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PARTICIPATION IMPLICATIONS OF A-LEVEL LEARNERS' SUBJECT PERCEPTIONS

GENDER INSIGHTS FROM SELECTED SCHOOLS OF MASVINGO DISTRICT, ZIMBABWE

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Abstract : This study explored the impact of gendered perceptions on the academic participation of A-Level learners in selected schools within Masvingo District, Zimbabwe. The research addressed persistent gender disparities in academic engagement, often exacerbated by entrenched stereotypes shaping learners' subject choices. The primary objective was to examine how these gendered perceptions influence learners' academic experiences, particularly their participation in various subject areas. The study's significance lies in its potential to inform educational policy and practice, focusing on promoting educational gender equity. Guided by the constructionist philosophy (interpretive paradigm) and conceptually framed within James Lull's (2011) Theory of Gendered Hegemony, the study employed a cross-case design within a qualitative approach, using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with learners, qualitative interviews with teachers, and documentary analysis of class registers and participation records from two schools. Despite limitations such as potential biases in self-reported data and challenges in generalising findings, the study provides critical insights for educational policy. Narrative analysis reveals that A-Level girls and boys encounter distinct barriers linked to societal gender roles, resulting in significant differences in subject participation. The findings highlight some progress made through targeted interventions and inclusive teaching practices. Recommendations for educational practitioners and policymakers include implementing gender-sensitive teaching strategies, professional development to challenge biases, and school-wide programmes fostering participation free from gendered expectations, promoting equitable academic engagement.

Index Terms **– Gender, Perceptions, Participation, Subject Selection, Stereotypes, A-Level Education**

I. INTRODUCTION

Gendered perceptions significantly shape the academic trajectories of learners (CAMFED, 2023), often dictating their subject choices (Kabweza, 2021; UN Women, 2021a) and influencing their overall academic engagement (Ruche and Ndlela, 2020; Ngwenya, Moyo and Sibanda, 2021; People for Education, 2022). Despite ongoing efforts to promote gender equality in education, societal expectations and entrenched stereotypes continue to guide these decisions, with boys frequently nurtured towards science and mathematics and girls towards arts and humanities (Moyo, Tshabalala and Ncube, 2021). These choices, rooted more in societal norms than in individual interests or abilities, not only limit the learners' potential but also perpetuate gender disparities in subject participation (Ruche and Ndlela, 2020; Ndlovu, 2021).

This article examines the participation implications of these gendered subject perceptions among A-Level learners, focusing on how such perceptions impact subject engagement and academic opportunities. The study begins by exploring the research problem, outlining the objectives and reviewing relevant literature surrounding educational gender dynamics. The methodology section details the qualitative approach and the comparative case study design employed, including FGDs with learners, interviews with teachers and documentary analysis. Following this, the findings section presents an analysis of the data, highlighting the distinct challenges faced by A-Level girls and boys in different subject areas and the impact of these challenges on their subject participation. The discussion then considers the progress made in narrowing the gender gap, assessing the effectiveness of targeted interventions and inclusive teaching practices. The article concludes with a set of recommendations aimed at educators and policymakers, suggesting strategies for fostering a more gender-inclusive learning environment that promotes equal subject participation for all learners.

II. NEED OF THE STUDY

The influence of gender on academic participation has been extensively studied, with research consistently highlighting how societal expectations shape the learners' academic trajectories. Studies by Mwadada (2020) and Ruche and Ndlela (2020) have shown that boys often gravitate towards subjects perceived as prestigious, such as those in STEM fields, driven by societal notions

of masculinity and future career success. This aligns with broader patterns observed in various educational contexts worldwide, where subject choices are heavily influenced by gendered perceptions (Mwebaza, 2020; United Nations Programme for Women - UNFPA, 2021; Moyo, 2022; Marufu and Chisango, 2023), ultimately affecting the learners' subject engagement, which formed part of the current study.

For girls, these gendered perceptions have a notably detrimental effect. As highlighted by Chari (2023) and Ndlovu and Chikohomero (2023), societal expectations discourage girls from engaging with STEM subjects, leading to their underrepresentation in these fields. This reluctance is often rooted in stereotypes that portray STEM as inherently masculine (Chimoto, 2023), which undermines girls' confidence and limits their academic engagement in these areas. Consequently, girls often participate more actively in arts and humanities, where they face fewer societal barriers (Moyo, 2022; Tang, Meltzoff, Cheryan, et al., 2024), but their potential in STEM subjects remains largely untapped, necessitating the current study.

Boys, on the other hand, face their own set of challenges. The societal pressure to excel in STEM subjects, as well as to embody traits such as competitiveness and assertiveness, can lead to increased stress and anxiety (World Bank, 2022; CAMFED, 2023; Chimoto, 2023). These pressures often result in boys participating less actively in subjects that require emotional intelligence or collaborative skills, such as languages or arts, where they may perceive themselves as less capable (Hlaise, 2023). This dynamic potentially contributes to a gender gap in participation across different subject areas, which the current study sought to ascertain.

Despite these challenges, there has been progress in closing the gender gap in academic participation. Targeted interventions, such as gender-sensitive teaching practices (Konyana and Motalenyane, 2022) and efforts to promote inclusivity (Mwadada, 2020), have started to yield positive results. For instance, programmes that encourage girls to pursue STEM subjects have shown promising outcomes, as have initiatives aimed at reducing the stigma associated with boys engaging in traditionally feminine subjects (Kabweza, 2022).

However, significant gaps remain in available literature. The persistence of gendered perceptions continues to hinder the full realisation of gender equality in education (Moyo et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2021; Carvalho, 2022). There is a need for ongoing efforts to address these perceptions at all levels of the educational system, ensuring that both girls and boys can engage with all subjects free from the constraints of societal expectations (Bhunu and Green, 2023). This study builds on the existing literature by exploring these dynamics in the specific context of A-Level learners in selected schools, offering insights into both the progress made and the challenges that remain in closing the gender gap in subject participation.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was guided by Constructive Interpretivism, which posits that reality is constructed through social processes and interactions, making it an ideal lens for exploring gendered perceptions in education (Carlstrom, 2022). This approach allowed for a deep understanding of how A-Level learners in Masvingo District navigate and interpret gendered expectations in their academic environment.

The study employed a qualitative methodology, chosen for its strength in uncovering the complexities of human experiences and perceptions (Chowdhury and Shil, 2021). The research design was a cross-case study, which enabled the comparison of gendered perceptions across different contexts within the same district, thus enriching the understanding of the issue (Holland, 2021; Tsimba, Mugoniwa and Mutembedza, 2022).

Data collection methods included FGDs, interviews and documentary analysis. The FGDs involved 24 A-Level learners from two schools, selected through purposive sampling. This sampling method ensured a diverse representation of gender, subject choices and socio-economic backgrounds. The FGD tool was particularly effective in capturing the ways in which learners experience gendered perceptions (US National Centre for Postsecondary Improvement, 2020; Tümen, 2020). Teacher interviews were conducted with 10 A-Level educators, providing insights into how gendered perceptions are reinforced or challenged in the classroom. These interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in exploring different aspects of gendered academic experiences (Holland, 2021). Documentary analysis focused on class registers and participation records from the selected schools. This method offered objective data on enrolment patterns and subject engagement, which were crucial for triangulating the findings from FGDs and interviews (Velazco, Hinostroza, Moreno, Cerda and Barros, 2022).

Data were analysed thematically using narrative analysis, a method that helps identify and interpret patterns within qualitative data (Delve and Limpaecher, 2020). Themes were developed inductively from the data, with particular attention to how gendered perceptions influenced subject selection and academic participation. This approach allowed for a detailed exploration of the intersection between gender attitudes and educational engagement, contributing to the existing literature on gender dynamics in academic settings.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Learners' Academic Participation in Light of Their Subject Perceptions

The study revealed a strong connection between learners' academic participation and their perceptions of subjects, which are significantly influenced by gendered expectations. The FGDs with learners highlighted the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes on subject perceptions. Boys frequently described subjects like literature and languages as "soft" (Boy 2, FGD2; Boy 5, FGD2) or "feminine," (Boy2 FGD1; Boy 3, FGD2; Boy 6, FGD1) leading to a lack of motivation and reduced engagement in these areas. Many boys admitted to prioritising subjects they perceived as more aligned with traditional masculine roles, such as Mathematics and Science, even when their abilities were stronger in other areas. Teachers tended to corroborate this seeing (Male Teacher 3, School 1; Female Teacher 1, School 1; Female Teacher 3, School 2). This aligns with findings by Ruche and Ndlela (2020), who note that boys often pursue subjects that confer social prestige rather than those where they might excel academically.

On the other hand, girls in the FGDs expressed a lack of confidence in STEM subjects, which they often associated with boys. Despite acknowledging their potential, many girls felt discouraged from fully engaging in these subjects due to societal expectations (Girl 3, FGD1; Girl 5, FGD1; Girl 2, FGD2) and a perceived lack of support (Girl 2, FGD1; Girl 6, FGD2). Female Teacher 4 from School 2 and Male Teacher 4 from School 1 upheld the sentiment that A-Level girls felt discouraged from participating in Science classes due to the female inferiority complex prevailing in their communities. This mirrors the findings of Chari (2023), who observes that gendered perceptions contribute to lower self-esteem among girls in STEM, negatively impacting their participation.

Teachers added that boys and girls approach subjects differently based on ingrained gender norms (Female Teacher 1, School 1; Female Teacher 3, School 2; Male Teacher 2, School 1). This observation aligns with the findings of Ngwenya et al. (2021), who note that boys often disengage from arts subjects which they associate with femininity, leading to lower academic engagement in these areas. Conversely, teachers in this study noted that girls often shy away from participating in STEM classes as already mentioned above, a trend also highlighted by Sullivan (2021), who discusses how educators' biases might unconsciously reinforce these gendered expectations, thereby perpetuating the cycle of gendered subject preferences.

Teachers also highlighted the challenges of addressing these perceptions within the classroom, noting that despite efforts to encourage all learners equally, societal norms often prevail (Male Teacher 3, School 1; Male Teacher 1, School 2, Female Teacher 1, School 2). These observations are consistent with Mwadada (2020), who emphasises the role of educators in either perpetuating or challenging gendered stereotypes in the classroom. The study suggests that while teachers are aware of the impact of gender on subject perception, there is a need for more targeted interventions to support both girls and boys in overcoming these biases.

The documentary analysis provided significant support for the qualitative findings from the learner FGDs and teacher interviews. Class registers and participation records showed clear patterns of gendered subject enrolment and engagement outcomes. These findings are consistent with the work of Bartlett (2022), who observes similar trends in gendered subject choices, where boys are underrepresented in most arts subjects and exhibited reduced participation in these areas. Similarly, girls in this study were underrepresented in STEM subjects and, even when enrolled, tended to engage less compared to boys, a pattern also highlighted by Nyamanhindi (2022b) in a study on gender and STEM education.

These trends also reflect broader national and regional patterns identified in previous studies, such as those by Ndlovu and Chikohomero (2023), who find that gendered enrolment patterns are a significant factor in participation disparities across subject areas. The analysis also highlighted areas where progress has been made in closing the gender gap, with one of the participating schools showing increased enrolment of girls in STEM subjects. However, these gains were not uniformly reflected in participation levels, suggesting that while an increasing number of girls chose STEM, they still faced challenges that thwarted their full engagement in these areas.

The triangulation of these current findings with past literature reinforces the notion that gendered perceptions significantly impact learners' academic participation. Previous studies, such as those by Ruche and Ndlela (2020) and Chari (2023), have documented similar trends, where girls and boys are steered towards or away from certain subjects based on societal expectations. The current study adds to this body of knowledge by providing specific insights from Zimbabwe's Masvingo District, illustrating how these dynamics play out in a local context.

4.2 How Gendered Perceptions Have Affected Girls' Participation

Gendered perceptions have significantly impacted girls' academic participation, particularly in subjects traditionally viewed as boy-dominated, such as STEM. The FGDs revealed that "societal expectations often pressure girls to conform to traditional gender roles" (Girl 6, FGD1), which affects their engagement in STEM subjects. Many girls reported feeling that STEM fields were not for them (Girl, 2, FGD1; Girl 5, FGD2) or that they were less capable compared to boys (Girl 4, FGD1, Girl 4, FGD2, Girl 6, FGD2). This internalisation of gender stereotypes led to a lack of confidence and decreased motivation in these subjects. For example, girls who had previously shown an interest in STEM were frequently dissuaded by peers, family or teachers (Boy 2, FGD2), which diminished their academic engagement. This finding is consistent with the research by Ndlovu and Chikohomero (2023), who find that societal expectations significantly impact girls' confidence and participation in STEM areas.

Interviews with teachers provided further insight into how gendered perceptions affected girls' participation. The teachers observed that many girls were reluctant to participate actively in STEM classes (Male Teacher 1, School 1; Female Teacher 2, School 2), often preferring to take on less challenging subjects perceived as more suitable for their gender (Female Teacher 1, School 1). Teachers noted that this reluctance was sometimes compounded by a lack of encouragement or support for girls in these subjects (Male teacher 4, School 1), which can reinforce the belief that STEM fields are not appropriate for them. Teachers also highlighted that girls who attempted STEM subjects often struggled with low self-confidence, impacting their overall engagement (Female Teacher 3, School 2). This finding echoes Chari (2023), who notes that the lack of confidence among girls in STEM is a critical barrier to their academic participation and success.

The class registers and participation records corroborated the above qualitative findings. Data indicated that girls generally engaged less in STEM subjects compared to boys, despite having similar enrolment rates. Participation records from the two schools revealed that while girls were increasingly enrolling in STEM subjects, their engagement levels were often lower than those of boys. This suggests that their gendered perceptions were not merely a matter of subject choice but also affected their actual participation. The lower levels of engagement among girls in STEM subjects highlighted a persistent gap that aligns with the trends identified by Ruche and Ndlela (2020), who find that gender stereotypes continue to hinder girls' participation in fields traditionally dominated by boys.

4.3 How Gendered Perceptions Have Affected Boys' Participation

Gendered perceptions have also had a considerable impact on boys' academic participation, particularly in subjects that diverge from traditional masculine expectations. The FGDs highlighted that "societal expectations for boys to excel in STEM subjects often resulted in undue pressure and stress" (Girl 3, FGD1). Many boys reported feeling compelled to prioritise STEM subjects to meet these expectations, even when they had a genuine interest or aptitude for other subjects (Boy 5, FGD1; Boy 6, FGD2). This pressure sometimes led to burnout and a decline in overall academic participation. For instance, some boys expressed frustration over their lack of enthusiasm (Boy 2, FGD2) or poor participation in arts subjects which they perceived as less masculine (Boy 2, FGD1). This phenomenon aligns with the findings of Chari (2023), who observes that gendered expectations can lead to disengagement and reduced academic participation in subjects that do not align with traditional gender norms.

Interviews with teachers revealed that the pressure on boys to excel in STEM subjects often resulted in a lack of support and encouragement for pursuing alternative subjects. The educators noted that boys who showed interest in arts frequently faced "ridicule from peers and sometimes even from teachers," (Female Teacher 1, School 1) reinforcing the stereotypical notion that these subjects were not suitable for them. This lack of encouragement contributed to lower enrolment and participation in some of these areas. Teachers also observed that boys who engaged in arts often struggled with "low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy," (Male Teacher 2, School 2) further impacting their academic outcomes. This observation is consistent with the research by Ndlovu and Chikohomero (2023), which highlights the detrimental effects of gendered expectations on boys' confidence and academic engagement.

The analysed documents provided first-hand evidence of the impact of gendered perceptions on boys' participation. The data revealed that boys generally participated less in Arts subjects compared to their participation in STEM subjects. Despite having comparable or even higher potential in Arts subjects, the societal pressure to excel in STEM resulted in lower academic outcomes for boys in areas where they might have otherwise excelled. This trend reflects the findings of Mwadada (2020) and Ruche and Ndlela (2020), who report that gendered expectations significantly affect boys' academic participation across different subjects.

Overall, the findings in this section reinforce existing literature that highlights the impact of gendered perceptions on boys' academic participation. Research by Mwadada (2020) and Ruche and Ndlela (2020) shows that societal expectations can impose significant pressure on boys, leading to stress and burnout, particularly in subjects outside traditional gender norms. The current study illustrates how such pressures can discourage boys from pursuing and participating in subjects where they might have otherwise performed better.

4.4 Noted Progress in Closing the Gender Gap in Participation

The study highlights several significant strides made in closing the gender gap in academic participation, reflecting positive changes in how gendered perceptions influence subject engagement and outcomes. In the FGDs, the learners reported notable improvements in their academic experiences due to targeted initiatives aimed at addressing gender disparities. For example, the establishment of STEM clubs (Girl 2, FGD 1; Boy 1, FGD2) and mentorship programmes (Girl 4, FGD2) has been particularly effective in boosting girls' confidence and participation in traditionally masculinised subjects. The girls shared positive experiences of receiving support from role models of successful women (Girl 1, FGD1; Girl 6, FGD2), which helped them overcome societal stereotypes and increased their engagement in STEM fields. In a similar way, Chari (2023) also emphasises the importance of role models and mentorship in mitigating gender-based participation disparities.

Teachers observed that gender sensitivity training for staff and inclusive teaching practices have played a crucial role in narrowing the participation gap between boys and girls. "Training programmes have equipped teachers with the skills to address unconscious biases and create a more supportive learning environment for all the learners," (Male Teacher 2, School 1). Educators noted that such training has led to more equitable encouragement and support for both girls and boys, thereby challenging traditional gender norms and fostering a more inclusive academic atmosphere. Additionally, Female Teacher 3 from School 2 said, "Gender-neutral career guidance has contributed to a more balanced representation of girls and boys across various subjects." These findings are consistent with the work of Ndlovu and Chikohomero (2023), who highlight the positive impact of inclusive practices on reducing gender disparities in academic participation. The documentary analysis revealed that in one of the schools, which implemented more inclusive teaching practices and gender-neutral career guidance, there was a more balanced distribution of subject enrolment and participation. Data from class registers and participation records showed an increase in girls' participation and success in STEM subjects for this school, alongside a more balanced distribution of boys across Arts subjects. This progress reflects the effectiveness of interventions designed to address gendered perceptions and encourage a more diverse range of academic interests among learners. This trend supports the observations of Mwadada (2020) and Ruche and Ndlela (2020), who note that targeted initiatives can help mitigate gender-based participation gaps.

The observed progress aligns with broader trends reported in the literature, where targeted interventions and inclusive practices have successfully contributed to closing the gender gap in academic participation. Initiatives such as STEM clubs and mentorship programmes have been shown to enhance girls' engagement and participation in STEM fields, while gender sensitivity training for educators and inclusive career guidance have promoted a more balanced academic environment (Chari, 2023; Ndlovu & Chikohomero, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of continued efforts to address gender disparities through strategic interventions and supportive practices.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a detailed exploration of how gendered perceptions shape academic participation among A-Level learners in Masvingo District, Zimbabwe. The findings reflect the complex ways in which societal expectations influence subject choices and the academic experiences of both boys and girls. In particular, the research highlights how boys, influenced by societal pressure to excel in traditionally masculine subjects such as STEM, experience stress and burnout, while girls face discouragement in male-dominated fields like STEM, resulting in under-participation despite their potential.

Lull's (2011) Theory of Gendered Hegemony, which posits that gendered norms are sustained through societal structures, media representations and educational practices, offers a useful framework for understanding the patterns observed in the current study. According to Lull, gendered hegemony is a dominant system of power that reinforces traditional gender roles, limiting individuals' participation in areas outside these roles. In the context of this study, the findings largely confirm this theory, particularly in how gendered expectations limit boys' and girls' academic participation and choices.

For boys, the pressure to excel in STEM subjects aligns with Lull's concept of hegemonic masculinity, which valorises traits such as rationality, strength and intellectual prowess typically associated with science and technology. These expectations are ingrained in societal norms and are reinforced through both peer interactions and educational practices. Boys who express an interest in Arts subjects, which are viewed as less masculine, face ridicule and stigma, confirming Lull's theory that the educational system perpetuates gendered hierarchies by discouraging deviation from gender norms. As a result, boys often find themselves participating less in non-STEM subjects, despite having the potential for success in these areas.

For girls, the findings reveal the effect of societal expectations that link femininity with Arts and less academically demanding subjects. The study corroborates Lull's theory in that girls are subtly pushed away from STEM fields by gendered norms, which dictate that such fields are primarily for boys. Despite evidence of interest and aptitude in STEM, many girls feel discouraged and lack the confidence to pursue these subjects, which further diminishes their academic participation in these areas.

However, the study also highlights important strides made towards challenging these gendered expectations, such as the establishment of STEM clubs and mentorship programmes aimed at encouraging more girls to engage in STEM. These interventions reflect a challenge to Lull's hegemonic gender norms, providing alternative narratives that allow girls to participate more fully in traditionally masculine subjects. This progress, although promising, indicates that Lull's theory still holds significant relevance, as these gendered norms remain deeply entrenched, requiring continuous efforts to dismantle them.

In conclusion, the current study largely supports Lull's Theory of Gendered Hegemony, confirming that gendered expectations continue to shape academic participation among A-Level learners. The findings illustrate how societal structures and educational practices reinforce gendered stereotypes, limiting both girls' and boys' engagement in subjects outside their traditional gender roles. While progress is being made through targeted initiatives, the persistence of these gender norms suggests that more systemic changes are necessary to ensure that all learners can fully engage in academic subjects based on their interests and abilities, free from the constraints of gendered expectations.

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