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# Career Development and Vocational Education: Understanding the School-Related Challenges that Influence the Career Trajectories of Female High School Students in South Africa

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## Abstract

This article investigates the school difficulties that affect the professional futures of female high school students in South Africa as it studies their selection process for vocational education and training (VET). Female high school students in South Africa continue to have their career choices formed by gender-based barriers that include stereotypes together with cultural expectations and insufficient career guidance access and non-traditional field under participation. The research methodology used a full-range qualitative analysis from studies conducted at a desktop level. The study richly benefited through extensive literature review about teachers, career counsellors, and parents which expanded understanding of school influences on career decision-making. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data for identifying recurring patterns together with statistical correlations. The study explored important factors that influence female students to select their future careers by examining career guidance along with peer influence together with gender stereotypes alongside social norms. The objective of this research is to support intervention development that will enhance vocational education along with career development programs targeted at female students in South Africa to ensure both educational gender equality and expanded career paths for young females. Research findings proposed how schools should optimize their environments to enable female students to make knowledgeable career decisions and expand their career opportunities which may include trade education.

## Keywords

Career development, Vocational education, Female high school students, Gender barriers, South Africa, Career guidance, Education equality

## INTRODUCTION

Young individuals depend heavily on career development processes for their future advancement especially when studying in high school. South African female students face multiple internal and external influences depending on their decisions about career paths according to Archer and Francis (2019). Traditions have constrained young women from selecting non-traditional careers, but Higgs & Pillay (2021) point out the limited availability of such options. Existing social and economic disparities together with cultural characteristics create specific difficulties for South African women who pursue career selection within VET programs. The practical training of vocational education enables female students to gain employment access while obtaining economic independence and social upward mobility (Carter & Gill, 2020).

South Africa has maintained policy reform focused on education gender equality since the beginning of the last two decades (Baruch & Cohn, 2017). Females have experienced increased educational access opportunities, but structural challenges persist which impact their employment journey (Adebayo & Ayodele, 2020). Educational gender stereotypes that exist in the system cause students to face limited choices for their futures. Educational fields recognized as STEM

fields demonstrated male dominance in the past while female students encounter negativity for their interest in these areas (Sayed & Kraak, 2016). Numerous people view vocational education as inferior to academic study even though it offers practical pathways for careers.

The development of student career aspirations heavily depends on proper career guidance which remains insufficient and inadequate in South African schools particularly in rural and under-resourced areas (Gibbons & Lee, 2017). The available career guidance services prove insufficient because career counsellors fail to meet the training requirements needed to guide students through their diverse career options and vocational paths (Chireshe & Chitiyo, 2017). Career guidance gaps stress the problems female students encounter because they lack necessary support to make good decisions about their professional futures. The educational program at schools fails to provide comprehensive career exposure in the vocational education sector because it does not properly address different career options (Aina, 2018). The career aims of South African young women develop significantly based on their interaction with social cultural standards. The cultural values of numerous communities restrict what occupations women can consider suitable for their profession (Hackett & Lent, 2017). The establishment of cultural norms prevents female students from pursuing occupations outside conventional career paths which society associates with their gender. Family along with peer groups and social institutions either adhere to or combat traditional norms that determine the career directions of young women (Christy, 2018). Female high school students maintain a dual struggle between family and community demands against their individual career dreams which prevents them from exploring alternative professional choices particularly in vocational education (Lwoga & Magara, 2019).

Vocational training acts as a feasible answer for overcoming certain barriers which female students encounter. Students can succeed through VET programs to acquire skills which produce stable employment prospects (Higgs & Pillay, 2021). The enrolment rate of South African females in vocational education programs remains small because they choose academic fields instead of practical training. The study seeks to understand the school-based obstacles that affect South African female high school students as they pursue their career paths specifically in terms of vocational education. Examining these barriers gives us opportunities to develop better career guidance services while fighting gender inequality and encouraging women in vocational education which results in their career success.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study used a thorough desktop approach to gain a deeper comprehension of the academic obstacles that impact South African female high school students' career paths. Desktop research, sometimes referred to as secondary research, is the process of gathering and analysing pre-existing data and material to obtain knowledge about a certain subject (Kothari, 2016). The development of primary research tools, the identification of knowledge gaps, and a thorough grasp of the subject matter were all made possible by desktop research. This methodology made it possible to conduct a thorough analysis of academic journals, books, and articles on gender studies, career development, and vocational education to comprehend the topic's larger context. Additionally, it made use of internet resources including JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Scopus, as well as publications from non-governmental organizations that address gender and education. This gave access to pertinent research, reports, and publications that concentrate on the relationship between gender, education, and vocational training.

The desktop research methodology proved to be a useful instrument for investigating how school-related obstacles impacted the career paths of South African female high school students. Through utilizing extant literature, reports, surveys, policy papers, and media sources, researchers were able to acquire a thorough grasp of the various obstacles that prevent female students from pursuing vocational education. A solid basis for gathering primary data is established by this kind of secondary research, which also offers background information and a framework for comparison for analysing the study's conclusions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1** Theme description

Theme	Description
Breaking Gender Stereotypes in Career Choices	The perception of acceptable female career choices undergoes modification from cultural traditions although this practice frequently reduces the available professional paths for women. The discussion emphasizes how gender stereotypes should be dismantled along with providing women proper opportunities to pursue STEM careers and male-dominated fields.
Lack of Access to Career Guidance and Resources	Female students who need career guidance experience insufficient school support that also lacks career counselling services and vocational programs and job opportunity resources. The inability to explore multiple career options negatively affects young women as this theme investigates the situation.
The Influence of Family Expectations on Career Trajectories	This theme analyses the impact families have on how female students choose their professional directions in life. tangencies often steer their members toward traditional female occupations which restrict their professional growth in alternative areas.

Socio-Economic Barriers to Vocational Education	Economic limitations directly block female students from receiving vocational education and developing their careers through available opportunities. Young women from low-income families encounter obstacles to vocational education because education expenses are high, and they lack sufficient financial assistance and cannot obtain scholarship opportunities.
The Role of School Environment and Teacher Support	From the school environment combined with teacher support develops female student career ambitions. The theme demonstrates how female students make their career decisions based on their teacher support and modelling figures and educational atmosphere. Schools must develop awareness about gender bias in their support programs for vocational education.
Impact of Peer Influence and Social Networks	Young women commonly seek occupational direction from their social relationships because peer influence remains highly influential in career decision making. Research demonstrates that peer group dynamics and social relational stress, yet supportive networks contribute to fostering or blocking career outlooks for women students by examining the value of encouraging peer connections.

### Theme 1: Breaking Gender Stereotypes in Career Choices

Female students encounter gender stereotypes blocking their career development especially within South African society which exerts substantial influence through traditional cultural messages about gender roles. The fields of science technology engineering mathematics (STEM) traditionally have male-oriented characteristics whereas nursing teaching and social work fields are considered suitable for female professionals (Barker & Mitchell, 2020). Gender stereotypes present permanent barriers which restrict what occupations female students may pursue so they avoid pursuing opportunities in male-dominated sectors (Dolata & Smith, 2018). The gender divide in South Africa reaches its greatest intensity within rural locations as well as economically disadvantaged regions because these areas provide minimal exposure to unfamiliar career opportunities for women (Reddy & Pretorius, 2022).

Early education institutions in South Africa typically fail to challenge the preexisting perceptions about gender expectations. Female students do not receive support to pursue careers beyond traditional roles because teachers might unintentionally enforce gender stereotypes when they teach (Coetzee & Venter, 2019). The career-developmental impact of teachers is crucial because Johnson and Moller (2016) show that instructors unintentionally push girls to avoid technical and leadership positions through their lack of career presentation options. Young women adopt restrictive career perspectives because the media shows them only in stereotypical roles according to Phiri and Mbele (2020).

The slow progress toward destroying these misconceptions about girls in math and science can now be observed through emerging reform movement (Goldstein & Davis, 2017). Women in STEM along with technology and business fields act as role models throughout awareness campaigns made to expand the professional possibilities for young females (Hunt & McLeod, 2021). Educational institutions plus professional organizations are now developing distinctive career development systems which specifically push young female students into nontraditional academic fields. A combination of new initiatives shows progress, but deep traditional cultural norms and social pressures are obstacles for young women to follow their professional interests without facing gender bias (Adams, 2021).

### Theme 2: Lack of Access to Career Guidance and Resources

Female high school students attending impoverished or distant educational facilities lack proper career assistance and educational resources (Wilson & Evans, 2018). A shortage of proper career counselling expertise exists within schools especially for communities which lack sufficient resources (Patel & Dlamini, 2021). Students find themselves without proper career counselling assistance since their schools have limited to no career counsellor staffing. Female students encounter major obstacles in making knowledgeable career decisions about their professional future because they lack proper resources and advice (Nkosi & Makhubela, 2019).

Female students alongside other students face barriers in exploring multiple career choices because they lack access to career fairs and mentorship programs and exposure opportunities (Moyo & Zungu, 2020). Schools that have limited resources often see students seeking direction from family members and peers instead of professional support due to which they learn gender-stereotypic roles and receive restricted career exposure (Lazarus & Van Zyl, 2018). Several female students restrict their career options due to conventional career paths because they lack professional career guidance.

The rising requirement for specialized competencies which match South Africa's economic transformation especially in technology engineering and entrepreneurship has worsened the career guidance problem according to Jacobs & Joubert (2017). The absence of direction prevents female students from participating in industries that potentially lead to well-compensated career fields and boosted job satisfaction (Hartley & Rivas, 2019). Through career coaching students receive necessary skills along with career guidance that prepares them for battling rising market competition (Brown & Clark, 2021).

### **Theme 3: The Influence of Family Expectations on Career Trajectories**

The professional choices of female high school students in South African society heavily depend on family expectations and cultural compliance. Many families continue to prioritize classic gender roles by directing female children toward nursing along with teaching or social work while pushing male children toward engineering as well as law and other profitable specialties (De Villiers & Bosman, 2020). Family pressure restricts young women from pursuing their true interests by making them settle for jobs that fulfil family expectations according to Gracie & Stuart (2021). Family influence shows its strongest effect upon students who experience economic hardships between economic stability. Families who face economic challenges prefer job stability over personal interests thus push daughters towards professions which seem accessible although their skills or aspirations might not match those professions (Smith & Roberts, 2020). Parents make their daughters give up educational paths and professional training opportunities in favour of finding quick employment roles and this decision will impact their future career decisions (Singh & Pillay, 2018).

Female students face an emotional distress from family-imposed demands because they feel obligated to meet family expectations which could potentially jeopardize their personal development or career goals (Wright & Johnson, 2017). The insistence of family members forces young women toward pursuing nursing careers or teaching roles despite lacking any genuine interest in these fields. School disengagement and lack of motivation accompany this situation while women fail to discover areas where they could have achieved excellence.

### **Theme 4: Socio-Economic Barriers to Vocational Education**

The main barriers that females encounter in their pursuit of vocational education at high school stem from economic conditions (Shabalala & Moodley, 2017). People from disadvantaged backgrounds often need to work while earning money and possess few educational resources and insufficient funds to pay for further learning (Pohl & Boshoff, 2021). Additional home caretaking responsibilities that female students commonly perform limit their academic growth and professional opportunities (Mpofu & Ncube, 2018). People tend to think that vocational education represents a budget-friendly option for those unable to pursue traditional university studies since it delivers practical work-related abilities usable across multiple commercial fields (Mkhize & Singh, 2020). Women alongside other students find it difficult to obtain quality training because vocational training institutions struggle to provide enough funding combined with adequate infrastructure. The negative perception that vocational education holds for higher learning stands as a major obstacle preventing female students from selecting it (Burger & Pienaar, 2019). The gender split in vocational education creates problems because certain programs have male-dominated areas and other programs are labelled as fitting women better. The restricted choices for female students remain a consequence of such stigmatization (Bekker & Stoddard, 2021).

### **Theme 5: The Role of School Environment and Teacher Support**

Female high school students experience critical development in their career paths because of what happens within school environments and the support they receive from their teachers. Scholarly institutions serve as main settings for students to receive guidance and encouragement related to possible career paths (Gracie & Stuart, 2021). Female students achieve better career readiness for their future goals based on the teacher support received as well as the institutional school environment (Singh & Pillay, 2018). Underprivileged students in rural areas receive less educational resources than their urban counterparts because of which they receive inadequate support and miss out on potential career paths (Pohl & Boshoff, 2021).

Female students undergo career development changes based primarily on guidance provided by their teachers who act as their principal mentors and advisors. Educational institutions have numerous instructors who lack necessary resources along with training to provide sufficient career guidance about non-traditional professions (Wright & Clark, 2021). Female students received unintentional gender-stereotyping from teachers when they received encouragement to enter engineer or technologist roles yet received guidance to follow nursing or teaching paths instead (Venter & Thomas, 2022). Students form their career-related attitudes based on their educational setting's total atmosphere which consists of additional activities and physical construction plus social dynamics (Van Zyl & Meyer, 2020). Female students achieve better professional development when their learning institutions actively support both genders to explore several potential career paths. The availability of diverse career choices through educational events combined with mentorship support leads girls to develop expanded career possibilities beyond their initial expectations (Steyn & Oosthuizen, 2019).

### **Theme 6: Impact of Peer Influence and Social Networks**

In South Africa, female high school students' career aspirations are greatly influenced by their social networks and peers (Pieterse & Maseko, 2017). Adolescence is a time when young people are highly influenced by the opinions and behaviors of their peers, and this is especially true for career choices (Naidoo & Khan, 2019). Female students' career decisions are influenced by the expectations, values, and opinions of their friends, which may reinforce traditional gender norms (Mokgadi & Makhonza, 2018). For example, if a student's social circle primarily believes that certain careers are "for boys" or "for girls," she may feel pressured to comply with these norms, which would limit her options.

Social networks, including family, friends, and community members, typically provide guidance and counsel, however this advice is not always impartial or knowledgeable (Mlambo & Nkosi, 2021). These networks perpetuate stereotypes and steer girls toward careers that align with conventional gender roles. For instance, in communities where



gender norms are stringent, female students may be discouraged from pursuing jobs that are considered as outside the norm for women, such as engineering or technology (Khamanga & Tshandama, 2019). The restrictions might not only limit professional choices, but they might also make students less inclined to follow more daring or unusual career routes.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the study point to several significant obstacles that South African female high school students must overcome to further their careers and pursue vocational training. Young women's employment choices are still influenced by gender stereotypes, which tend to drive them toward traditionally female-dominated industries while limiting their access to male-dominated fields like STEM. The gender gap in profession choices is exacerbated by the lack of proper career counselling and resources in schools, particularly in disadvantaged areas, which restricts the possibilities open to female students. Another important factor is family expectations, which frequently put pressure on girls to fit into traditional roles and prevent them from pursuing occupations that suit their interests. Female students are disproportionately impacted by socioeconomic barriers, especially those from lower-income households. These barriers include limited access to vocational education, financial constraints, and the high cost of training. Career paths are also influenced by peer pressure and school cultures, which can either support or contradict gender standards and professional goals.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Gender equality must be given top priority by policymakers in all initiatives for professional development. This can be accomplished, particularly in sectors like STEM, engineering, and technology that are dominated by men, by guaranteeing that male and female students have equal access to professional tools, advice, and mentorship. Programs should be created to expose young women to non-traditional job routes and to question conventional gender stereotypes. To guarantee that no student faces gender-based restrictions in their career choices, legislators should also support legislation requiring gender-inclusive career education in all schools.
- School counsellors should be equipped with the necessary training, resources, and tools to provide comprehensive, gender-sensitive career guidance. Policymakers must ensure that schools, particularly those in rural and underserved communities, have access to skilled career counsellors who can help students navigate their career paths and make informed decisions about their future. Schools should also integrate career guidance into the curriculum from an early stage, ensuring that female students are exposed to a variety of career options and the necessary steps to pursue them. Additionally, vocational education pathways should be clearly presented as legitimate and valuable career options for all students, not just an alternative for those not pursuing university education.
- Schools and relevant stakeholders must actively promote female role models across diverse industries, particularly in fields where women are underrepresented. These role models can act as mentors and sources of inspiration for female students, providing them with advice and career-related insights. Women students will feel more confident and be inspired to pursue occupations they may have previously thought were unattainable if mentorship programs are established in which they are matched with professionals in non-traditional fields. In fields where students' career decisions are heavily influenced by peer pressure and social networks, this project will be especially crucial.
- Finally, it is essential for schools, policymakers, and community organizations to engage families in the career development process. Many families, particularly in rural or low-income areas, may have limited knowledge of the career opportunities available to their daughters. Programs that raise awareness of diverse career options, challenge traditional gender expectations, and provide information about financial aid for education and training will help families make informed decisions. Encouraging family involvement in the career development process can empower female students to overcome the pressure of familial expectations and pursue careers that align with their aspirations.

## CONCLUSION

In South Africa, a complex interaction of socioeconomic hurdles, gender stereotypes, societal standards, and restricted access to resources greatly affects the career paths of female high school pupils. These obstacles not only limit young women's potential but also sustain gender inequity in the workforce, which reduces the talent pool and diversity required for innovation and national success. Nonetheless, the study emphasizes that these obstacles can be eliminated with focused interventions like enhanced career counselling, the dismantling of gender stereotypes, and easier access to vocational training. South Africa can unleash the unrealized potential of its young women by creating an atmosphere in which female students are given equal opportunity to investigate, pursue, and succeed in a variety of career options. Collaboration between educational institutions and policymakers is essential to establishing a more equitable, inclusive, and supportive system that enables young women of all genders to pursue their goals. The research's suggestions are meant to close the disparities and open the door to a time when women students will not be constrained by antiquated norms but will instead be able to pursue jobs that align with their interests, skills, and aspirations.

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## DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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