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**FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING GENDER STUDIES AT THE  
MASTER'S LEVEL AT SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN COLLEGES**

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**Factors to Consider when Choosing Gender Studies at the Master's Level at Selected South African Colleges**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to establish the determinants of choice of the master's programme in gender and development studies in South Africa.

**Methodology:** The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

**Findings:** The results revealed that there exist conceptual and contextual gaps relating to the study on choice of the master's programme in gender and development studies in South Africa. Preliminary empirical review reveals that lack of gender awareness featured primarily when the students did not feel suited to the choice, they had made due to factors such as family advice and their educational background constraints.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** Rational choice theory may be used to categorize the key work design factors which may relate to human nature that are important to this study. The results of this research will form the basis for further research to benefit colleges in terms of knowledge contribution because it sought to highlight similarities and differences in the educational experience of women and men thus adding a qualitative aspect that needs to be addressed in any meaningful developmental discourse.

**Keywords:** *Choice, Culture, Gender Equality, Gender Responsiveness, Socio-Cultural Factors.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Career choices in education are made every day. Subsequently, the way these choices are made and implemented depends on the attitudes and perceptions of the society and their decision makers. Equally, an individual's education helps to form these attitudes and priorities during the career choice process. An educational career choice is important because of its potential to promote social change and act as defender of prevailing norms and values (Ridgeway & Erickson, 2020). Career choice not only concerns institutions one chooses to attend but also a broad range of forces influencing the development of individuals, their educational experience and their later working life (Kabeer, 2015).

According to Ampofo *et al.* (2015), gender and development studies as a career choice ensures that education has a positive impact on the status and roles women and it integrates men into the gender discourse. Ampofo *et al.* add that gender and development studies has the potential to challenge stereotypes about male and female roles, offers alternative ideas that to equip both women and men to pursue a range of possibilities. Thus, as a career choice in this area of study is associated with power and control just like gender which is viewed as a system of challenging patriarchy. This system of patriarchy has been demonstrated in the career choices that women have made since 1990s. It is noted that women's employment confines them to low level pay and responsibility. They include: work in the health sector, education and social services, banking and insurance, hotel and catering, the retail trade and personal services such as hairdressing and domestic work. Typically, women make up the majority of sales staff, cleaners, and kitchen assistants, nursing auxiliaries, secretaries and primary-school teachers. Worse still, most service jobs are part time, casual, temporary or 'informal' than jobs in other sectors, thus posing a great disadvantage to women (ILO, 2016).

In some work situations women dominate certain career choices that are characterized by low level skill, responsibility and pay leads to job segregation. This implies that the career choices that women and men make differ leading to segregation and concentration, often leading to women overrepresentation in a limited number of careers (ILO, 2015). Crucial to note in the gender system is the impact of women's career choices, lack of opportunities in both formal and informal careers that increases competition between them and keeps wages low. There are two types of career based segregation that women face when they make their career choices; the first is horizontal segregation where they find themselves in career clusters that are dominated by women such as the services sector, especially in the personal and caring services. Secondly, is vertical segregation where a career choice has both women and men; however, women are assigned less responsibility which is less secure leading to low pay. In fact, even when the career is predominantly female, men are still found in the managerial positions (ILO, 2016).

Gender and development studies as a career choice is crucial as it seeks to examine the issues of structural disparities of the gender system that influence women and men when making their career choices. Of importance to note is that women do not enter the labor market be it formal or informal on the same basis as men, nor do they operate within it on equal terms (ILO, 2016). The socio-cultural roles allotted to women and men limit women's access to means of production ranging from credit to training opportunities. These result in crowding of women in a limited number of careers and markets (ILO, 2015). Gender and development studies has revealed that the low wages

and prices that women command and the pressure on their time from their unpaid domestic activities, means that women everywhere work longer hours than men for considerable less income and with less control over the decision- making processes that affect their lives and careers (ILO, 2016). Gender and development studies is thus of importance as it reveals career choice dynamics and their implications on both women and men.

Gender studies emerged as an academic discipline within social sciences as a result of the UN Women's Conferences that sought to establish an approach that integrates men and women, their needs and concerns in the development process. Former development approaches such as the Women in Development approach (WID) prevalent in the 1990's exclusively focused on women without taking into account how their lives were shaped by their relations with men (Kabeer, 2015). Globally gender studies seek to address the structural relations of power and inequality in a wide range of political, economic, social and cultural spheres in which equality needs to be realized (Ridgeway & Erickson, 2020).

Gender studies in higher education seeks to draw out interconnections of relationships associated with power and meaning in different sites between men and women, boys and girls. According to Unterhalter (2022), gender studies explore how colleges and processes of learning operate to reproduce and transform inequalities. This is important because among others it highlights the process of choice whereby there are subjects defined as either those which women or men are "good" at or those which they are not. Gender studies in higher education is therefore, an academic discipline aimed at naming and changing the relationships of inequality that set the conditions and processes that allow people to critically view their wellbeing. The term gender studies flourished in the mid-1980s in research and publications which substituted the word 'gender' rather than 'women' as their area of focus (UNDP, 2020). On the other hand, the use of the term gender as developed in America and Western Europe led to the increased interest in the study of masculinity and the development of men's studies alongside women's studies (Kabeer, 2015). This was due to the perception that there was little direct focus on the social construction of 'men'. Moreover, gender studies in higher education examine ideas like 'masculinity' and 'femininity' and the processes involved in the reproduction of gender relations (ILO, 2017). The ILO (2017) additionally notes that these processes play a crucial role in the creation and reproduction of gender differences and that to understand them; we have to look at the experiences of students themselves and the meanings they give to the choice on whether to study gender studies. The goals of gender studies include the balancing of the curriculum by providing a place for both male and female perspectives and advocating for social change (World Bank, 2015).

Further, they are supposed to be change agents either through generating gender disaggregated information if they are researchers or train others and act as good role models by enhancing gender sensitive practices (Mama, 2015). A case in point is Makerere University which offers gender studies at the degree level. Its mission is to bring change in the socialization of men and women in Uganda by enhancing understanding their lives and encouraging development of policies and programmes that are sensitive to the fact that women's and men's lives are structured differently (ILO, 20214).

Gender studies have also been introduced at the Gender Studies Institute in Cape Town University in South Africa. They promote eradication of patriarchal domination tendencies, instead men and

women are respected as equals and socioeconomic justice is a reality for all. In other cases, specific courses on gender have been introduced or a gender perspective adopted in the mainstream curricula at African colleges. At the University of Dar-es-Salaam for instance, gender study courses have been introduced in the Institute of Development Studies and Sociology while a gender perspective has been adopted in some courses in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences, Law and Education. Such integration has been beneficial in the articulation of gender issues and has raised awareness on the significance of gender issues for both staff and students (Cooksey, Levey *et al.* 2021).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Almost all public and some private colleges have sought to offer gender related courses. This is in response to international conventions (SDGs) and treaties (CEDAW) as well as national gender policies (National Policy on Gender and Development (2020) and that aim to entrench gender equality and equity in higher education. These policies are meant to promote the equal inclusion and participation of men and women in careers. While making subject choices it has been noted that even if men and women have the same opportunities availed to them, several factors condition their choices in different ways. This leads to gender imbalance in terms of gender representation despite interventions by the colleges such as advertisements for the courses that are not gender specific and are aimed at ensuring gender inclusivity. Subsequently, some subjects end up being male or female dominated leading to a perception that such courses are suited for or are meant for a specific gender. Even though subject choices made by both women and men are personal, patterns emerge as some courses are dominated by a specific gender leading to gender disparities in terms of gender representation.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify the socio-cultural factors or norms that influence choice of gender and development studies at the masters' level, investigate the effect of perceptions concerning choice, identify constraints faced in choice-making and make suggestions that will address gender responsiveness in enrolment interventions in the gender and development studies departments.

### **Theoretical Review**

#### **Rational Choice Theory**

This study is guided by the rational choice theory which was formulated by John H. Goldthorpe in 2016, which posits that individual choice is the foundation for action and inaction (Goldthorpe, 2016). The theory explores how individuals react to and seek to structure the varying constraints on actions that occur, whether they are sets of institutions, patterns of group interaction or constellations of socio-economic structures. In particular, the rational choice theory focuses on individual choice making as influenced by social factors making it relevant to explain how masters' students in South Africa made their subject choices.

Rational choice according to Goldthorpe, (2016) deploys some distinct tenets about human nature that are important to this study; the first is that human beings have preferences that are for the purposes of analysis, that is individuals are purposive entities rather than just vehicles for wider social and economic forces. Thus, they are capable of choosing their own projects and preferences.

Secondly, rational choice theory assumes that individuals act in their self-interest rather than for the interest of others. In fact, they are instrumental rather than expressive and they seek to maximize their personal utility rather than to give life to their personal and collective identities. Personal utility is maximized through an optimization process whereby individuals maximize their income or balance out a number of preferences such as between current and future benefits.

Thirdly, people express their preferences as clear goals. Fourthly, rational choice theorists often assume individuals have information about the preferences available to them. Fifth, when individuals examine the information available to them, they select the course of action that satisfies their preferences and are able to modify their courses of action when the benefits and costs of choices change (Goldthorpe, 2016).

In this study, the rational choice theory was applied to explain masters' students' processes of choice making as influenced by socio-cultural factors. Goldthorpe's argument that individuals are purposive entities seeks the individual student's preferences of choice before those of the society. This was significant to this study as the society's socio-cultural beliefs played a role in influencing the students' choice of masters' programme before their preferences could lead to conflict.

In addition, the view that individuals act out of their self-interests rather than the interest of others was applied in the study. According to the rational choice theory, the interest of the individual comes first before that of society thus making the students' attitudes and beliefs free from socio-cultural encumbrances. Goldthorpe argues that even though society may have certain expectations for students' choice, the prime motivator for the students' actions should be their own individual preferences. Therefore, Goldthorpe approaches choice making as an individual process which emerges as rational when the chosen alternative is primarily based on the student's individual preferences. Applied to this study, the theory provided the opportunity to achieve gender responsiveness in subject choice by focusing on the student's individual preferences.

### **Empirical Review**

Owusu, Essel-Anderson, Ossei Kwakye, Bekoe and Ofori (2018) examined factors influencing career choice of tertiary students in Ghana. The purpose of this paper was to investigate the factors that influence Ghanaian tertiary students' career choices. The paper explored the dimensionality of the career choice factors within the Ghanaian context and also ascertains their degree of influence on students' career choices. The study employed survey method of research and a set of questionnaires was used to examine the factors that influence students' career choices. A total of 354 undergraduate students from the Ashesi University College in Ghana participated in the study. Factor analysis was conducted on the career choice factors and differences in response between science and business students were ascertained by means of independent sample *t*-test. The findings of this study indicated that university students in Ghana place much premium on intrinsic value and employability/financial prospect in their career choice decisions than such factors as prestige and desired working conditions. The findings of this study were relevant for policymakers and tertiary education providers interested in making the study of science an attractive option for university students in Ghana.

Koch, D'Mello and Sackett (2015) conducted a meta-analysis of gender stereotypes and bias in experimental simulations of employment decision making. Gender bias continues to be a concern

in many work settings, leading researchers to identify factors that influence workplace decisions. This study examines several of these factors, using an organizing framework of sex distribution within jobs (including male- and female-dominated jobs as well as sex-balanced, or integrated, jobs). The study conducted random effects meta-analyses including 136 independent effect sizes from experimental studies ( $N = 22,348$ ) and examined the effects of decision-maker gender, amount and content of information available to the decision maker, type of evaluation, and motivation to make careful decisions on gender bias in organizational decisions. It also examined study characteristics such as type of participant, publication year, and study design. The findings revealed that men were preferred for male-dominated jobs (i.e., gender-role congruity bias), whereas no strong preference for either gender was found for female-dominated or integrated jobs. Second, male raters exhibited greater gender-role congruity bias than did female raters for male-dominated jobs. Third, gender-role congruity bias did not consistently decrease when decision makers were provided with additional information about those, they were rating, but gender-role congruity bias was reduced when information clearly indicated high competence of those being evaluated. Fourth, gender-role congruity bias did not differ between decisions that required comparisons among ratees and decisions made about individual ratees. Fifth, decision makers who were motivated to make careful decisions tended to exhibit less gender-role congruity bias for male-dominated jobs. Finally, for male-dominated jobs, experienced professionals showed smaller gender-role congruity bias than did undergraduates or working adults.

Tegtmeier and Mitra (2015) investigated gender perspectives on university education and entrepreneurship. The purpose of this paper was to direct attention to recent research on women's entrepreneurship with a focus on university education. A literature review and a summary of authors' selected papers provide both a context for and an introduction to the articles in this special issue. This introduction provides an overview of the literature on female entrepreneurship with specific reference to the context of university education. Searches on Web of Science and in this journal were conducted to provide a systematic overview of the area of research. The study paper found that the quantum of past research endeavors remains limited despite the growing significance of the subject. This paper also revealed that developing a focused approach that is based on a female ontology of entrepreneurship, and one that identifies specific contexts, and appropriate methodological considerations that enable enquiry at different levels, are of value to future research.

Winchester and Browning (2015) investigated gender equality in academia. Gender equality in academia has been monitored in Australia for the past three decades so it is timely to reflect on what progress has been made, what works, and what challenges remain. When data were first published on the gender composition of staff in Australian universities in the mid-1980s women comprised 20 per cent of academic staff and held 6 per cent of senior positions. Since the early 1990s many Australian universities have had policies in place to remove sex discrimination and initiatives to increase women's representation in academia. Two decades on, women comprise 44 per cent of academic staff and hold 31 per cent of senior positions. How did this happen? What worked? Are there still challenges to be addressed? This paper provided a critical reflection on what has worked, the practical impacts on gender in academia in Australia and what challenges remain for the future.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

## **RESULTS**

The results were grouped into various research gap categories namely as conceptual, contextual, and geographical.

### **Conceptual Gaps**

Studies by Owusu, Essel-Anderson, Ossei Kwakye, Bekoe and Ofori (2018), Koch, D'Mello and Sackett (2015), Tegtmeier and Mitra (2015), Winchester and Browning (2015) had a conceptual framework gap. The determinants of choice of the master's programme in gender and development studies were not established by any of the research cited. The research did not provide a clear breakdown of the of the determinants of choice of the master's programme in gender and development studies. Because of this, the current work aims to fill in these conceptual gaps.

### **Contextual and Geographical Gap.**

Studies by Owusu, Essel-Anderson, Ossei Kwakye, Bekoe and Ofori (2018), Koch, D'Mello and Sackett (2015), Tegtmeier and Mitra (2015), Winchester and Browning (2015) had geographical gap because they weren't actually done in South Africa. This suggests that the findings may not be applicable in South Africa due to the fact that the methods employed in each country vary. This study was undertaken with the intention of filling that void.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Additional significance in the study was the data it produced that could be used as a guideline by policy makers. This could lead to understanding and formulating friendly and appropriate policies to assist students enrolling for gender and development studies. Besides, this research can benefit colleges in terms of knowledge contribution because it sought to highlight similarities and differences in the educational experience of women and men thus adding a qualitative aspect that needs to be addressed in any meaningful developmental discourse.

This study is justified as it seeks to place choice in higher education in the global gender and development discourse as is demonstrated in various developmental blueprints such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and South Africa's Vision which emphasize the need for gender equal participation in the development field and in gender and development studies which should therefore reflect such equality.



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