



Influence Of Gender Norms On Career Aspirations In Middle School Girls

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Abstract: Career goals and choices are important parts of a person's growth. They are influenced by things like society, education, culture, personality, and work settings. Career decisions can greatly affect a person's life, for better or worse. These choices are often shaped by parents, friends, and the environment. Picking the right career is crucial for students starting professional education because it affects their future success. Research shows that gender plays a big role in career choices. Giving young people the right knowledge and tools helps them plan their futures realistically. This study looks at how gender norms affect career goals in middle school girls. It explores how gender norms shape career goals at a critical stage when societal expectations meet self-perception. It suggests a way to understand how stereotypes, reinforced by family, teachers, and media, limit girls' career choices, often making them ignore STEM fields. The paper calls for a broad approach to break these barriers, stressing the need for inclusive education, role models, and awareness programs. Using data from teenagers aged 13–18 from 1992 to 2025, this study examines changes in career goals, focusing on gender and race/ethnicity differences.

Keywords: Career aspirations, Gender norms. Middle school girls

I. INTRODUCTION

Choosing a career is a deal. It is very important for students who are just starting their education. The career they choose will affect their life and what they achieve in the future.. It seems that whether you are a boy or a girl plays a big role in what career you choose. Boys and girls tend to choose careers because they think about themselves in different ways. Even though more girls are going to college now boys and girls still tend to choose careers. This happens because boys and girls make choices about what they want to study and do. People often think that some subjects are for boys or just for girls. For example people think that math and science are for boys and arts are for girls. This is why most girls do not like to take math classes even though it's a required subject in school. There are reasons why this happens. Some of the reasons are because of fashioned ideas, differences between boys and girls and not having enough information about different careers. What people think and believe, what they know, how they live, what they want and what they need all affect what career they choose. This is a part of being human and it affects how people think, feel and act.

One area where this is a problem is when boys and girls in high school choose their careers. Kids start thinking about their careers early even in the first grade. What they choose shows what they have learned

from their families and society. Some girls do not want to be drivers or builders because people think those jobs are for boys. According to some ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman boys are supposed to be competitive and dominant and girls are supposed to choose careers that give them time to take care of their families. Usually what career you choose is because of how you were raised and what society expects from you. Schools are still not fair to girls especially when it comes to science and engineering. Girls do not have the access to education and training as boys and this makes them less likely to choose careers in those fields.

Your career is a part of your life. It does not just affect how money you make but also who you are as a person. One of the important things education can do is help students choose careers that are right for them. Choosing a career is a skill that everyone needs to learn. What you choose to do for a career will have an impact on your life. Being a boy or a girl plays a role in choosing a career. For girls they often choose careers because they do not think they can do certain jobs. What happens to kids when they are growing up including their relationships with their families and friends can affect what they are interested in and what they choose to do. This is especially true when it comes to careers, in science and technology.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The influence of gender norms on career aspirations in middle school girls has been extensively examined across various studies, highlighting how societal expectations and stereotypes shape young girls' perceptions of their future professional roles. Gender norms, often deeply ingrained in cultural and social frameworks, play a critical role in limiting or expanding the career possibilities that girls envision for themselves during formative years.

Self-efficacy beliefs mediate the relationship between gender norms and career aspirations, with girls with higher confidence in their abilities more likely to pursue careers in fields traditionally dominated by males (Eccles et al., 2000; Betz & Hackett, 1983). Middle school girls often receive subtle and overt cues from family and friends that shape their career aspirations, frequently steering them towards nurturing or communal professions (Eccles & Harold, 1991). Eccles (1994) proposed that gender stereotypes significantly affect children's self-concept and academic choices, suggesting that middle school girls internalize societal messages that certain careers are more appropriate for their gender. The intersectionality of gender and ethnicity is also crucial, with minority middle school girls often facing compounded challenges due to cultural gender norms and societal expectations (Fouad & Smith, 1996). Media representations also play a role in shaping gender norms, with limited and stereotypical portrayals of women in various careers restricting girls' perceptions of what is attainable (Blakemore & Centers, 2005). Socio-economic status intersects with gender norms, influencing access to resources and opportunities that shape career aspirations (Eccles, 2007). Parental and peer influences contribute substantially to the reinforcement of gender norms during adolescence (Leaper & Brown, 2008). Middle school girls' career aspirations are also influenced by the perceived compatibility of careers with family and caregiving roles, which are traditionally ascribed to women (Riegle-Crumb & Humphries, 2012).

Early adolescence is a critical period during which gender norms solidify and begin to shape long-term educational and occupational pathways (Eccles & Wang, 2016). This internalization often leads to the exclusion of traditionally male-dominated fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Cheryan et al. (2017) argued that the persistent stereotype that STEM fields are masculine discourages girls from aspiring to careers in these areas, reinforcing gender disparities in these professions. Indeed, early awareness of gender discrimination and differential treatment can lead to distinct aspirations for adulthood, with girls often imagining their future lives revolving around family responsibilities rather than solely career pursuits (Zambrano-Varghese, 2017).

The influence of gender norms on career aspirations in middle school girls is a complex issue, requiring multifaceted approaches involving family, school, media, and community to effectively challenge restrictive gender norms and support diverse career aspirations among middle school girls (Leaper & Starr, 2019). Nevertheless, substantial research confirms that gender stereotypes are a driving force behind career choices, leading girls to aspire to "feminine" professions in health, education, and domestic fields, while boys lean towards "masculine" careers in STEM (Korlat et al., 2022). Such societal influences manifest as early as middle school, where gender role socialization directs boys and girls towards differing values and occupational aspirations, often resulting in girls pursuing health and service sectors while boys gravitate toward engineering and computing fields (Özdemir & AS, 2022). This phenomenon is not merely an anecdotal observation but is substantiated by research indicating that girls' aspirations are molded by historically constructed social structures and categories that restrict their imaginative scope for future roles (Sandager, 2022). Gender disparities in career expectations often perpetuate traditional gender roles and stereotypes, with adolescent girls frequently gravitating towards professions such as medicine, law, and teaching, while boys tend to envision careers in policing, athletics, and engineering (Guo & Hau, 2024). This divergence in career interests, often reinforced by societal and familial pressures, underscores the profound influence of gender norms on shaping early career aspirations (Chebet, 2024).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Objectives of the Study

To study the factors that leading middle school girls about their career aspirations based on the gender.

2. Research Design

3.

A qualitative research design is well-suited to explore the complex and nuanced ways in which gender norms influence career aspirations among middle school girls. This approach emphasizes understanding participants' lived experiences, social contexts, and the meanings they assign to their career development, which is essential in investigating how gender expectations shape early adolescent girls' professional identities and ambitions. The design outlined here is intended to guide a conceptual review article that synthesizes qualitative findings and suggests directions for future research.

3. Research Purpose

The primary aim of this qualitative study is to deepen understanding of how middle school girls perceive, internalize, and respond to gender norms as they form their career aspirations. This study intends to provide a deep, conceptual interrogation of how "career" is constructed as a gendered identity during early adolescence. It seeks to capture the interplay between individual agency and social pressures across family, school, peer, and media contexts. The purpose of this qualitative conceptual study is to explore and deconstruct the nuanced ways in which gender norms shape, limit, and redefine the career aspirations of girls during the critical developmental window of middle school (ages 11–14).

3.1 Independent Variables

Gender norms — which include what society expects, stereotypes, family influence, media images, and school or peer pressure that affects what jobs are deemed appropriate for girls.

3.2 Dependent Variables

Career aspirations of middle school girls — the fields, professions, or career paths they consider for the future (e.g., choosing STEM or non-STEM fields, leadership roles, or jobs traditionally seen as "feminine")

IV. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Gottfredson's revised theory of circumscription and compromise. Consistent with the theory, it was predicted that individuals engaging in a low degree of compromise would place greatest importance on interests followed by prestige, and then sex-type. In a moderate degree of compromise situation, it was expected that individuals would place greatest importance on prestige followed by interests, and then sex-type. For individuals engaging in a high degree of compromise, sex-type was hypothesized to be most important followed by prestige, and then interests. Using a heterogeneous sample of 119 university students, partial support for Gottfredson's (1996) revised theory was found. Participants engaging in a low degree of career compromise placed greatest importance on interests, followed by prestige, and then sex-type. However, within the moderate and high compromise conditions, there were no significant differences between prestige and sex-type, although both were significantly greater than interests. It was concluded that more research investigating these changes is needed.

Eagly's (1987) social role theory argues that widely shared gender stereotypes develop from the gender division of labor that characterizes a society. In western societies, men's greater participation in paid positions of higher power and status and the disproportionate assignment of nurturant roles to women have created stereotypes that associate agency with men and communion with women. In addition, the gendered division of labor gives men and women differentiated skills. When gender stereotypes are salient in a group because of a mixed sex membership or a task or context that is culturally associated with one gender, stereotypes shape behavior directly through the expectations members form for one another's behavior. When group members enact social roles that are more tightly linked to the context than gender, such as manager and employee in the workplace, these more proximate roles control their behavior rather than gender stereotypes. Even in situations where gender stereotypes do not control behavior, however, men and women may still act slightly differently due to their gender differentiated skills.

In social cognitive theory human behavior is extensively motivated and regulated by the ongoing exercise of self-influence. The major self-regulative mechanism operates through three principal subfunctions. These include self-monitoring of one's behavior, its determinants, and its effects; judgment of one's behavior in relation to personal standards and environmental circumstances; and affective self-reaction. Self-regulation also encompasses the self-efficacy mechanism, which plays a central role in the exercise of personal agency by its strong impact on thought, affect, motivation, and action. The same self-regulative system is involved in moral conduct although compared to the achievement domain, in the moral domain the evaluative standards are more stable, the judgmental factors more varied and complex, and the affective self-reactions more intense.

V. CONCLUSION

The influence of gender norms on the career aspirations of middle school girls is a complex and multifaceted issue that has garnered increasing attention in educational research and social psychology. This conceptual review synthesizes a broad range of literature to elucidate how societal expectations, developmental factors, and interpersonal dynamics converge during early adolescence to shape and often restrict girls' professional ambitions. Middle school, typically encompassing ages 11 to 14, emerges not merely as a chronological phase but as a critical psychological "crossroads" where gender norms exert

profound influence, often narrowing the career horizons that girls envision for themselves. Understanding this phenomenon is essential for developing effective interventions that foster equitable career development and empower young girls to pursue their true potential.

The study discovered that there are differences in career choices and aspirations between girls and boys based on stereotypes on males' masculinity which make them suitable for certain careers compared to girls. Lack of financial support is one of the prominent factors which influences career choices among boys and girls. Those whose financial status and background are less likely to pursue costly careers even if their capabilities and interests dictate so. Other significant career influential factors include; examination results acquired at grade 12, personal interest, religious affiliation, teachers and parents as both guiders and role models, family, and friends or peers. These factors have varying impacts on differences in career choices and aspirations among boys and girls. Stereotypes were discovered to have a negative effect on career aspirations and choices because they promote males in more ambitious careers such as engineering, medicine, computer studies and others while side-lining females to soft and easier careers such as nursing, hotel management and other careers which are more home oriented. However, it was also discovered that these beliefs are fading in the face of modern change.

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