

# The Omnipresent Gendered Career Pathways for Women and the Role of Career Counsellors in Kenya

Ciriaka Muriithi Gitonga

Career Development Consultant, Career Development Association of Kenya (CDAK)  
P. O. Box 16724 00620, Nairobi, Kenya

**Abstract:** *Girls are socialised to grow knowing that their role is taking care of the families. The homemaking role continues to override women career aspirations among the Kenyan women. With emerging trends in the last three decades in Kenya, more girls have continued to access higher education with most studies showing that they still fall under the social sciences. Very few women enrol and complete training in science and technology fields at higher education. This paper examines the role of career counsellors in informing career decision-making process for girls to empower them to aspire fields in science fields, a Kenyan perspective.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Career, Counselling

## 1. Introduction

The societal changes that have taken place in last 50 years in Kenya have led to formal employment in Kenya being a critically important aspect in a woman's life span. Women constitute a significant population in the labour force and with the affirmative action actualised by the new constitution there more opportunities for women in employment. Women since time immemorial are assumed to find satisfaction with a husband being a breadwinner. However, this has changed significantly with several studies showing that women need more than provision from a husband to be satisfied.

Psychologists Freud (Erikson 1967) states that a psychologically well-adjusted human being male or female is able to love and work effectively. A woman is not just satisfied with internal family relationships but from the external interactions, which provide her an opportunity to use her talents and abilities. This paper seeks to explore some of the salient emerging issues that have continued to affect a woman's choice of a career to-date.

## 2. Traditional Perception of the Woman and its effect on career pathways

Traditionally a woman finds herself from formative years destined for homemaking responsibilities and they are perceived to be satisfied when they are at home with children. The home environment continues to restrict a woman display of their abilities and talents because such abilities can only be developed when she is given an opportunity to engage in a career pursuit activity just like men. Traditionally it was believed that a woman's need for self-realization could be achieved through childbearing or childrearing even though these two are very important. This is however no longer the case because these two events childbearing and rearing are time bound. The children grow and become independent of the mother. So what does a mother of two do once the child hits 18years? Studies show that homemakers who do not have other outlets for achievement or productivity are highly susceptible to

psychological disorders. There is evidence from the west world that show that the women who have an IQ of 170 will experience psychological distress if they remain unemployed after their children leave home. Similar studies have shown that married women are least psychologically affected after their children move on.

### 2.1 The woman's gift of multitasking provides a natural way for professional career

A woman can easily carry out multiple roles with great success. In actual facts women who work and take care of their homes have been reported to be satisfied (Bernett & Hyde, 2001). This is because the failure in one role can be compensated by success in another role. An extra income from a woman can cushion a family from one breadwinner syndrome. Women are able to thrive at work and home because they are able to development and maintain social support from the work environment, church, neighbourhood unlike men who depend only on the family support. In the end the workingwoman is able to remain psychologically well adjusted.

### 2.2 Woman participation in the omnipresent gendered career pathway

Even though women have made progress in penetrating the job market in last few decades in the male dominated professions such engineering, medical related fields, it is evident that majority of women will be found in pre-school and kindergarten, child-care, cleaners and servants, nurses, therapists and teaching fields. Males remain dominant in jua-kali sector, top government jobs, military, scientific and technical careers. The key questions that need to be raised in addressing these issues are:

1. How does a career counsellor help a girl or woman make a career decision that will be fulfilling, satisfying and economically sufficient?
2. How will a girl move away from the gendered subjects and stand out even when she will be alone?

3. Will the career counsellor prepare for sessions that will help girls view themselves not just as potential mothers and wives, but also as successful scientists, engineers, economists etc?

In an unpublished study conducted recently by (Gitonga, Orodho, Kigen & Wangeri, 2013), shows that female students prefer social sciences as opposed to science related field. To shed light on this existing patterns its important to examine the common barriers a young woman will encounter during career explorations stages. Career exploration is made up of six stages, which present challenges for the woman.

The socialised belief systems or behaviour patterns that girls and women receives from different socialization agents in the society lead them to avoiding certain career related activities especially if they are deemed masculine. At an early age girls develops math anxiety and avoidance. In most cases girls develop a sense of low self-esteem and in particular when they compare their performance with those of the boys. Yet the best career opportunities are mathematical based. Lack of a mathematical background is a major barrier for most women. In an unpublished study conducted recently by (Gitonga, Orodho, Kigen & Wangeri, 2013), in the engineering field there were 14.5% women compared to 85.5% males. The girls may have failed to choose the mathematical based subjects because they did not do well in it, yet it is one of the requirements in most of science related fields. In humanities the number of girls was high showing 66.9% women and 33.1% men in education. Yet, mastery of mathematics and science is essential for full participation in the world of work. Our society is increasingly becoming technological and therefore math will remain a significant filter. It is therefore important for career counsellors to help girls at formative age when career decisions are made to address women mathematics avoidance.

Self-efficacy is another filter central in career pathways for women. Social Cognitive proponents argue that self-efficacy, people believe about self and what they can achieve is critical in achieving a fulfilling career option. Bandura, (1997) states that self-efficacy produces certain behavioural tendencies in a person. Depending on the decision that needs to be made, a person can approach or avoid the situation, the quality of the performance will depend on what the person feels and views self and persistence is a product of self-perception. In career decision-making if a girls perceives themselves strong in a field, then they making the decision is much easier. However, feeling of low self-efficacy may result in completely avoiding some areas, attaining poor performance and generally an increased tendency to give up or get discouraged.

Studies show that women who scored lower in self-efficacy also avoided mathematics compared to men. Self-efficacy correlated significantly well with certain career fields such that a student who felt strong in mathematics opted for math based courses in the university. It is also evident that low self-efficacy correlated positively with traditionally male-dominated careers.

### 2.2.1 Gender stereotypes and occupational preferences

Stereotype is defined as fixed image that many people have of a particular type of a person or thing, which is often not the truth (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary). Stereotypical behaviour happens when a person forms a fixed idea about a persons or thing which may not really be true. Gender stereotypes affect girls/women detrimentally in a number of ways as reported by (Betz 2005) leading to believe that girls should prioritize homemaking and childbearing roles and de-emphasize their own educational achievement. This may lead to decreased aspirations in girls. Studies show that girls and boys begin with equally strong aspirations but those for girls decrease with time (Farmer, 1997).

Gender stereotypes lead women to believe that certain occupations suit men and others suit females. This is because children grow in social environments where comments like “do not climb the tree you are woman” “do not change the tyre, it’s a man jobs” “do not change the diaper it’s a woman’s job” are spoken repeatedly. This makes the children susceptible to these stereotypes and they will display them during their role-play. The age of 3years girls have incorporated gender roles in their growth pattern.

### 2.2.2 Gendered vocational Interests

Occupational choice is about matching traits to specific work environments. This is because of the reason that individuals differ in job related abilities or interests that job environment differ in the requirements. The job environment also attracts a specific kind of interest. The match or fit is so critical in the life of a person. Lofquist & Dawns (1991) theory of work adjustment argues that the abilities and aptitudes are important variables in job search. Similarly Holland (1997) argues that vocational interests are the major determinants in career choice. If this is the case then, using a career assessments tool it is possible for a career counsellor to generate educational or career options. In some of these tests, such as Holland’s SDS test, women have been reported to fall under social personality types as opposed to men who fall under the realistic fields may be due to their socialisations factor. In an unpublished study by (Gitonga, Orodho, Kigen & Wangeri, 2013) show that on personality classification most of the women were categorised as social while men as realistic or investigative on Holland’s personality type classification.

### 2.2.3 The nature and level of Education attained by women

The nature and level of education an individual attains influences the career achievements and the socio economic status that can be achieved. The level of education consequently influences the lifestyle one can attain. Today, the undergraduate degree is the bare minimum that one can attain. However in Kenya, majority of the woman are yet to attain this level. To become a professional a postgraduate or professional education is required (Betz 2005). In addition, earnings are based on the level of education one attains. Since education creates options and therefore the concept for choice, then the type and level of education is very

significant for a woman to be able to make a career decision just like men.

Studies in Kenya show that girls continue to drop out of school. Most of them continue to be disadvantaged in many ways. Girls receive much less attention, when such is given it tied with gender harassment, which is on the increasing. In higher education girls and women get differential treatment characterised by disparaging women's intellectual abilities. Girls are still advised to lower their academic and career goals and focus on family and homemaking concerns.

Women unlike men need encouragement to attain higher levels of education. However most women/girls find themselves in what (Freeman, 1979) calls the null education environment. This means that the female student is neither encouragement or discouraged but is just ignored. These effects leaves the individual is at the mercy of whatever the environment presents or personal resources. Such an environment inherently discriminates against the women since it fails to take into accounts the differentiating external environment from which men and women students comes from. Majority of the female students lack familial support, peer support and societal support. Female students do have to experience overt discrimination from a faculty member, it already exists from the society (Bix, 2004). Career oriented women/female student have to survive without much support from their environment. Discrimination continuously exist as omission or commission factors career counsellor are obligated to actively support women to mitigate against these harsh factors in-order to attain their career goals.

Eccle, (1987) stated that the omnipresence gender role prescription regarding appropriate female life choices remain the basis for female non-development from the traditional goals in the absence of encouragement from parents, peers, teachers and counsellors. Therefore females who receive support from family and especially mothers who are career, which are non-traditional will have higher aspirations. It is also evident that if a girls as strong male supporter and especially mentor they will tend to move away from the traditional career pathways (Betz, 2000, 2002). It is also evident that girls whose personality types demonstrate a high degree of instrumentality previously called masculinity (Farmer, 1997) are likely to make choice that reflect their independence of thought, self sufficiency and a feeling that they will cope with the choice. Bandura, (1997) describes this as self-efficacy. A female who displays the androgynous personality type will most likely appear to display a preference for non-traditional career options.

### 3. Implications on the Role of Career Counsellors

Educational and career counselling interventions for women in career pursuits is a critical role of the career counsellor if we are going to achieve gender equity within the Vision 2030 timelines. This is a challenge because this country still lacks a structured career counsellors training program that can inform practice. A career counsellor who appreciates the existence of stereotype socialization that girl continues to experience will prepare adequately to address the major blocks in a woman's career pursuit. Such a counsellor will develop a full range of career option available and use

research findings to empower their interventions. The career counsellor will need to:

- Have a clear understanding of the high quality and extensive education and training locally and abroad
- Encourage the female to appreciate mathematics as a background that opens options.
- Be clear in the role of helping clients to create new learning experiences for themselves as a catalyst.
- Will confront clients barriers to career goals and help them develop coping mechanisms and find ways of harnessing societal support.
- Be aware of the effects of the null environment and offer support
- Use existing carer theories to empower their practice

### References

- [1] Bandura, On Self-efficacy: The exercise of control, Freeman, New York. 1997.
- [2] R.C. Barnett & J. S. Hyder, On Women, men, work and family: An expansionist theory: American Psychologist 2001.
- [3] N.E. Betz, On Women career development weaving personal themes and theoretical constructs. Counselling Psychologists, 30, 467-481. 2002
- [4] S.A Bix, "From Engineers to "girl engineers" to "good engineers": A history of women's US Engineering Ed. National Women's studies Association Journal, 1b, 1, 27.49. 2004
- [5] J.S, Eccles, "Gender Roles and Women's Achievement-related decisions". Journal of Social Issues, 46, 183-201 1999
- [6] J.S Eccles, "Understanding women's education and occupational choices". Psychology of women quarterly 18: 585-609. 1994
- [7] H. S Farmer, Diversity and women's career development. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 1997
- [8] Francis, Is the future really female? The Impact and implication of gender for 14-16 years old career choice. Journal of Education and Work. Vol 15. No 1. 2002
- [9] B Francis, "The gendered subjects. Students subject preferences and discussions of gender and subject ability". Journal of Education and Work, Vol, 15, No. 1 2002. 2001
- [10] J. Freeman, "How to discriminate against women without trying": In J Freeman (Ed). A feminist perspective 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed: Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield 1979.
- [11] J. L Holland, Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments (3<sup>rd</sup>ed.). Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.1997
- [12] L, Lofquist, &R. Darwin, Essentials of person-environment correspondence counselling. Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press. 1991

### Author Profile



**Ciriaka Gitonga** is currently PhD student at Kenyatta University, Master of Education, Bachelor of Education from Kenyatta University 2002 and 1991 respectively. She is Global Career Development Instructor. Now, she is working for Career Development Association of Kenya.