

Perceived gender-based challenges endured by Zimbabwean secondary school girls in their academic and occupational prospects

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This study explores and unmasks factors in the Zimbabwean school curricula that predispose or channel girls into particular occupational trajectories, in particular occupations or careers traditionally stereotyped as feminine. As a qualitative research study of the culture of the schooling system within this country, it employs the views of a sample size of 20 Sixth Form girls who were purposively selected. The study also examines the impact of the pupils' gender and their teacher attitudes and expectations towards them as girls on their resultant career trajectories. The design adopted is an exploratory case study that utilises the focus group interview for data collection from four secondary schools conveniently sampled from the Ngezi District of Zimbabwe. The study establishes that as part of the hidden culture and curriculum, teachers' perceptions, attitudes and expectations of pupils' gender roles exert a significant influence on their academic achievement and career aspirations. This study concludes that effective intervention strategies are an imperative if the Zimbabwean school curriculum is to be made gender-sensitive.

Keywords: Gender-role stereotyping, career trajectories, hidden culture curriculum, teacher attitudes and expectations

Introduction

Despite international calls for equality, and despite Zimbabwe's assumed democracy, women remain marginalised in education and career decision-making structures in this country. It is in this context that the current study posits that teacher attitudes and expectations of pupils as males or females coupled with the workings of the formal and hidden curricula are biased against the girl child. There is certainly an imperative to incorporate the views of girls and women in all spheres of life, since they constitute more than half the population of the country (51%). Discriminating against them is not only a sign of male chauvinism and dictatorship, but also an antithesis to democracy, which interestingly the parties to the Government of National Unity (GNU) are purportedly working to re-institute in the country (Kwinjeh, 2007). The masculine nature of the Zimbabwean educational, occupational and political structures manifests itself in a number of ways, as shown in studies by Jansen (2008), Gaidzanwa (1997) and Machingura (2006) who concur that the Zimbabwean educational and occupational landscape lacks gender sensitivity despite previous lip-service initiatives by governmental and non-governmental organisations towards gender equity and equality. Paid female labour-power still constitutes only 25% of the total workforce in the country. Women are still overburdened with domestic and reproductive roles traditionally expected of them by society (Kwinjeh, 2007). They are thus still underrepresented in many occupational sectors of the economy; especially in the public sphere in areas such as politics, engineering or science and technology in general (Jansen, 2008). This despite the fact that Zimbabwe herself boasts of having one of the highest literacy rates among countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Nhundu, 2007).

Theoretical perspective used as the lens for the study

The perspectives of scholars such as Atkinson, Agere and Mambo (2004), Jansen (2008), Nhundu (2007) and feminist writers, Gaidzanwa (1997), Gordon (1995), Machingura (2006) and Wolpe (2006) are used as the lens for viewing the problem being explored in this study. In examining curricula influences of the colonial educational legacy of Zimbabwe, Atkinson *et al.* (2004) concur with Gaidzanwa (1997), Jansen (2008), Machingura (2006) and Nhundu (2007) that the colonial history of Zimbabwe left an indelible legacy on her political, economic and educational systems. For instance, the Zimbabwean school curriculum has for a long time been inextricably linked to the patterns of European colonisation in the region and the dominant role of the British settler regime. The curriculum inherited by Zimbabwe at her independence in 1980 was modelled on the English system (Wolpe, 2006). As in Britain, girls in Zimbabwean schools were educated for domesticity, whereas boys were amply prepared for employment and the role of family head and breadwinner (Gordon, 1995). Mechanisms, including the curriculum for the restructuring of gender roles in schools, were similar to those in Britain. The curricular for boys and girls differed. Boys and girls were offered different practical and vocational subjects, with boys being channelled into technical subjects such as metalwork, woodwork, agriculture, technical graphics and building (Vithal, 2001; Samoff, 2001). They were also encouraged to pursue science subjects. On the contrary, girls were offered domestic science subjects as well as typing and shorthand and were encouraged to pursue the arts subjects (Gordon, 1995).

The legacy of the Rhodesian colonial school curriculum is often reflected in the curriculum scholarship not only of Zimbabwean writers, but also of Southern African writers in general (Jansen, 2008). One such theme is what Atkinson *et al.* (2004) regard as curricular reflective of the influence of the colonial settler government. According to this view, the colonial settler officials tended to visualise girls and women in terms of a Victorian image of what a woman should be, instead of observing women's actual capabilities and functions alongside their male counterparts. They equated men with breadwinners. As a result, they introduced technologies to men and recruited them for better paying and highly esteemed jobs, which often took them away from the homes, farms and their rural areas, then called tribal trust lands (Mavhunga, 2009; Samoff, 2001).

Jansen (2008) contends that the gender-based curricula challenges for girls can also be viewed in terms of school subjects focusing on their nature, design organisation and effects on teaching and learning as well as attitudes among the various categories of learners. According to this view, although schools purport to offer all pupils the same subject options, girls still tend to opt for those perceived as feminine. Jansen asserts that, in Southern Africa, school subjects remain a powerful organisational reality in post-colonial institutions despite various initiatives for the integration of subjects or interdisciplinary curricula. The gender-typing of school subjects by teachers and their comparative importance and suitability for boys and girls set the stage for the continuing gender polarisation and stereotyping of occupations (Nhundu, 2007). Gender stereotypes embodied in school textbooks (Gati, Givon & Osipow, 1995) and syllabi that define a school subject are also pointed out by Dorsey (1996) who notes that, in Zimbabwe, the general perception among educators on the nature and power of subjects is that Mathematics and Science subjects are a preserve for boys, whereas Languages and Humanities are a female domain. The same is true for careers involving these subjects.

Problem statement

Despite the claim that Zimbabwe is a democratic nation, child socialisation practices coupled with the hidden school culture and curriculum continue to lock girls in traditional occupational roles. The challenges of gender-role stereotypes peddled by the home and school often interfere not only with the girls' choices of school subjects of study, but also with their occupational prospects and ultimate overall life prospects. Therefore, the Zimbabwean school curricula subtly offer a prescription of the subjects and careers presumed suitable for the different genders.

Research questions

- What careers do girls from the different schools in Zimbabwe prefer?
- What motivates the girls' choice of careers?
- What relationship, if any, exists between the school curriculum and Zimbabwean girls' career aspirations?
- How do the girls explain their academic challenges and resultant career trajectories?
- What curricular strategies are necessary to mitigate the effects of gender, school subjects and occupational stereotypes?

Research design and methods

The study adopted a qualitative exploratory case study design and used the focus group interview as the instrument for data collection. As an exploratory case study (Yin, 2009), the epistemological position held was that using focus group discussions to gather the views of Sixth Form girls on their perceptions of challenges they face in the school curriculum would enable group interaction to generate a wide range of responses by activating details of perspectives and releasing inhibitions (Dzvimbo, Moloji, Portgieter, Wolhuter & Van der Walt, 2010). The instrument used thus helped to elicit rich texts as participants tended to build on each other's ideas and comments to provide in-depth and value-added insights on their perceptions of factors affecting their education and career prospects upon their graduation from schools. A focus group, as described by McLafferty (cited in Dzvimbo *et al.*, 2010), is a semi-structured group discussion, moderated by a discussion leader, held in an informal setting, with the purpose of obtaining information by means of group interaction on a designated topic. In using focus group discussion as a data-collection tool, insights were drawn from Shumba, Mpofu, Seotlwe and Montsi (2011), who assert that the technique is capable of unearthing crucial issues regarding a people's culture or systems of beliefs and practices embedded in their structured human social relations.

Sampling

Participants of the focus group interviews were 20 Sixth Form schoolgirls, a category that represents the school-leaving General Certificate of Education at the Advanced Level of study in Zimbabwe (GCEAL). They were drawn from four secondary schools conveniently sampled as the sites for the study. The participants were organised into four focus groups, with each group being interviewed for approximately 45 minutes to one hour. The data was then drawn on to discover how the school curriculum, as reflected in teacher attitudes and expectations of the girls, predispose them wittingly or not into the gender-polarised occupational world. Using a combination of convenient, purposive and stratified random sampling techniques (Clark & Creswell, 2008), the study managed to identify the study participants.

Ethical considerations

The researcher had to obtain the necessary ethical clearance and permission to conduct the study from the provincial education department, district and school principals before going into the schools as part of his advance protocols. The participants had to be at ease before the interview proceedings commenced, especially in the face of a voice or audio-recorder that was used to record the data. The focus group interviews were initiated by clarifying the purpose of the research and the interview so as to give the participants an opportunity for informed consent. They were reassured of their rights during the course of the study and also made aware of the confidential nature of their interview responses, their rights to privacy, protection from harm, informed consent, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the research at any moment. However, none of the participants withdrew.

Data management and analysis

Guided, in particular, by Dey's (2010) assertion that data management and analysis in case study research ought to be done in terms of meanings mediated through language and action tied to particular contexts, a descriptive and interpretive mode of data presentation and analysis was adopted. This involved the use of summary tables, excerpts from interviews, narrative vignettes and direct quotes. Consistent with Tesch's (2000) advice that one of the most important tasks of data analysis is the identification of patterns, commonalities, differences and processes, the focus was placed on breaking down the data into separate parts, examining it and making comparisons in the emerging themes which formed the basis of the discussion and analysis of results.

Results and discussion

The results presented in this section of the study evolved out of the focus group interviews held with the research participants. As shown in the interview guide, the questions were categorised into four sections (A-D), with questions in each section focusing on a specific research question for the study.

The purpose of the focus group interview guide was to keep the interview sessions focused (Patton, 2000). Questions in the first section of the interview guide were meant to solicit data on the impact of the school curriculum in orienting girls to specific school subject choices and occupational aspirations. The rationale was to try and establish the link between curriculum and career aspirations for girls. Four questions were thus posed to the participants as follows: State the subjects you are studying for your GCE Advanced level school certificate. What career do you wish to follow upon leaving school? Why did you choose to study the subjects you mentioned? Has your school contributed in any way towards your choice of subjects? The girls' responses to the above questions are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of girls' perceptions of the link between curriculum and careers

Subjects studied	No	Preferred careers	% age responses	Reason for choice of career
Accounting	5	Accountant	25	Well paid, requires my knowledge and skills
Art	4	Artist/sculptor	20	Like it/interested, suits my education
Biology	3	Doctor/nurse	15	Prestige/suits my education ability
Chemistry	3	Pharmacist/cosmetologist	15	Help fellow people
Divinity	12	Teacher/lawyer	60	Long holidays/white collar
English literature	14	Lawyer/teacher	70	Like it, interested, security, holidays
Economics	7	Economist/entrepreneur	35	Requires my knowledge, suits education ability
Geography	7	Navigator/town planner	35	Travel, prestige, well paid
History	13	Teacher/lawyer	65	Security, requires knowledge, interest, opportunity for further studies
Mathematics	4	Architect	20	Employment possibility, prestige and well paid
MOB	6	Hotelier	30	Serving people, easy interest and pleasant
Music	9	Musician	45	Entertaining, travel
Physics	4	Engineer	20	Prestige, well paid, suits education ability
Sociology	8	Social worker	40	Help fellow people

Subjects studied	No	Preferred careers	% age responses	Reason for choice of career
Shona	11	Teacher	55	White collar, security, and opportunity for further studies

In motivating their choice of subjects and career preferences, the following were some of the responses:

Interviewer (Int): What do you want to do when you leave school?

Respondent (R) 1: Well, I am going to join the merchant navy. My uncle was in it. He enjoyed it.

R 2: I am going for an apprenticeship to be an electrical engineer. I told the careers' man that my dad works in ZESA (Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority) as a sparks and he says I might as well go that road.

R3: Since I am studying Arts subjects (Divinity, History & Shona), these can only enable me to become either a teacher or lawyer if I pass in my GCE advanced level school certificate.

R 4: I am an arts person and hoping to become either a teacher or social worker.

R5: My sister is already preparing me for an internship in accounting in her firm Ernest & Young. She says if I pass my GCE Advanced level accounting, she will organise for me to join her firm as a trainee CA following her footsteps. She is the one who advised me to study accounting. She earns a lot of money there and does not even intend to get married because men who earn less than their wives often become abusive of them.

R6: According to the information we received from the careers people (occupational psychologists) who visited the school twice last year, as girls we need to choose from any of the following careers: nursing, teaching, hotelier, cosmetologist, lawyers, social workers, accounting and pharmacists. Professions such as engineering, architecture and others in the automotive industry are ideal for men because of their physical strength and endurance.

An interpretation of the above responses reveals that, while occupational psychologists help in making available the necessary information on possible careers girls and boys can follow upon graduating from school, it appears that they still need to make girls conscious that they can do the same jobs as their boy counterparts instead of simply presenting a list of the professions or careers without helping in the deconstruction of gender-role biases or prejudices.

Parental influences

According to the girls' responses, parental occupations and those of their older siblings considerably influence their resultant career choices, as the following two responses indicate:

R 2: I am going for an apprenticeship to be an electrical engineer. I told the careers' man that my dad works in ZESA (Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority) as a sparks and he says I might as well go that road.

R5: My sister is already preparing me for an internship in accounting in her firm Ernest & Young. She says if I pass my GCE Advanced level accounting, she will organise for me to join her firm as a trainee CA following her footsteps. She is the one who advised me to study accounting. She earns a lot of money there and does not even intend to get married because men who earn less than their wives often become abusive of them.

Such responses clearly epitomise the influence of the family on girls' career choices, in particular, the impact of parents' and siblings' careers. Many of the girls reported during focus group interviews that they would prefer jobs that allow them to stay closer to their families to jobs such as trucking, a stereotypically masculine job that often entails spending several days away from home. It emerged from these results that

gender-typed and polarised perceptions of jobs are attributed to the home environment and society at large, which often express social disapproval of women who pursue careers that interfere with their perceived social role of child rearing. Another theme that emerged from the girls' responses during the focus group discussion was the relationship of school subjects to career trajectories.

The relationship of school subjects to career trajectories

Results from the focus group discussions revealed that there is a positive relationship between the subjects studied by girls and the career trajectories they ultimately follow upon leaving school. It became apparent that school girls who pursue the arts subjects' curriculum tend to follow careers in areas such as teaching, law, hotel and catering, and general social work. The evidence from the focus group interviews revealed that 14 (70%) of the 20 respondents whose school subjects included English literature aspire for careers as either teachers or lawyers. Twelve participants (60%), whose studies included Divinity as a school subject, also aspired to become lawyers, because Divinity is considered one of the fundamental entry subjects for a Bachelor of Laws Degree in a Zimbabwean university. The 13 girls (65%) studying subjects that included History cited teaching as their preferred career. A similar response was given by 11 participants (55%) studying subjects inclusive of Shona. The 7 girls (35%) studying Economics cited a desire to become economists or general entrepreneurs. Only 7 respondents (35%), whose subject domains included Geography, mentioned careers in fields such as Merchant Navy and Town Planning as their preferred occupations. The 5 girls (25%), who chose Accounting as a career claimed to have been inspired by their families. The 6 girls (30%) studying subjects that included MOB cited a desire to work in the hotel and catering industry as hoteliers or entrepreneurs in sales and marketing.

Careers such as architecture, medicine, pharmacy and cosmetology were also cited by girls studying pure sciences such as Mathematics, Biology, Physics and Chemistry. Four (20%) of the participants studying Mathematics and Physics cited a desire to become architects, whereas 3 girls (15%) studying subjects that included Biology intended to be medical practitioners as either nurses or doctors. Four girls (20%), whose subjects included Chemistry, cited Pharmacy and Cosmetology as their preferred careers, should they pass their GCE Advanced school level. Eight of the girls (40%) studying subjects that included Sociology claimed to aspire for people-oriented careers such as social work, whereas 4 girls (20%) studying Art cited a wish to join Sculpture as their career.

In motivating why they are still attending school when others of their age have since left it, 11 participants (55%) cited a desire for highly paying jobs on the assumption that the higher they achieve better qualifications, the higher the likelihood of them being able to compete with their male counterparts in the job market. Nine girls (45%) were of the opinion that remaining in the school up to GCE advanced level would provide them with an opportunity to venture into occupations traditionally construed as masculine domains. In motivation of this idea, they argued that challenging patriarchy in the occupational sphere requires them to have a strong academic stamina.

Asked to shed light on what they perceive as the reasons why some girls have dropped out of school, whether or not their teachers had something to do with this; whether or not they have ever missed school or failed to submit an assignment on time due to gender-based constraints and what different tasks were assigned to them as girls compared to their brothers in the homes, the respondents cited many and varied factors that included the following: girls' academic underachievement, sexual harassment, and parental attitudes towards girls' education and careers.

Girls' academic underachievement

The notion of an underachieving pupil denotes a pupil who scores lower than the acceptable score in a test or examination and whose performance is described as below standard. Eleven girls (55%) from the focus group interviewees cited underachievement as the reason why some of the girls dropped out of school prematurely. Nine respondents (45%) pointed to the problem of sexual harassment of girls in the schools as one of the reasons some girls have abandoned school prematurely.

Sexual harassment in schools

From the results of the focus group interviews, 10 respondents (50%) were of the opinion that the sexual harassment of girls in co-educational schools accounted for a large number of high school dropouts. In elaborating their claims, they defined sexual harassment as taking a variety of forms, ranging from the verbal to the physical. They further claimed that it occurs at several levels: harassment by boys and harassment by male teachers. It emerged from the focus group discussions that the sexual abuse of girls by male teachers is not an infrequent occurrence, particularly in the rural and township schools. Fifteen respondents (75%) cited teasing, humiliation, verbal bullying or assaults, and the unnecessary ridicule of girls by boys as a major impediment to girls' education and career aspirations. The harassment was reported as occurring both within and outside the classroom, as the following sample responses from the participants show:

Int: Tell us some of the things that the boys and male teachers you mentioned do which you can say affect your schooling.

R1: The boys can laugh at you if you fail to answer a question. Some boys just criticise us girls telling us that we are useless in school. Then we just keep quiet in the classroom not participating.

R2: The boys can make you shy by making comments about your structure, about your body. The boys will be watching you at break time. They will talk loudly and laughing saying which girls is beautiful and which girls are ugly.

R3: You know if you are menstruating the boys will know it, sometimes they will see the blood on your skirt. Then they will laugh at you and tell their friends to look. And they will mention it for a long time after that.

Int: What do some teachers do to you that you see as sexual harassment?

R 4: One of the big problems we face is teachers proposing love to us girls. If you say no he can make you fail the subject, make you hate school or drop out of it. Teachers proposing love to us girls make us to be shy in class. You must be very quiet so that he will not notice you.

R 5: Some of the young teachers will say because they are in love with you so they will ask you to clean their houses, wash their clothes, but when you fall pregnant they will leave you to drop out of school and suffer. It happened to two of my friends last year at this school.

In response to the question of what their teachers do if boys unnecessarily laugh at or ridicule them in the classroom, thirteen respondents (65%) claimed that some of the teachers laugh with the boys or merely ignore them. Probed further about whether or not they report incidents of sexual harassment and abuse to other staff members, particularly to female teachers, 65% of the respondents indicated that reporting cases to teachers would, in fact, do more harm than good. One girl interview respondent had this to say:

R6: If you report it, no, that is not good. You will be on tight. The teacher will say that you are a prostitute and you were attracting the man. You cannot tell the lady teacher because she may be very angry with you alleging you are to blame. The lady teachers may say a teacher will not propose love to you if you did not entice him. May be he rejected you that is why you are reporting him.

The above results show that some of the teachers tend to collude with the male pupils in the verbal harassment of girls in the classroom, either by omission or directly.

Parental attitudes

Many girls claimed that the belief that girls who are sexually harassed or abused by boys and teachers are, to some extent, responsible for their fate is fairly common among both parents and teachers. The girls cited this as one of the reasons why some parents do not care a great deal about the dropout of their girl children, preferring to have them married instead. Sixteen respondents (80%) also lamented their teachers' and parents' acceptance of the feminine role as primarily domestic and the belief that the man should be

the provider, breadwinner and head of the family on the grounds that such a view obscures the protection they should be giving to the girl child in the school.

In explaining the different tasks allocated to them as girls in the home, 8 of the 20 girls (40%) claimed that they often fail to submit assignments on time due to the role conflict of the home and school. At home they are expected as girls to do basically all the household chores such as washing dishes and cleaning the kitchen after supper, whereas their brothers may be working on their school work. Due to fatigue from too much work in the home, girls often fail to accomplish homework and consequently face harassment by their teachers the next morning. Participants also pointed out that within their homes there are tasks that are deemed men-only and others women-only. Among the men-only tasks mentioned are herding cattle, woodcarving, building houses and cattle pens, whereas sweeping, cooking, doing dishes, laundry, sewing, and fetching water and firewood are considered women-only tasks. Many of the respondents shared these traditional gender-role beliefs. The respondents also indicated that both the home and the school tend to afford boys more opportunities for work compared to girls who are often pressed for time, especially for homework. At home, parents tend to afford boys more time and space for extra studies compared to girls who have to endure the dual burden of household chores and extra homework studies. The above findings correspond with those reported by Mosley (2004) and Mwaba (1992). Mosley, for example, reported that, in Ethiopia, cooking, cleaning and fetching water are considered feminine domains, whereas agricultural activities (mainly ploughing) are considered masculine roles. In another study, Mwaba (1992) found that a sample of South African secondary school boys and girls characterised housecleaning, nursing, and all sweeping as predominantly women-only jobs.

Enquiring whether participants believe that boys and girls should study similar school subjects and whether or not the proportion of female to male teachers in their schools has an impact on their career aspirations and whether or not they were happy attending co-educational as opposed to single sex schools, 12 respondents (60%) concurred that there is a need for gender equity in all learning areas or subjects if the curriculum is to be rendered gender neutral. Fourteen respondents (70%) concurred during the focus group discussion that the proportion of female to male teachers in their schools impacts negatively on their career aspirations. Asked to elaborate on this idea, the respondents pointed out that when they see more female teachers teaching in the Arts and Humanities Departments compared to the number of male teachers teaching in the sciences and technical departments, they tend to think that Arts and Humanities are female domains and that the Sciences and Technical divisions are male domains. The same is true when they see more male teachers in managerial portfolios in the school, as principals, heads of departments, senior teachers or sports masters compared to female teachers who often occupy positions at the infancy-school level and other subordinate positions in their schools.

Eight girls (40%) argued in favour of the notion of sexual division of labour on the grounds that it needs to be upheld in all curriculum issues so that the status quo of the stratified nature of society is maintained. The following is a sample response applauded by 40% of the respondents:

R 7: The streaming of learners into the different subject areas such as the Arts, Sciences, Commercial and Humanities is a necessary step towards preparing learners for the world of work where a clear division of labour is needed on the basis of the different competencies learners possess.

Twelve respondents (60%) did not take kindly to the above response on the grounds that it does not augur well for pupils, in particular girls, as it fosters an inferiority complex towards their boy counterparts not only in the school but also in the general occupational world. Eighteen respondents (90%) expressed happiness in being in co-educational as opposed to single-sex schools. In motivating their responses, they argued that co-educational schools afford them an opportunity to compete on an equal footing with their boy counterparts. They, however, lamented the attitudes of some teachers who tend to discourage this healthy competition and to deny girls the opportunity for learning equity in education.

Asked to make suggestions on ways to reduce the gender biases and prejudices prevalent in their school curricular, the participants made the following recommendations: schools need clear-cut measures to promote learning equity and reduce prejudices based on gender-role stereotypes. The Ministry of Education needs to ensure that teachers who abuse girls are not only blacklisted but also severely dealt

with. Teachers need to revamp their attitude towards girls' education and career aspirations so that they promote high aspirations for girls as much as they do for boys. Parents also need to give ample time to their girl children at home so that they can cope with schoolwork as opposed to overburdening them with household chores at the expense of study time. Girls need to be encouraged to be able to realise their full potential as human beings along with their boy counterparts.

Conclusion

The study concluded that the gender stereotyping of school subjects and careers coupled with teacher attitudes and expectations of girls' traditional gender roles are, to a large extent, responsible for the fate of girls' academic underachievement and consequent career trajectories. The study also concluded that one of the most important decisions human beings make early in life is the choice of their future careers. Although a variety of other factors influence girls' vocational choices, gender has emerged as the most powerful predictor of girls' future careers. Other influential aspects in their career choices include familial influences, perceived job importance, level of difficulty, salary, interest, security, suitability for subjects or education ability, prestige, easy, pleasant, white collar, desire for travel and long holidays. In terms of intervention strategies to mitigate the effects of gender-role stereotypes in the curriculum, the results of this study point to the need for the social institutions, in particular the family, school and workplace, to minimise gender-role stereotyping by encouraging girls to realise their full potential as human beings instead of accepting to be locked up in the traditional gender-stereotyped occupational world.

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