challenging traditional gendered expectations in career choices. Research could explore how these shifts in the labor market influence both male and female career aspirations in different cultural settings (Bittman, 2018; Baker & Pugh, 2020; Glick & Fiske, 2019; Chen, 2021; González & Sánchez, 2022; Ogunyemi & Oduwole, 2021; Takahashi & Fujimoto, 2020).

Geographical Gap: Geographically, the studies primarily focus on Western and some Asian countries, such as Australia, the UK, and Japan. However, there is a lack of research in the context of gendered career choices in developing economies outside of Africa (e.g., Latin America or Southeast Asia). In particular, countries with rapidly evolving economies like Brazil or Indonesia may present unique challenges in balancing traditional gender roles with the demands of modernization and industrialization. Expanding research to these regions could provide valuable

insights into how globalization and economic growth are influencing gendered career choices (Bittman, 2018; Baker & Pugh, 2020; Glick & Fiske, 2019; Chen, 2021; González & Sánchez, 2022; Ogunyemi & Oduwole, 2021; Takahashi & Fujimoto, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

In conclusion, the influence of gender roles on career choices is a deeply ingrained societal phenomenon that continues to shape professional aspirations and opportunities across different cultures and regions. Research consistently shows that traditional gender expectations steer men and women towards distinct career paths, with women often being directed towards caregiving and nurturing roles, while men are encouraged to pursue leadership or technical professions. These gendered career patterns are reinforced by various factors such as family pressures, educational systems, and societal norms. Despite ongoing efforts to promote gender equality, significant barriers remain, particularly in male-dominated industries where women face challenges in entering and advancing within these fields. However, there is growing recognition of the need to challenge these stereotypes through policy interventions, educational reforms, and workplace diversity initiatives. Moving forward, research should focus on addressing gaps in understanding the experiences of non-binary and gender-fluid individuals, exploring the impact of new labor market trends, and expanding studies to developing and rapidly industrializing economies. Ultimately, by promoting gender-neutral career guidance, providing diverse role models, and fostering inclusive environments, societies can reduce the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles, thus creating more equitable and diverse workforces globally.

Recommendations

Theory

Future research should explore and expand upon non-binary and gender-fluid identities within the context of career choices, moving beyond the traditional male-female dichotomy. Theories on career development and gender roles could be refined to include diverse gender identities, thus offering a more inclusive framework. The integration of intersectionality into gender role theory would further help understand how race, socioeconomic background, and other social factors intersect with gender to influence career choices. Additionally, researchers could investigate how new work trends, such as the gig economy and remote work, challenge or reinforce traditional gender expectations in the career sector. By developing a more nuanced understanding of gender in career choices, the theoretical underpinnings of career development can be broadened to reflect evolving social norms.

Practice

Practically, educational institutions must implement gender-neutral career counseling programs that provide all students with equal opportunities to explore a wide range of career options, irrespective of their gender. Schools should offer workshops that expose both boys and girls to non-traditional career paths, encouraging them to explore professions traditionally dominated by the opposite gender. Additionally, mentorship programs targeting underrepresented groups especially women in STEM and men in caregiving roles can be instrumental in breaking down career barriers. Employers should also adopt gender-inclusive recruitment strategies that

emphasize diversity in leadership and technical roles, providing equal access to career advancement opportunities for all genders.

Policy

Policy interventions should focus on addressing systemic gender inequalities in the workforce. Governments should enforce equal pay legislation, ensuring that women receive the same pay as men for equal work, which would further challenge traditional gender expectations around career value. Policies promoting work-life balance, such as paid parental leave for both men and women, would support individuals in pursuing careers outside of traditional gender norms. Additionally, policies that incentivize companies to adopt diversity and inclusion strategies such as offering gender-neutral job descriptions, flexible working hours, and inclusive workplace training would contribute to narrowing the gender gap in various industries. Furthermore, gender equity initiatives at the policy level should support initiatives to empower women in male-dominated fields such as technology and engineering, offering financial and logistical support to foster their success.

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