

An Analysis of Gender Differences in Career Aspirations among Mentees in Public Universities in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Career aspirations play a critical role in shaping students' educational and professional trajectories. However, many university students graduate without clearly defined career aspirations due to inadequate career guidance and mentorship opportunities. This study sought to establish career aspirations of student mentees and determine the influence of gender in career aspirations among student mentees in public universities in Kenya. The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design. Ten public universities were purposively selected from the 33 accredited public universities in Kenya, representing 32% of the target population. A sample of 309 student mentees was selected using stratified and simple random sampling techniques. Data were collected using a Career Aspirations Questionnaire. Prior to hypothesis testing, tests of normality and homogeneity of variance revealed that the data violated the assumptions required for parametric analysis. Consequently, the Mann–Whitney U test was employed to examine gender differences in career aspirations. The findings revealed a statistically significant difference in career aspirations between male and female student mentees, with male students reporting higher career aspiration scores than their female counterparts ($U = 9163.00$, $Z = -3.20$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, while inferential statistics were used to test the study hypothesis. The study concludes that gender significantly influences the career aspirations of student mentees in public universities in Kenya. The findings underscore the need for universities to implement gender-responsive mentorship and career development programmes aimed at fostering equitable career aspirations among students.

Keywords—Career Aspirations, Gender Differences, Mentee, Mentor, Mentorship, Public Universities.

INTRODUCTION

Gender disparities in educational outcomes continue to be a significant global concern despite decades of policy interventions aimed at promoting equality. Research consistently demonstrates that males and females differ in their educational preferences, occupational interests, and career aspirations, resulting in persistent gender segregation across professions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). Although substantial progress has been made in expanding educational opportunities for both genders, occupational choices remain strongly influenced by societal expectations, cultural norms, and gender stereotypes. Consequently, women continue to be underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) careers, while men remain underrepresented in fields such as education, health care, and social services.

Evidence from the World Economic Forum (WEF) indicates that gender inequalities in occupational participation remain prevalent across regions of the world. The Global Gender Gap Report revealed that males are disproportionately represented in technical and engineering professions, whereas females dominate professions related to education, hospitality, and caregiving (WEF, 2018). Similarly, the OECD (2017) reported

that gendered career aspirations are already evident among adolescents as young as fifteen years, suggesting that occupational preferences are formed long before individuals enter the labour market. More recently, the Global Gender Gap Report estimated that, at the current rate of progress, achieving full gender parity in economic participation and opportunity may take more than a century (WEF, 2022). These findings underscore the need for sustained efforts to understand factors that influence career aspirations among young people and to identify interventions capable of reducing gender-based occupational disparities.

Career aspirations constitute an important aspect of psychosocial development and are closely linked to educational attainment, career planning, and future occupational success (Curtin et al., 2016). Career aspirations refer to an individual's long-term occupational goals, ambitions, or desired professional achievements. They represent future-oriented expectations that influence educational choices, skill development, and career-related decision-making. During university education, students are provided with opportunities to explore career interests, acquire professional competencies, and evaluate various occupational pathways. Consequently, the university period represents a critical stage for the formation and refinement of career aspirations.

The development of career aspirations is influenced by both personal and contextual factors. According to social cognitive and career development perspectives, individuals form career aspirations based on their beliefs regarding their abilities, interests, self-concept, and perceived compatibility with particular occupations (Jones et al., 2013; Lane et al., 2012). These perceptions are often shaped by societal beliefs about gender roles and occupational suitability. As a result, certain careers may be viewed as more appropriate for one gender than the other. Research has shown that when individuals perceive a profession as inconsistent with their gender identity or believe that members of their gender are less capable of succeeding in a particular occupation, they are less likely to develop aspirations toward that career path (Cundiff et al., 2013; Neuhaus & Borowski, 2018). Such perceptions contribute to the persistence of gendered career trajectories and occupational segregation. Consequently, males and females frequently adjust their educational and career aspirations to align with prevailing social expectations and stereotypes (Makarova et al., 2019; Ramsey, 2017).

Mentorship has emerged as one of the most effective interventions for supporting students' academic, personal, and career development. Mentoring relationships provide psychosocial support, career guidance, role modelling, and opportunities for personal growth, thereby enhancing students' confidence, academic performance, and career planning abilities (Bayer et al., 2013; Bonin, 2013; Collier, 2017; Curtin et al., 2016). Effective mentoring enables young people to develop self-awareness, identify career opportunities, and cultivate the competencies necessary for career success. Moreover, mentoring has been associated with improved educational outcomes, increased self-efficacy, stronger career commitment, and greater aspirations for professional advancement (Hamilton et al., 2019; Meltzer & Saunders, 2020). Through exposure to mentors and career-related experiences, mentees are better positioned to make informed decisions about their future occupations.

Despite the documented benefits of mentorship, evidence regarding its influence on gender differences in career aspirations remains inconclusive. While mentoring programmes are designed to promote equal opportunities and broaden career horizons, societal and cultural gender norms may continue to shape the aspirations of mentees differently. Existing studies suggest that gender stereotypes may persist even among highly supported and academically successful students, influencing their perceptions of career suitability and future occupational goals (Gutman & Schoon, 2012; Makarova et al., 2019). This raises important questions regarding whether mentorship interventions are equally effective in shaping the career aspirations of male and female students.

In Kenya, higher education institutions play a critical role in preparing students for the labour market and national development. The university sector is regulated by the Commission for University Education (CUE), which is mandated to ensure relevance in higher education programmes. However, concerns have been raised regarding the alignment between students' educational experiences and their career trajectories. Factors such as inadequate career guidance, limited exposure to career information, socio-cultural expectations, peer influence, and labour market perceptions continue to influence students' career aspirations. These challenges are particularly significant among students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may have limited access to professional networks and career development opportunities.

One initiative that seeks to address these challenges is the Education for All Children (EFAC) mentorship programme. The programme provides structured mentoring, life-skills training, career guidance, psychosocial support, and educational assistance to academically talented students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Reports from the programme indicate improved academic achievement, increased tertiary education transition rates, and enhanced personal development among beneficiaries. While these outcomes demonstrate the potential value of mentorship interventions, limited empirical evidence exists regarding gender differences in the career aspirations of students participating in such programmes.

Given the persistent global concern regarding gender disparities in occupational outcomes and the growing importance of mentorship in higher education, it is essential to examine whether gender differences in career aspirations continue to exist among university students who have received mentoring support. Understanding these differences may provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of mentorship programmes in promoting equitable career development and inform policy and practice aimed at enhancing career guidance interventions. Therefore, this study sought to examine gender differences in career aspirations among mentees enrolled in public universities in Kenya.

Objectives of the Study

To assess the career aspirations of mentees in Kenyan public universities.

To determine the influence of gender on the career aspirations of mentees in Kenyan public universities.

Research Hypothesis

H₀: There is no statistically significant difference in career aspirations between male and female mentees in Kenyan public universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Career aspirations constitute an important predictor of educational attainment, career success, and future earnings. Young people who develop high career aspirations are more likely to pursue higher levels of education, secure meaningful employment, and achieve better socioeconomic outcomes in adulthood (Gutman & Schoon, 2011). However, career aspirations are shaped by a range of individual, social, and contextual factors, among which gender remains one of the most significant determinants (Nadeem & Khalid, 2018). Existing literature suggests that males and females often differ in their perceptions of career opportunities, occupational preferences, career certainty, and expectations regarding future employment prospects. These differences are influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by broader sociocultural contexts that define gender roles and occupational expectations (Abbasi & Sarwat, 2014; Nadeem & Khalid, 2018).

Research across diverse cultural settings consistently demonstrates significant gender disparities in career aspirations. In the United Kingdom, Gutman and Schoon (2012), using longitudinal data from over 8,300 adolescents aged 16–18 years, found that female participants exhibited greater certainty regarding their future careers than their male counterparts. Similarly, a study conducted in Pakistan by Nadeem and Khalid (2018) reported significantly higher career aspirations among female college students than males. The authors attributed these findings to increasing acceptance of women pursuing non-traditional careers and changing societal attitudes toward female participation in the labour market. Comparable findings were reported in Oman, where Al-Bahrani et al. found that female secondary school students demonstrated more ambitious career aspirations than males. Collectively, these studies challenge traditional assumptions that males necessarily exhibit stronger career ambitions and suggest that shifting educational and labour-market opportunities may be contributing to greater career optimism among young women.

Evidence from educational transitions further indicates that gender differences in career aspirations emerge early and persist throughout the educational trajectory. Kang et al. (2019), in a Finnish study involving adolescents transitioning into secondary education, observed significant gender-based differences in career interests and subject preferences. Female students demonstrated stronger interests in biological sciences and people-oriented

occupations, whereas males were more inclined toward physics and chemistry-related careers. These findings align with broader international research showing that gender socialization processes often channel males and females toward different occupational pathways. Nevertheless, while the study highlighted disparities in occupational interests, it did not establish whether one gender possessed higher overall career aspirations than the other. This leaves unanswered questions regarding the persistence of such differences at higher levels of education, particularly among university students preparing to enter the labour market.

The role of social support and mentoring in shaping career aspirations has also attracted growing scholarly attention. Studies suggest that mentoring positively influences young people's educational and occupational ambitions, although outcomes may vary by gender. Research by DuBois et al. (2011), Kupersmidt et al. (2017), and Raposa et al. (2019) indicates that male youth often derive greater benefits from mentoring relationships than females. Such findings are particularly noteworthy in contemporary contexts where significant efforts have been directed toward enhancing educational access and labour-market participation for women. The differential effects of mentoring suggest that gender may moderate the relationship between developmental interventions and career aspirations, thereby warranting further investigation. Moreover, contextual influences such as cultural expectations, family beliefs, and societal norms may shape both mentoring experiences and career outcomes differently for males and females (Abbasi & Sarwat, 2014).

Within the African context, evidence similarly points to gendered patterns in career aspirations. In Kenya, Migunde et al. (2012) found significant differences among secondary school students, with female learners expressing preferences for people-oriented careers while males gravitated toward occupations involving tools, machinery, and technical operations. Although these findings provide valuable insights into career preferences among adolescents, they do not adequately capture the aspirations of university students who are at a more advanced stage of career development and closer to labour-market entry. Furthermore, most existing studies have focused on adolescents in secondary schools or college settings, predominantly within Western, Asian, or Middle Eastern contexts. Comparatively few studies have examined gender differences in career aspirations among undergraduate students in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly within mentoring programmes designed to facilitate career development.

Mentoring has emerged as a critical intervention for enhancing young people's career development, particularly during educational transitions and labour market preparation. Through guidance, role modelling, psychosocial support, and exposure to professional networks, mentors can help mentees clarify career goals and strengthen their occupational aspirations. Existing studies suggest that mentoring contributes positively to career-related self-efficacy, educational persistence, and career planning. However, evidence regarding gender differences in mentoring outcomes remains inconclusive.

While some studies report stronger mentoring effects among male youth, others indicate that female mentees benefit substantially when mentoring relationships challenge traditional gender stereotypes and provide access to non-traditional career role models. These mixed findings suggest that gender may influence both the nature and effectiveness of mentoring relationships. Therefore, examining career aspirations within the context of mentoring programmes provides an important opportunity to understand whether mentoring can reduce or reinforce existing gender disparities in career development.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates consistent evidence of gender differences in career aspirations across diverse geographical and cultural contexts. However, findings regarding which gender exhibits higher aspirations remain mixed and appear to be influenced by contextual, cultural, and educational factors.

Moreover, the majority of previous studies have focused on adolescents rather than university students, and limited attention has been given to the interaction between mentoring experiences and gender in shaping career aspirations. Consequently, there remains a significant empirical gap regarding whether gender differences in career aspirations persist among undergraduate students in Kenya and how participation in mentoring programmes influences these aspirations. The present study sought to address this gap by examining gender differences in career aspirations among undergraduate mentees participating in the EFAC mentoring programme in Kenya.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods research design to examine the influence of gender on career aspirations among mentees participating in a mentorship programme in selected public universities in Kenya. The design enabled the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data concurrently, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The target population comprised undergraduate students enrolled in the mentorship programme. A sample of 309 mentees was selected using proportionate stratified random sampling to ensure adequate representation of both genders. Of the respondents, 160 (51.8%) were female while 149 (48.2%) were male.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing both closed-ended and open-ended items. The instrument was piloted prior to the main study to assess its reliability and validity. Reliability was established using the split-half method, and the instrument yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.79, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Content validity was established through expert review to ensure that the questionnaire adequately measured career aspirations and related constructs among university mentees.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize respondents' characteristics and career aspiration levels, while an independent samples t-test was employed to determine whether significant gender differences existed in career aspirations. Qualitative data obtained from the open-ended items were analyzed thematically and integrated with quantitative findings during interpretation. Ethical principles were observed throughout the study, including obtaining informed consent from participants and assuring them of confidentiality and anonymity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics, particularly gender, and results were presented in tables and figures. The gender distribution of mentees is presented in Figure 1.

The findings indicated that 160 (51.8%) of the respondents were female, while 149 (48.2%) were male. This distribution is notable when compared with national university enrolment trends in Kenya, which consistently show a higher proportion of male students in public universities (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2022). The relatively higher female participation in the EFAC mentorship programme may therefore reflect increased female engagement in structured developmental interventions, particularly those linked to career guidance and psychosocial support. This observation aligns with Hamilton et al. (2018), who report that female students are more likely than males to actively participate in mentorship programmes, possibly due to higher perceived benefits of relational and supportive learning environments.

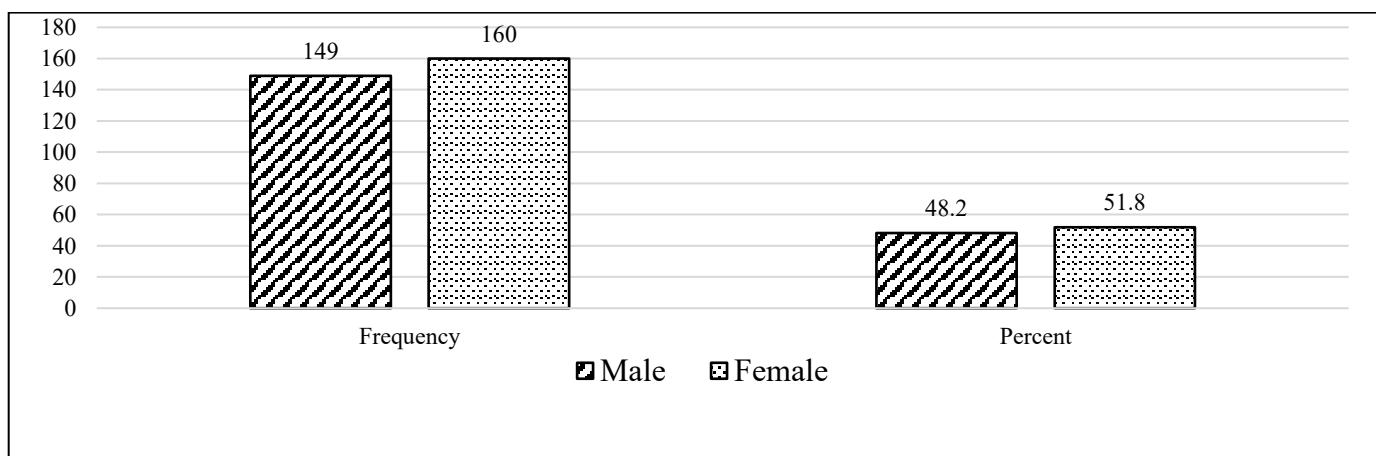


Figure 1.1: Details of Gender of the Mentees

To examine gender differences in career aspirations, a composite score was computed from the 24-item Career Aspirations Scale. Prior to hypothesis testing, assumptions of parametric analysis were assessed. Tests of normality using Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk indicated that the data for both male and female groups significantly deviated from normal distribution ($p < .05$). Additionally, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated ($F = 3.89, p = .05$). Consequently, a non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to determine gender differences in career aspirations.

Table 1.1: Normality Test of Career Aspirations

Gender		Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Career Aspirations	Male	0.248	149	0.00	0.787	149	0.00
	Female	0.144	160	0.00	0.793	160	0.00

The results revealed a statistically significant difference in career aspirations between male and female mentees ($U = 9163.00, Z = -3.20, p = 0.001$). Males recorded a higher mean rank (169.50) compared to females (137.24), indicating stronger career aspirations among male mentees. The effect size, calculated using eta squared ($\eta^2 = 0.03$), indicated that gender accounted for 3% of the variance in career aspiration ranks. According to Funder and Ozer (2019), this represents a small effect size, suggesting that while gender differences are statistically significant, they are relatively modest in practical terms.

These findings suggest that gender remains a relevant, though not dominant, factor in shaping career aspirations among university mentees. The higher career aspirations among male students may reflect persistent sociocultural expectations in which men are more strongly associated with career advancement, leadership roles, and financial responsibility. In contrast, women may experience subtle social conditioning toward balancing career ambitions with anticipated familial roles, which may moderate the strength of their career aspirations. Such interpretations are consistent with broader gender socialization theories and empirical evidence from Sub-Saharan African contexts, where traditional gender norms continue to influence educational and occupational pathways.

From an educational perspective, the findings also point to the role of mentorship environments in shaping career outlooks. Although mentorship programmes such as EFAC are designed to enhance aspiration and career readiness, differential engagement or responsiveness to mentoring between genders may influence outcomes. The observed pattern may suggest that male mentees translate mentoring inputs into stronger career ambitions, while female mentees may require more targeted or gender-responsive mentoring approaches to achieve similar levels of aspiration enhancement.

The results corroborate earlier studies conducted among adolescent and youth populations, which consistently report gender differences in career aspirations (Migunde et al., 2012; Nyugen & Blomberg, 2014; Nduta, 2020). However, the present study extends these findings by demonstrating that such differences persist even at university level, where students are closer to labour market entry and have greater exposure to career development resources. Interestingly, the higher proportion of female respondents combined with their lower mean career aspiration scores further underscores the complexity of gender dynamics in higher education.

These findings also resonate with labour market evidence showing that even when women attain comparable or higher educational qualifications, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions and high-status occupations (Gollins et al., 2017). House et al. (2021) further argue that such disparities may reflect not only structural barriers but also differences in career confidence, ambition, and long-term occupational planning between genders. In this regard, the present study suggests that gendered patterns of aspiration formation may contribute to later disparities in professional attainment, even within contexts where educational access is relatively balanced.

Overall, the findings indicate that while gender differences in career aspirations among EFAC mentees are statistically significant, they are small in magnitude but socially meaningful. This highlights the need for

mentorship programmes in public universities to incorporate gender-responsive strategies that actively challenge stereotypical career expectations and strengthen female students' career confidence and long-term ambition.

CONCLUSION

This study examined gender differences in career aspirations among mentees participating in a mentorship programme in public universities in Kenya. The findings revealed a statistically significant difference in career aspirations between male and female mentees, with males reporting higher levels of career aspirations than females. However, the effect size was small, indicating that gender, while significant, accounts for only a limited proportion of variation in career aspirations. This suggests that career aspirations among university mentees are shaped by multiple interacting factors beyond gender alone. Although mentorship programmes are designed to enhance career development, the results suggest that their effectiveness may be moderated by gendered cognitive and sociocultural influences. Therefore, addressing gender disparities in career aspirations requires interventions that go beyond access to mentorship and actively engage with the underlying psychological and cultural mechanisms that shape career thinking.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this research study, the recommendations are as follows;

1. University mentorship programmes should incorporate gender-sensitive approaches that explicitly address the different career development needs of male and female students, ensuring equitable enhancement of career aspirations.
2. Institutions should implement structured interventions such as leadership training, and skills development workshops aimed at strengthening female students' confidence in pursuing high-aspiration and non-traditional careers.
3. Mentorship initiatives should deliberately expose students, especially females, to successful professionals in leadership, STEM, and high-income sectors to challenge existing gender schemas.
4. Mentors should be trained to recognize unconscious gender biases and to actively support the dismantling of stereotypical career expectations during mentoring interactions.
5. Universities should reinforce career guidance and counselling services to complement mentorship programmes, ensuring continuous support in gender-equitable career aspirations among students.

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