

Influence of gender on choice of undergraduate degree programmes A case of students at Great Zimbabwe University.

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Abstract

The choice of a college degree program can be one of the most important decisions a student can make. This paper investigated the influence of gender on the choice of degree programmes at Great Zimbabwe University. Data was collected from a sample of 37 students from 3 faculties through a questionnaire. We also used data from the graduands of the 6th Graduation Ceremony , October 2012 at Great Zimbabwe University. The analysis revealed that gender plays a part in the choice of degree programmes. This is attributed to a variety of factors which include the fact that society is patriarchal where women feel insecure to venture into challenging programmes. We recommend researchers to investigate further into this issue for the sake of generalisation.

Key words: gender, major choice , skills development.

Introduction

Gender equity has been a topical issue since the rise of feminist movement which was at its height in the 1980s. Feminists created an awareness that women have historically been oppressed or dominated by men in society (unequal gender relations) and that the structural arrangements that initiate, support and legitimate that systematic oppression of women constitute patriarchy (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000). Feminism constituted itself into a social and political movement meant to dismantle the effects of patriarchy and this has generated much debate on the 'women question' and resulted in the United Nations Decade for Women, the Beijing Conference of 1995 and other related conventions on women. The impact of these efforts differs from country to country.

The educational system and the school in particular, is a miniature of society and reflects the values, beliefs and practices of the larger society (Oakley, 1987). So the students are products of the society in which the education institution operates. Educational institutions as key agents of socialisation are central to effective application of gender equity practices. Feminists are of the view that women and girls are not only disadvantaged in the education system, but it is there that they learn to be subordinate and to accept dominant ideologies of femininity and masculinity (Tyler, 2005). Feminist studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s found that girls were being channelled into certain subject areas and this tended to encourage the continuation of subordination of women in society as they ended up in careers that were considered to be insignificant. Since then, in response to international conferences that highlighted the plight of women world over, various policies meant to ensure educational equity and that girls and boys follow the same school curriculum have been put in place in different countries. In Zimbabwe, for example, the government enacted policies and legislation meant to achieve gender equity and equality. The first such policy was Affirmative Action, a gender-based policy which demonstrated a conscious need to redress recognised imbalances in society, a deliberate effort to uplift women in various sectors of the economy. Then in 1999 the National Gender Policy was enacted. Item 6.2.1 of the Policy notes that:

The education and training sector poses a big challenge to the eradication of gender imbalances and inequality since it is the foundation of economic and social development.

It suggests several strategies to address gender equity in education and training but the two that are of relevance to this study are: a) eliminate all forms of discrimination against boys and girl in education and skills training which include science and technology; and b) provide information on alternative career pathways especially for women; c) promote and encourage girls to take on science, mathematics and technology at all levels of education.

But research shows that subtle processes that result in girls making choices that propel them into female careers and subordinate roles in a patriarchal society are still operational . Chipunza (2004), notes that in Zimbabwe, despite these policy pronouncements, educational institutions continue to be fertile grounds for gender discrimination and inequality.

The area on gender differences and performance in various disciplines has been trodden much before and contrasting findings have been reported. Some recent studies had reported girls doing better than boys in certain areas of science subjects while others researchers have reported a dominance of girls by boys in most mathematical tasks. The task of making a correct choice of degree programme at universities is a very critical issue since this generally has a bearing on one 's life career. A lot of factors such as job security , academic excellence, person-environment fit, race and ethnicity

should be taken into consideration by undergraduates . The major choice determines where students will take most of their courses within an institution, thus in turn affecting much of their interactions with faculty and other students. Scholars have long understood the impact of academic majors (and departments) on students, and have concluded that they often produce quite different influences on the development of students' interests and abilities (Baird,1988; Chickering, 1969). For example, several authors note the impact that departmental culture and climate have on student learning, satisfaction, and persistence.

According to The Sphere Project (2004) women and men, girls and boys, have the same entitlement to humanitarian assistance; to respect for their human dignity ; to acknowledgement of their equal human capacities , including the capacity of choices; to the same opportunities to act on those choices ; and to the same level of power to shape the outcome of their actions. Humanitarian responses are more effective when they are based on an understanding of the different needs , vulnerabilities, interests , capacities and coping strategies of men and women and the differing impacts of disaster upon them. The understanding of these differences as well as of inequalities in women's and men's roles and workloads , access to and control of resources , decision-making , power and opportunities for skills development , is achieved through gender analysis. Gender cuts across all the other cross-cutting issues. Humanitarian aims of proportionality and impartiality mean that attention must be paid to achieving fairness between women and men and ensuring equality of outcome.

Although recent research suggests that congruence between students and their academic environment is critical for successful student outcomes, little research has been done on student college major choice. The present study will look into the factors which influence choice of degree programmes at Great Zimbabwe University critically analysing the gender differences in various faculties. The study shall look into the following factors : social, psychological , emotional and physical factors which have an overall bearing in decision –making , especially in the choice of careers.

Background

Great Zimbabwe University is one of the state universities in Zimbabwe which is focussed on cultural and heritage studies . Gender cuts across both culture and heritage in Zimbabwe. The objective of this research is to investigate whether choice of degree programmes has anything to do with gender under the flagship of cultural and heritage system. The issue of race is out since the majority of students are black. The issue of ethnicity will be looked into since the University is composed of black students from different ethnic backgrounds. This study is a follow-up of the statistics of 6th Graduation Ceremony , October 2012.

	Male	Female	Total
Faculty of Arts	47	55	102
Faculty of Commerce	138	82	220
Faculty of Education	140	156	296
Faculty of Science	4	2	6
Faculty of Social Science	147	145	292
Total	476	440	916

Table 1.Statistics of October 2012 graduands from various faculties

There is evidence that choice of degree programmes are segregated by gender differences at Great Zimbabwe University. The representation of women in the sciences and commercial subjects remains substantially below their representation in the overall population. This statement is generalisation from previous studies carried out in the U.S.A. by the National Research Council (1994) and this can be seen in the data above for recent graduands at Great Zimbabwe University. Jacobs (1986) argued that gender differences in student major choice are the result of socialization in traditional gender roles and he suggests that women are likely to select majors that have been traditionally dominated by women. Lackland (2001) argue that women tend to choose disciplines like education, nursing and English because of their female gender role orientation. Kanter (1993) uses the theory of proportions in social life to argue that minority status within an organization reinforces traditional roles and places constraints on women.

Despite the Affirmative Action Policy which was introduced in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe to include as many females as possible into the science field with lower entry points compared to their male counterparts many women settle for Arts subjects. A longitudinal study carried out at Great Zimbabwe University by Ngoma (2009) on the enrolment of females in mathematics in the BEd. program revealed the following statistics:

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Males	8	6	10	8	10
Females	2	4	3	2	0

Table 2: Enrolment of males and females in mathematics

The figures show that the enrolment of females in mathematics ranges from zero to four . Further questions on this research revealed that fear of failing the course is one of the main culprits which causes a few women to major in the science fields . These differences have serious consequences in the development of the country at a larger scale as depicted by the statistics below taken from the Government of Zimbabwe Medium Term Plan(2011-2015).

Rank	Percentage of women
Ministers	20%
Deputy Ministers	9%
Members of Parliament	14%-lower house ,33% -upper house

Table 4.Women in Public Sector 2009

Rank	Percentage of women
Commissioners in the Public Service	67
Permanent Secretaries	26
Principal Directors	26
Directors	33
Deputy Directors	28

Table 3. Women and Politics in Zimbabwe 2008

Theoretical Framework

Opportunities for skills development versus roles and responsibilities under the umbrella of liberal feminism.

Liberal feminism believes that unequal opportunities between males and females originate from socialization i.e. socialization on gender roles that is done at home and at school. Socializations on gender roles have a result of producing rigid and inflexible expectations of men and women (Nyoni,2004). Liberal feminists however advocate for educational reforms that realize that women can be equal partners in all spheres of life. They campaign for a curriculum which has no gender prejudices (Gordon, 1995).

Universities are educational institutions which offer equal opportunities for skills development in all areas of interest to all aspiring students regardless of gender differences. Women constitute 52 percent of the total population in Zimbabwe. It is therefore important that their representation and participation in the development process is commensurate with this numerical and demographic reality. Zimbabwe has adopted international instruments on gender equality and women empowerment. These instruments oblige member states to provide for the equal participation of women in economic policy formulation and implementation. Opportunities for skills development is an extension of the Opportunities to Learn (OTL)framework. The concept of OTL is the subject of widely varied definitions. For example, OTL is described as:“the degree of overlap between the content of instruction and that which is tested” (Reeves and Muller, 2005), “equitable conditions or circumstances within the school or classroom that promote learning for all students” (Schwartz, 1995;Cooper and Liou, 2007), the“absence of barriers that prevent learning” (Mereku et al, 2005),“conditions or circumstances within schools and classrooms that promote learning for all students” (Cooper and Liou, 2007),“conditions that may benefit students’ mathematics learning and achievement, provided for students by the educational system” (Gau, 1997). This framework is a suitable window to examine the influence of gender on choices of degree programs but it should be viewed against the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the Zimbabwean context. The roles and responsibilities of women and men in Zimbabwe differ between ethnic groups and race , hence the issue is analysed in specific terms.

Neither roles nor sex alone are sufficient to explain the extent of the differential values between sexes and the functions that are specific to a woman. Roles and responsibilities refer back in each socio-cultural background to a world of representations, which in itself is inherent to a conception and vision of the world. It is therefore imperative to consider the societal goals, symbolism, ideology and power that ensure society's equilibrium and reproduction. The social status of women and the relationship between them and men cannot be thought of outside the question of power that determines the social dynamics. Women are both biological beings and social actors and one does not happen without the other. The biological and social are linked . They influence each other and sometimes determine each other.

Factors influencing choice of anything in life vary from person to person. There is no unique category or type of woman in Zimbabwe. Actually they are many according to their social origin , education, training , profession, marital status and so on. However , this categorisation is neither very rigid nor definitive. It contains uncertainties owing to changes in women`s fortunes and the dynamic character of women`s identity.

Data Collection and Methodology

The data used in this study is taken from a sample 37 students taken from 3 faculties at Great Zimbabwe University. The students were each given a questionnaire on students` personal background and open - ended questions on factors influencing choice of degree programs. To further check for an association between gender and choice of degree program we applied a Chi-Square Test using actual statistical data collected from the university database of the 6th Graduation Ceremony, 19 October 2012 . The data from the questionnaire was only used to investigate factors influencing choice of degree programs.

Results

The results of the questionnaire revealed the following information:

The gender composition comprised of 19 males and 18 females

The distribution of subjects per faculty was 6 Commerce, 15 Education and 16 Social sciences.

Duration of degree programmes was 2years for Education and 4 years for Commerce and Social sciences

All the students except one were self sponsored

All the students were happy with their choices of degree programmes

The two major questions of the research are summarized on the table below:

	Male	Female	Total
YES	3	5	8
NO	16	13	29
Total	19	18	37

Table 4. Are males and females balanced in your class?

	Male	Female	Total
YES	12	13	25
NO	6	6	12
Total	18	19	37

Table 6. Does gender influence choice of degree programme?

Data Analysis

Distribution of gender by faculty

It can be seen from Table 1 that generally females are less than males at Great Zimbabwe University. Statistically females constitute 48% of the University enrolment. Male students dominate all the faculties except in the Faculty of Education where they are 52% of the Faculty enrolment. We are going to use Chi-Squared test to test the hypothetical data on Table 1 whether there is an association between Faculty enrolment and gender distribution.

	Male	Female	Total
Faculty of Arts	47 (53)	55 (49)	102
Faculty of Commerce	138 (114)	82 (106)	220
Faculty of Education	140 (154)	156 (142)	296
Faculty of Science	4 (3)	2 (3)	6
Faculty of Social Science	147 (152)	145 (140)	292
Total	476	440	916

$X^2 = \sum_{i=1} \frac{(O_i - E_i)^2}{E_i} = 15$ when $X^2\text{-tables} = X^2(4,0.05) = 9.5$ which suggests that there is an association between Faculty enrolment and gender distribution at Great Zimbabwe University.

Test for bias

We also need to establish whether the responses in Table 5 and Table 6 are gender associated.

	Male	Female	Total
YES	3 (4)	5 (4)	8
NO	16 (15)	13 (14)	29
Total	19	18	37

$X^2 = \sum_{i=1} \frac{(O_i - E_i)^2}{E_i} = 1$ when $X^2\text{-tables} = X^2(1,0.05) = 3.84$

	Male	Female	Total
YES	12 (12)	13 (13)	25
NO	6 (6)	6 (6)	12
Total	18	19	37

$$X^2 = \sum_{i=1} \frac{(O_i - E_i)^2}{E_i} = 0 \text{ when } X^2\text{-tables} = X^2 (1,0.05) = 3.84$$

The responses on Table 5 and Table 6 are not gender biased , confirming the reliability of the response to the main questions of the research.

The above analysis and conclusion is further strengthened by the responses in Table 5 and Table 6 which we can easily deduce from the graphs below.

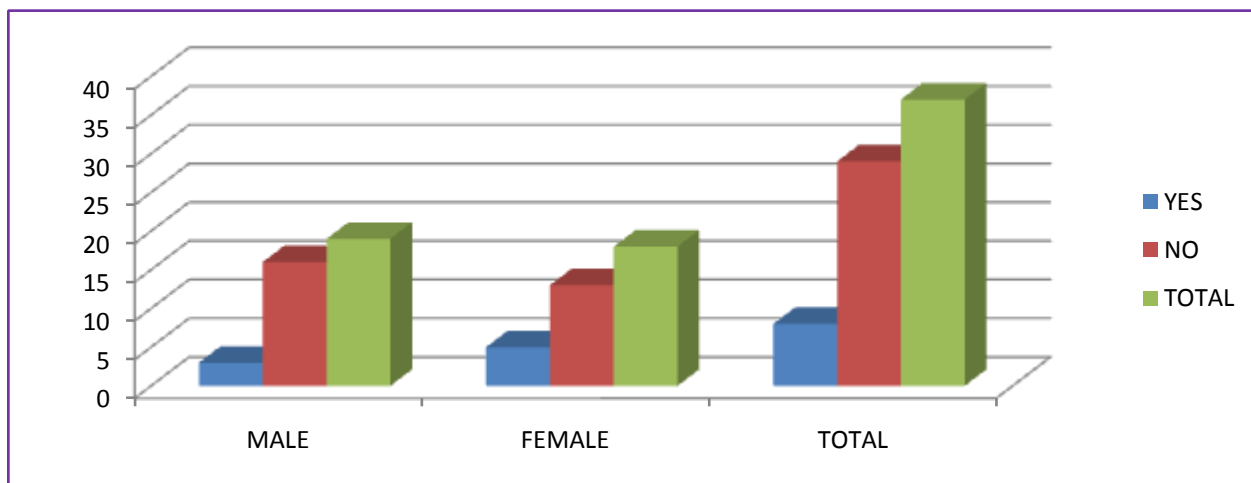


Fig.1. Are males and females balanced in your class?

From the graph it can be easily seen that the respondents are confirming that there are gender differences at Great Zimbabwe University.

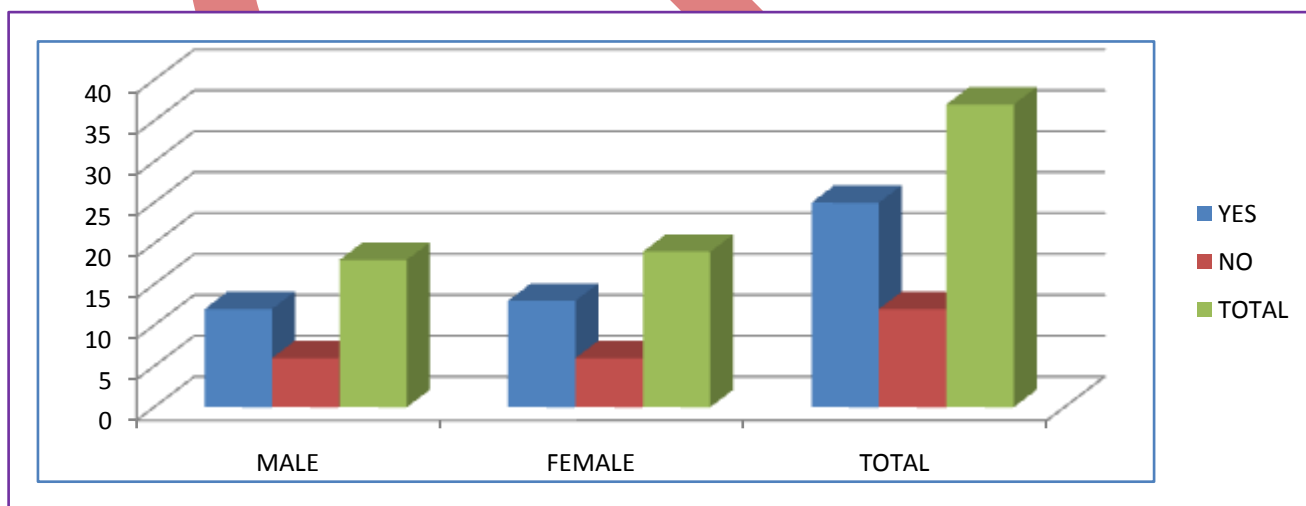


Fig 2. Does gender influence choice of degree programme?

From the graph it can be easily seen that the respondents are confirming that gender influences the choice of degree programme at Great Zimbabwe University.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the analysis of the results we can conclude that generally there is gender differences at Great Zimbabwe University and also that gender plays a key role in the choice of degree programs. However it can also be noted that the gap in gender differences at Great Zimbabwe University is

almost closing up . We also recommend the University to increase enrolment of females in the Faculty of Commerce. It can also be noted that the Faculty of Education is female biased. Possibly this is due to the fact that the teaching profession is not a challenging course, but we recommend further research on this result. Whilst gender plays a part in the choice of degree program we also recognize that there a lot of variables which also influence the choice of degree programs. The results obtained can only be generalised when further research is done in comparison with other institutions.

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