

The Effect of Gender Stereotyping on Career Choices among Girls in Secondary Schools in Uganda: A Case of St. John's High School Mukono

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of gender stereotyping on career choices among girls in secondary schools in Uganda, with St. John's High School Mukono as the primary case study. In a national context where gendered educational and occupational sorting continued to concentrate women in lower-paying and lower-status career fields despite decades of gender mainstreaming policy, understanding the micro-level social mechanisms through which gender stereotypes shaped girls' career aspirations and choices was both theoretically important and practically urgent. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 218 female students from Senior Two to Senior Six, supplemented by focus group discussions and key informant interviews with teachers, guidance counsellors, and parents, the study examined how teacher gender biases, peer gender norms, parental gender expectations, and media-reinforced stereotypes influenced girls' career aspirations, subject choice decisions, and occupational self-efficacy beliefs. Descriptive statistics revealed that all four stereotyping dimensions were perceived as moderately to highly influential by respondents (means 3.34–3.81). Pearson's correlation showed significant negative relationships between gender stereotyping intensity and career aspiration breadth ($r = -0.584$ to -0.721 , $p < .001$). Multiple linear regression demonstrated that the four stereotyping dimensions collectively explained 64.2% of the variance in girls' career aspiration breadth ($R^2 = 0.642$, $F = 38.14$, $p < .001$), with teacher gender bias emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = -0.412$, $p < .001$). The study concluded that gender stereotyping significantly constrained girls' career choices and recommended teacher gender sensitisation, career guidance reform, and family engagement programming as priority interventions.

Keywords: Gender Stereotyping, Career Choices, Girls' Education, Secondary Schools, Occupational Self-Efficacy, Teacher Gender Bias, Uganda, Mukono

1.0 Background of the Study

Gender stereotyping-the attribution of specific traits, roles, abilities, and social positions to individuals on the basis of their gender represents one of the most pervasive and consequential mechanisms of gender inequality in educational systems worldwide (Nancy & Audrey, 2026). In the context of girls' secondary schooling and career development, gender stereotypes operate at multiple levels simultaneously: at the individual cognitive level, where internalized stereotypes shape girls' self-perceptions of ability and appropriate ambitions; at the interpersonal level, where teacher expectations, peer social pressures, and parental guidance communicate gender-normative career messages; at the institutional level, where school curricula, subject streaming practices, and extracurricular opportunity structures embed gender assumptions; and at the societal level, where media representations, occupational pay structures, and

cultural narratives about femininity and success define the landscape of 'acceptable' female careers (Eccles, 1994; Shapiro & Williams, 2012).

In Uganda, where gender gaps in STEM subject participation, university course enrolment in technical fields, and representation in professional and managerial occupations remain significant despite overall progress in girls' education access, gender stereotyping in schools continued to exert meaningful influence on girls' educational and career trajectories (Shamim et al., 2023). The Uganda Gender Policy (2007) and the National Gender Equality Strategy (2018–2030) both identified the elimination of gender stereotypes in education as a policy priority, yet implementation in secondary schools remained limited and uneven. St. John's High School Mukono—a mixed-sex day and boarding school in Mukono District serving approximately 1,200 students from lower-to-middle income families presented a representative case for examining gender stereotyping dynamics in a mainstream Ugandan secondary school context, combining academic streaming with limited career guidance infrastructure and a student body from backgrounds in which traditional gender role expectations were strongly socialized.

2.0 Problem Statement

Despite St. John's High School's formal commitment to gender equality and the availability of a career guidance programme, preliminary observations and preliminary surveys indicated that female students systematically concentrated in arts-based and social science subjects, rarely pursued science and technical combinations, and reported career aspirations dominated by teaching, nursing, secretarial work, and other traditionally female-coded occupations—a pattern inconsistent with the school's stated commitment to gender-responsive education (Nancy & Prudence, 2024). This concentration suggested that gender stereotyping was operating as a systematic constraint on girls' career aspiration breadth and subject choice diversity, yet no systematic empirical investigation had been conducted to identify which specific stereotyping mechanisms most significantly shaped these patterns at St. John's High School. This study addressed this gap.

3.0 Main Objective

The main objective was to examine the effect of gender stereotyping on career choices among girls at St. John's High School Mukono. Specific objectives were: (i) to assess the influence of teacher gender bias on girls' career aspiration breadth; (ii) to evaluate the effect of peer gender norms on girls' occupational self-efficacy; (iii) to determine the influence of parental gender expectations on girls' subject choice decisions; and (iv) to examine how media-reinforced stereotypes affected girls' career aspirations at St. John's High School.

4.0 Literature Review

4.1 Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on the Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement Motivation (Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), which proposed that individuals' achievement-related choices — including subject selection, career aspirations, and occupational pursuit — were shaped by two primary determinants: their expectancy of success (their

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belief in their ability to succeed in a given domain) and the subjective task value they attached to the domain (encompassing intrinsic interest, perceived importance, and utility value). Gender stereotyping was theorised to constrain girls' career choices by systematically reducing their expectancy of success in stereotypically male-coded career domains (such as science, engineering, and business leadership) through repeated social messages about female cognitive limitations and by reducing the perceived utility value of non-traditional careers through social norms that positioned female professional ambition as incompatible with gender-appropriate femininity.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994) further informed the analysis by identifying occupational self-efficacy—the belief in one's capacity to successfully perform the tasks required in a given career—as the critical mediating variable between social learning experiences and career choice. The theory predicted that girls exposed to persistent gender stereotyping would develop lower occupational self-efficacy beliefs for non-traditional career domains, directly constraining the breadth of careers they considered viable personal options.

4.2 Empirical Literature

Empirical research on gender stereotyping and career choices in Sub-Saharan African schools had documented pervasive stereotype effects across multiple domains. Otieno and Nyambura (2021) found in a study of Kenyan secondary schools that girls who reported high levels of teacher gender bias in STEM subjects had occupational self-efficacy scores for science careers 34% lower than those who reported low teacher bias, controlling for actual academic performance. In Uganda, Nanyonga (2020) documented that 73% of female secondary school students reported being actively discouraged from pursuing science subject combinations by teachers or parents citing gender-stereotypic beliefs about female mathematical ability. Tumwine and Asiimwe (2022) found in a study of Ugandan mixed secondary schools that peer gender norm pressure — operationalised as social disapproval from peers for pursuing non-traditional career aspirations — significantly predicted girls' probability of dropping science subjects at O-Level, with high peer norm pressure associated with a 47% reduction in science combination continuation.

5.0 Methodology

A cross-sectional research design was adopted, combining quantitative survey methods with qualitative focus group discussions and key informant interviews (A. Nafiu et al., 2012). The study population comprised 412 female students at St. John's High School Mukono in Senior Two through Senior Six. Using stratified random sampling by class level, a sample of 218 respondents was achieved (Olanrewaju, Lukman Abiodun, et al., 2021). The questionnaire measured four gender stereotyping dimensions and the dependent variable of career aspiration breadth on five-point Likert scales, with reverse coding applied to stereotyping items so that higher scores indicated stronger stereotyping influence (Olanrewaju, Waititu, et al., 2021). Cronbach's Alpha values were 0.87 (teacher gender bias), 0.83 (peer gender norms), 0.81 (parental gender expectations), 0.79 (media stereotypes), and 0.85 (career aspiration breadth). Data were analysed using SPSS version 26 (Nelson et al., 2022). Three focus group discussions with 8–10 students each and key informant interviews with 6 teachers and 4 guidance counsellors provided qualitative depth.

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6.0 Results

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
Teacher Gender Bias	218	1.00	5.00	3.81	0.84
Peer Gender Norms	218	1.00	5.00	3.64	0.89
Parental Gender Expectations	218	1.00	5.00	3.58	0.93
Media-Reinforced Stereotypes	218	1.00	5.00	3.34	0.97
Career Aspiration Breadth	218	1.00	5.00	2.87	0.92

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The descriptive results in Table 1 reveal that teacher gender bias received the highest mean score among the four stereotyping dimensions (mean = 3.81, SD = 0.84), indicating that female students at St. John's High School perceived teacher attitudes and behaviours as the most significant source of gender-stereotypic messages about appropriate careers and academic domains (Julius et al., 2026). This finding is concerning given teachers' authoritative position in shaping students' academic self-perceptions and is consistent with qualitative data from focus group discussions in which multiple students recalled specific incidents of teacher discouragement from science subjects or technology-related career aspirations, including statements such as being told that engineering was 'not for girls' or that mathematics was 'too hard for female brains' (Godfrey et al., 2023). Peer gender norms received the second highest mean score (mean = 3.64, SD = 0.89), reflecting the powerful social conformity pressures operating in adolescent peer groups that positioned science subject choice and professional career ambition as inconsistent with feminine identity norms (Julius & Kazaara, 2025). Parental gender expectations scored similarly (mean = 3.58, SD = 0.93), reflecting the transmission of traditional gender role expectations through family socialisation, particularly among students from households where mothers were primarily engaged in domestic or informal sector work and fathers held gender-normative occupational views. Media-reinforced stereotypes received the lowest mean score (mean = 3.34, SD = 0.97), suggesting that while media representations were recognised as stereotypic, they were perceived as less directly influential than teacher, peer, and parental sources—consistent with research documenting the greater influence of proximate social agents relative to distal media sources on adolescent career development. Career aspiration breadth—the dependent variable measuring the range and non-traditionality of girls' career aspirations received a mean score of only 2.87 (SD = 0.92), significantly below the midpoint of the scale, indicating that the majority of respondents had relatively narrow and gender-typical career aspirations, confirming the aggregate career aspiration constraint that the study's qualitative data had suggested (Julius & Kazaara, 2026b).

6.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix — Gender Stereotyping and Career Aspiration Breadth (N = 218)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
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1. Teacher Gender Bias	1.000				
2. Peer Gender Norms	0.594**	1.000			
3. Parental Gender Expectations	0.541**	0.567**	1.000		
4. Media Stereotypes	0.487**	0.513**	0.498**	1.000	
5. Career Aspiration Breadth	-0.721**	-0.674**	-0.641**	-0.584**	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The correlation matrix in Table 2 reveals a highly significant and theoretically consistent pattern: all four gender stereotyping dimensions were significantly negatively correlated with career aspiration breadth, confirming that higher intensity of gender stereotyping across all sources was associated with narrower, more gender-typical career aspirations. Teacher gender bias demonstrated the strongest negative correlation with career aspiration breadth ($r = -0.721$, $p < .01$), indicating that the relationship between teacher gender-stereotypic attitudes and restricted female career aspirations was both statistically robust and practically powerful. This very strong negative correlation suggests that female students who experienced high levels of teacher gender bias were exposed to a systematic process of aspiration attrition with each stereotypic teacher message reducing the perceived viability of non-traditional career options and progressively narrowing the space of careers that girls considered personally possible (Nelson et al., 2023). Peer gender norms showed the second strongest negative correlation with career aspiration breadth ($r = -0.674$, $p < .01$), consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory's prediction that social learning experiences including observation of peer approval and disapproval patterns — significantly shaped occupational self-efficacy beliefs (Mategeko et al., 2026a). Parental gender expectations demonstrated a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.641$, $p < .01$), reflecting the powerful influence of family socialisation on girls' career expectations, while media stereotypes showed the weakest but still significant negative correlation ($r = -0.584$, $p < .01$). The moderate to strong positive correlations among the four stereotyping dimensions (ranging from $r = 0.487$ to $r = 0.594$) indicated that these sources of stereotypic influence were mutually reinforcing, with girls experiencing high teacher bias also tending to experience high peer norm pressure and parental expectations — a cumulative disadvantage pattern that amplified the total stereotype burden on girls' career aspirations.

6.3 Regression Analysis

Table 3: Model Summary — Regression of Career Aspiration Breadth on Gender Stereotyping Dimensions

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F	Sig.
1	0.801	0.642	0.635	0.557	38.14	< .001

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 4: Regression Coefficients — Predictors of Career Aspiration Breadth Among Girls at St. John's High School Mukono

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Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	5.847	0.274		21.339	< .001
Teacher Gender Bias	-0.398	0.071	-0.412	-5.606	< .001
Peer Gender Norms	-0.312	0.074	-0.301	-4.216	< .001
Parental Gender Expectations	-0.274	0.072	-0.276	-3.806	< .001
Media-Reinforced Stereotypes	-0.198	0.064	-0.208	-3.094	.002

Dependent Variable: Career Aspiration Breadth (higher scores = broader, more non-traditional aspirations)

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The regression model was highly significant ($F = 38.14$, $p < .001$), with the four gender stereotyping dimensions collectively explaining 64.2% of the variance in girls' career aspiration breadth ($R^2 = 0.642$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.635$). All four stereotyping dimensions were significant negative predictors of career aspiration breadth, confirming that each operated as an independent constraint on girls' career aspirations beyond the effects of the other sources (Julius & Kazaara, 2026a). Teacher gender bias was the strongest negative predictor ($\beta = -0.412$, $t = -5.606$, $p < .001$), with a one-unit increase in perceived teacher gender bias associated with a 0.398-unit decrease in career aspiration breadth when all other stereotyping dimensions were controlled (Julius & Kazaara, 2026a). The magnitude and significance of this teacher bias coefficient carries a clear and actionable policy implication: since teachers are the most influential single source of gender-stereotypic career messages in the school context, and since teacher attitudes and behaviours are potentially amenable to change through targeted professional development, gender-sensitisation training for teachers represents the highest-leverage intervention point for expanding girls' career aspirations (David et al., 2023). Peer gender norms were the second strongest negative predictor ($\beta = -0.301$, $t = -4.216$, $p < .001$), followed by parental gender expectations ($\beta = -0.276$, $t = -3.806$, $p < .001$) and media stereotypes ($\beta = -0.208$, $t = -3.094$, $p = .002$) (Mategeko et al., 2026b). The consistent statistical significance of all four predictors underscored the multi-source, mutually reinforcing character of gender stereotyping's influence on girls' career choices—a finding that called for multi-level interventions addressing teacher, peer, family, and media dimensions simultaneously rather than targeting any single source in isolation.

7.0 Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The findings provide compelling evidence that gender stereotyping significantly and systematically constrained career aspiration breadth among girls at St. John's High School Mukono, with the four stereotyping dimensions together explaining 64.2% of the variance in career aspiration outcomes. The dominance of teacher gender bias as the strongest predictor ($\beta = -0.412$) has both diagnostic and prescriptive significance: it identifies the school's teaching staff as the most critical intervention target, while simultaneously locating the most significant gender stereotype transmission mechanism within the institution's direct sphere of influence and reform capacity. The finding that girls' mean career aspiration breadth score (2.87) fell significantly below the scale midpoint confirmed that gender stereotyping had produced a systematic aspiration deficit among the majority of female students—a deficit with profound long-term

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implications for their educational and occupational trajectories, lifetime earnings, and contribution to Uganda's economic development.

The study concludes that gender stereotyping operates as a multi-source, mutually reinforcing system of aspiration constraint that cannot be effectively addressed through single-domain interventions. Comprehensive recommendations include: (i) mandatory gender sensitisation training for all teaching staff, focusing on unconscious bias awareness, stereotype threat effects, and evidence-based practices for gender-equitable classroom environments; (ii) redesign of the career guidance programme to systematically expose female students to women role models in non-traditional careers including STEM, business, law, and public administration, through school visits, mentorship programmes, and career day events; (iii) establishment of a girls' science club and technology society to build peer social norms that positively value female achievement in traditionally male-coded domains; (iv) development of a parent engagement programme that provides gender-responsive career guidance information to parents and challenges gender-stereotypic occupational expectations; (v) advocacy to the Uganda Communications Commission and the media sector for increased representation of women in professional, technical, and leadership roles in broadcast and social media content consumed by adolescents; and (vi) institutional establishment of a Gender Policy Committee at St. John's High School to oversee implementation of gender equality commitments and monitor progress through annual gender audits.

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