




# Careership: The experiences of women in choosing career paths in TVET in South Africa



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## Dates:

Received: 26 Apr. 2023

Accepted: 07 July 2023

Published: 16 Oct. 2023

## How to cite this article:

Nghonyama, M.G., Maluleke, L., & Seitshiro, T. (2023). Careership: The experiences of women in choosing career paths in TVET in South Africa. *African Journal of Career Development*, 5(1), a84. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajcd.v5i1.84>

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**Background:** This study explored the potential role that gender and race play in influencing the career choices of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) college students.

**Objectives:** This research aimed to explore the possible role that gender and race play in influencing the career choice of students enrolled at one of the country's public TVET colleges.

**Method:** An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted for this study. A total of 33 students were randomly selected to form part of the study sample. A convenient sampling method was used to select a total of 33 students who participated from three campuses. Multiple data collection methods comprising semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to collect data. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the collected data.

**Results:** The findings reveal that gender and race continue to play a significant role in career decision-making and career destinations of students. In particular, the results show that it is important to pay special attention to women in TVET colleges.

**Conclusion:** The article concludes that career decision-making is an important topic in the public TVET college sector. It is important to look at the enablers and disablers of career decision-making, including gender and race.

**Contribution:** The study contributes towards guiding TVET colleges on how to support new entrants with their career choices. It brings further insight into the potential role of gender and race in influencing the career choices of students enrolling at TVET colleges.

**Keywords:** gender; career; career choices; students; technical vocational; education and training.

## Introduction

The influence of gender in determining one's career choice is well documented (Colley et al., 2007; Matenda, 2017; Mtemeri, 2017). Literature on career choices and educational access tends to emphasise social structures such as race, gender and class. A case in point is the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which looks at how the habitus influences the actions of individuals, thereby pointing out the different career paths that women take (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, 1979). The study reveals that men and women experience the world differently, and their varying experiences lead them to different destinations. Although the data were generated with men and women, this article focuses on women's experiences. The challenges that women face in life are shown to play a huge role in how they navigate through life. In South Africa, socio-cultural factors such as socialisation, cultural beliefs and social expectations, gender stereotypes and patriarchal expectations have, for years, played an influential role in shaping the career paths for both male and female students.

Statistics reveal that men continue to dominate engineering-related programmes. For example, the 2018 Statistical Report of the Department of Higher Education and Training shows that a total of 131 212 students enrolled for the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) programme nationally. Of the 131 212 students, 27 695 enrolled for programmes such as Office Administration, 9050 enrolled for Civil Engineering and Building Construction, 8226 enrolled for Tourism, 225 enrolled for Process Plant Operations and 840 enrolled for Mechatronics (Republic of South Africa, 2020). The statistics further show that men are concentrated in N1–N3 programmes, which are generally engineering-related qualifications. Women are more concentrated in the N4–N6 programmes, a mixture of business and engineering studies. In short, the statistics show that although the number of women has increased in public Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges and engineering-related programmes, they continue to dominate

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in programmes such as Office Administration (Republic of South Africa, 2020).

Despite this, there is currently a shortage of information on the role that gender plays in influencing the career decision-making of students enrolled on the country's public TVET colleges. There is, therefore, a need for studies of this nature to be carried out to determine whether the gender of students plays a role in influencing their career choices. It further looks at the education system and its influence on the career destinations of young people. The *careership* theory addresses gender and its influence on career choices, but this is mainly about the male-dominant versus female-dominant occupations (Hodkinson et al., 1996). South Africa is a unique country with diverse racial groups and inequalities formed along these racial lines. Here, we narrow this down to 'being a young black woman' in South Africa and how this influences one's life experience, educational experience, career options and choices. By focusing on women's experiences, we show that career decision-making is not a neutral act but is influenced by various factors, such as gender. Given that we are writing in the South African context, we further show how being a black woman brings unique challenges that can affect career decision-making.

## Background literature

Literature shows that career decision is one of the most important steps that young people must take at some point in their lives (Booyens & Crause, 2012; Shumba & Naong, 2012). These career decisions are a lifelong developmental process (Ayiah-Mensah et al., 2014). They are not neutral but are influenced by the environment in which social actors live, socialisation, and social and cultural position. For example, women continue to face challenges that hinder their academic and career progress. According to the report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2022), only 25% of women in Somalia are literate. From the report, it was clear that most females in Somalia are prevented from pursuing their studies because of religious and cultural norms. This is further supported by a study by Ali Farah (2020), who revealed that the low literacy rate in Somalia is caused by cultural and societal norms that prioritise male education and undervalue female education. The ongoing conflict in Somalia has also made it difficult for women to access education. Other countries facing a low literacy rate for African women are Sudan, Ethiopia and Chad (UNESCO, 2022).

South Africa has shown improvement in the high percentage of women accessing TVET colleges. According to a statistics report on post-schooling education and training in South Africa, the total enrolments for NCV programmes were 142 373, with females 90 099 and males 52 274 in 2017 (DHET, 2020). In addition, the enrolment for National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) programmes was 282 609 for females and 227 544 for males in 2017. The report shows a higher proportion of enrolled female students for TVET programmes compared with male students. Even

though female students are increasingly enrolled in commerce and humanities programmes, the country still faces the challenge of low female enrolment in Science, Technology, Engineering, and MSTEM subjects (DHET, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). There are also challenges that female TVET students face in the process of their academic journey, which affect their performance in class and are identified by several scholars in education, such as stereotyping, gender-based violence (GBV), financial stress, family and household responsibilities, and psychological health support (Madara & Cherotich, 2016). It is important to observe that while violence affects everyone, women suffer even more from GBV.

Gender-based violence is a global issue that has existed for a long time. It cuts across cultures and sectors of society. In the education sector, female students face various forms of GBV, such as sexual harassment, rape and physical assault (Tikly Vogel & Kurves, 2020). These issues are faced in the communities where they stay and in the education environment. A study conducted by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) in 2017 found that 30% of female students had experienced sexual harassment, while 4% had experienced rape or attempted rape in the higher education sector (Mojapelo & Ngoepe, 2017). The study also revealed that only 4% of the victims had reported the incidents to college authorities. Similarly, a study conducted by the Higher Education and Training HIV / AIDS Programme (HEAIDS) in 2018 found that 27% of female TVET college students had experienced sexual harassment, while only 16% of the victims had reported the incidents (Mbelle et al., 2018). The government has proposed several interventions, including awareness campaigns, training and policy implementation, to prevent GBV in TVET colleges.

Female students in TVET colleges in South Africa may face several challenges, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some challenges include managing family and household responsibilities, including caring for children or elderly family members, cooking, cleaning and other household chores (Bukhosini, 2019). These responsibilities can limit their time and energy to focus on their academic work, leading to lower grades and decreased academic performance. In South Africa, during the time of the National Development Plan, Kariem and Mbete (2012) painted a picture of the reality of young women in South Africa. They showed that women from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to have more responsibilities at home than their male counterparts. Consequently, their education is likely to suffer (Kariem & Mbete, 2012).

## Theoretical framework

This study is framed within careership theory, a sociological theory examining the social, economic, cultural, political and other environmental factors influencing young people's lives and career choices (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Maluleke et al., 2022). The fundamental idea in careership theory is that young people make career decisions concerning their fields depending on available resources and their socialisation

(Lindblad & Lundahl, 2020; Maluleke, 2022). The field is simply a setting where people (social agents) operate. Habitus refers to the embodiments of cultural capital, habits and skills people accumulate throughout their lives (Reay, 2004). A horizon is associated with vision or the extent to which a person can see. In careership theory, the horizon is related to human knowledge and the ability to act. Young people's career choices are influenced by what they know, and their actions are influenced by their position and embodied dispositions. The careership theory regards the individual as a player among other players in career decisions. Individuals are not always directly responsible for or in full control of their career choices (Hodkinson, 2009).

The careership theory considers social inequality to be important in career decision-making (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). The theory points to gender inequalities and stereotypes in education and training. It shows how women were made to feel redundant in previously male-dominant occupations. Also, the theory assumes that a social position, be it gender, race or social class, is central to career decision-making (Hodkinson et al., 1996). However, these inequalities must be understood in relation to the context and historical period of the careership theory, the 1990s United Kingdom. Also, the theory must be read in conjunction with Bourdieu's social theory. Concerning these inequalities, recent literature has shown that the careership theory remains powerful in explaining the South African situation of gender and racial inequality (Maluleke, 2022; Maluleke et al., 2022). To achieve such an understanding, the authors argue that the theory must be contextualised critically (Maluleke et al., 2022).

## Aim

The study explored the experiences of female students in choosing career paths at a public TVET college.

## Specific objectives

- To explore the role of gender as a possible influencer for career choice for female students enrolled at a public TVET college
- To establish possible challenges confronting female students registered at a public TVET college concerning making career choices

## Research methods and design

### Research design

An exploratory, qualitative research design was adopted for this study. The study was exploratory because there has not been research in public TVET colleges that focuses on career decision-making, so the study sought to explore this area along with a potential theory – careership. Also, the careership theory is neither popular nor dominant (Maluleke et al., 2022; Powell, 2014); hence, it was explored in this study. Adopting the qualitative approach allowed researchers to gain an in-depth insight into the subject under investigation by allowing participants to express their lived experiences and

viewpoints regarding the topic (Babbie, 2021). In particular, using the qualitative approach allowed researchers to gain a subjective reflection of TVET college-registered female students' experiences on the possible influences of gender in their career choices (Bryman, 2008).

## Study setting

The study focused on three campuses of one of the country's 50 public TVET colleges located in the Eastern Cape province.

## Population and sampling

The study participants were registered male and female students from three campuses of a public TVET college located in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Although men and women were involved in data generation, only data from selected women are presented in this article. A convenient sampling method was used to select 33 participants. Of the 33 participants, 16 were identified to participate individually and face to face with researchers (Maluleke, 2022). Only full-time students were considered as participants, while part-time students were excluded as potential participants. The 16 participants who were interviewed individually were chosen based on availability, especially because they lived in college residences. Therefore, availability after college classes was not a huge problem. Some students did not live in residence, so they had to leave college before it was late, as they mentioned that they were likely to be mugged. Also, getting a recognisable presence of men and women in the individual interviews was important. Most importantly, the 16 participants were chosen based on their willingness to be interviewed individually. Table 1 displays the background information of the participants.

## Data collection

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to collect qualitative data for this study. Researchers prepared pre-written questions that were used as interview guide. The interview guide was necessary to influence the direction of the interview. These questions were in line with specific objectives. The use of semi-structured interviews for individual interviews and focus groups allowed participants to 'tell their story' (Conrad, 2001) regarding the influences and role, if any, of gender in the career choices of female TVET students. This approach allowed the researchers to obtain narrative data in participants' own words while controlling the interview topic. Individual interviews were conducted with 16 female students conveniently sampled from the three campuses. All interviews were conducted at the student's respective campuses and took less than an hour. In addition to the individual interviews, one focus group meeting, each comprising 11 participants, was held on each of the three campuses. The focus group meetings were also conducted at students' respective campuses. A digital audio recorder was used to record the proceeding of both

TABLE 1: Background of participants.

Characteristics (Pseudonym, Age in years, Gender, Residence)	Family Social Status	Schooling Background	School Subjects	Career Fantasy at young age	Reason for Studying at College	Prior and Current Educational Pursuits	Employment History	Life Turning Points
<b>Nomhle</b> Age: 24 Female Place of birth: Cofimvaba Place of residence: Motherwell	Single mother; 2 children; working-class – mother employed	Rural primary school; Former Model C high school	Commercial subjects	Police or Military Officer, as well as Construction and Maritime, Studies	Points low for university	Prior: Upgrading grade 12 Current: NC(V): Office Administration	None	Falling pregnant (2 children-girls); doing badly in grade 12; going to college; death of grandmother
<b>Nolubabalo</b> Age: 28 Female Place of birth: Khayelitsha Place of residence: Gcuwa	No home of her own; living with strangers (significant others)	Township and rural schools	Not applicable as she stopped schooling early in life	Drama or Performing Arts	No grade 12 (Horizon for action allows access to college)	Current NATED/Report 191: Public Management	Salon; Singing; Performing Arts	Mother, uncle, grandmother's deaths; leaving Western Cape; rape and pregnancy (1 child-girl); precarious employment; going to college
<b>Phumeza†</b> Age: 25 Place of residence: Motherwell	Middle-class family; father Engineer; aunt Lecturer; siblings employed with bachelor's degrees & beyond	Briefly attended a rural primary school in Alice, to be moved to a private school, and has attended former Model C schools ever since.	Science and Mathematics	Analytical Chemistry, Environmental Health, Medicine, Nursing	APS Points low; found passion in ECD offered at College	Prior: Dropped out from Primary Health Learnership programme Current: Learnership: Early Childhood Development	Restaurant – waitress	Failing grade 12; dropping out of college; pregnancy (1 child-boy); restaurant job; returning to education; mother's death
<b>Nozipho</b> Age: 21 Place of birth: King Williamstown Place of residence: King Williamstown and New Brighton	Middle-class family; Mother and father pensioners from government (parents hold post-school qualifications)	Briefly attended township primary, to be moved to a former Model C school, and later to a boarding high school	Life Sciences, Maths Literacy, Economics and Information Technology	Medicine; Nursing	APS Points low; need to do something	Prior: Upgrading grade 12 Current: NATED/Report 191: Management Assistance	None	Failing grade 12; upgrading grade 12. going to college
<b>Sindiswa†</b> Age: 26 Place of residence: Matatiele	Middle-class; mother Nurse; father - high profile politician	Attended all her schooling in Matatiele, a rural town in KZN.	Mathematics and Science	Forensic Science	APS Points low for University; Needed something to do	Prior: Did NC(V) before NATED/Report 191 Current: NATED/Report 191: Electrical Engineering	None	Biological father's death
<b>Licebo</b> Age: 31 Place of birth: Motherwell Place of residence: Booyens Park	Poor or Working-class family; father in an out of work; mother domestic worker; herself piece jobs	Attended many primary schools in Motherwell, township, and one high school in Cleary Park	Commercial subjects, including Home Economics, Business, and History	Athletics, Interior Design, Social Worker, Nursing, Law	APS points low; rejected at university; desperate to study	Prior: Incomplete Business Management certificate at private college; completed NC(V) level 2 Current: NATED/Report 191: Business Management	Volunteer: restaurant; street vendor; government piece jobs	Rejected at university; pregnancy (2 children-girl and boy); precarious jobs; going to college
<b>Lutho</b> Age: 37 Place of birth: Mdantsane Place of residence: Mdantsane	Poor or Working-class family; mother domestic worker; single parent household	Attended schools in Mdantsane, East London.	General subjects such as History, Biology, Business Economics	Nothing. Did not really focus much on careers during high school	No grade 12	Prior: NC(V) Levels 2-4 Current: NATED/Report 191: Public Management.	Clothing industry - sewing machine operator	Failing grade 12; running away from home; getting married; divorce; going to college
<b>Asanda†</b> Age: 25	Poor or Working-class family; stepfather unemployed; mother works at hotel as general worker	Rural primary school in Cofimvaba, later township school in Zwile.	Mathematics and Physical Sciences	Nursing	APS points low for university; time ticking and feeling left behind	Prior: 3 months fashion designer certificate; NC(V) Levels 2-4 in Construction NATED/Report 191: Electrical Engineering Current: Apprenticeship in Electrical Engineering	None	Not doing well in grade 12; rejected at university pregnancy (1 child-girl); registering and deregistering from college

Table 1 continues on the next page →



TABLE 1 (Continues...): Background of participants.

Characteristics (Pseudonym, Age in years, Gender, Residence)	Family Social Status	Schooling Background	School Subjects	Career Fantasy at young age	Reason for Studying at College	Prior and Current Educational Pursuits	Employment History	Life Turning Points
<b>Bcogitwe†</b> Age: 32	Living alone at her own house; independent receives maintenance from father, receives child social grant for own children	All township schools in KwaZakhele	Mathematics and Science	Pilot	Desire to do Civil Engineering	Prior: Information Technology Diploma; Plumbing at private college; Current: NATED/Report 191: Civil Engineering	None	Discovering that her weight is hindrance to becoming pilot; going to university; looking for employment; pregnancy (2 children-boy and girl)
<b>Sandile</b> Age: 24 Place of residence: Motherwell	Single mother; middle-class family; four children employed; mother retired teacher	All township schools in Motherwell and Uitenhage	Commercial Subjects, e.g. Accounting, Economics, Business Studies	Doctor or Medicine, Accountant	No grade 12; went to college by chance	Prior: NC(V): Financial Management Current: NATED: Financial Management	Once in while construction work at brother's firm	Failing grade 12; going to college
<b>Vuyo†</b> Age: 24	Single mother; retired teacher; middle-class family	All rural schools in Cofimvaba	Commercial subjects like Accounting, Business, Studies	Nothing specific, other than wanting to be an influential person, e.g. president	University dropout; went to college by chance	Prior: incomplete Accounting degree – university drop-out Learnership: Technology Current: Information Technology	Restaurant – waiter and cashier	Going to university; dropping out of university; moving to NMBM; working at restaurant going to college
<b>Vuyisa†</b> Age: 24 Place of birth: Colesberg	Middle-class; mother retired teacher; three children employed; 2 studying; single parent	All township schools in Colesberg.	Mathematics and Physical Sciences	Lawyer or Doctor	No grade 12; advised by cousin to go to college	Prior: Upgrading grade 12; NC(V): Marketing NATED/Report 191: Marketing Current: W8L - Marketing	Waiter at restaurant	Failing grade 12; upgrading metric; discovering that upgrading school is fly-by-night; working at restaurant; going to college

†, Limited information provided.

NATED, National Accredited Technical Education Diploma; NCV, National Certificate Vocational.

interviews and focus groups with the permission of the participants.

## Data analysis

Thematic content analysis is an interpretative application of content analysis in which the analysis focuses on thematic content that is identified, categorised and elaborated based on systematic scrutiny (Babbie, 2021). The first stage of qualitative data analysis involved preparing the data for analysis, for example, transcription. This entailed using a computer to transcribe recorded interviews verbatim from isiXhosa to English and saving the transcribed data as a Microsoft Word (MS) document.

The second stage involved noting items of interest from the text. This was achieved by initially reading the text for the emergence of themes. This was followed closely by the third stage which involved reading the text to facilitate the micro-analysis of data for open coding. Upon completing this stage, the researcher sorted items of interest from data into themes and organised them into categories containing similar topics. The fourth stage involved inspecting the proto-themes. This step involved examining each theme in order to determine their current meaning. The researcher then created a provincial name and flexible definition for each emerging theme. The fifth stage involved re-examining texts for relevant incidents of data for each theme. This was achieved by re-contextualising data in categories developed through the analysis. This process led to the sixth stage, which involved constructing the final form of each theme. This was carried out by re-examining names, definitions and supporting data for the final construction of each theme using all material relating to it.

## Ethical considerations

Firstly, necessary permissions were secured from relevant stakeholders before the study could be carried out. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Nelson Mandela University Research Ethics Committee (Human) (No. H17-EDU-ERE-027). Secondly, informed consent was secured from the 33 participants prior to the commencement of the data collection process. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were protected by replacing their real names from the interviews with pseudo names. Participants were notified that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time (Babbie, 2021). Furthermore, a commitment was made to all participants that counselling services would be made available to anyone who will require counselling as a consequence of participating in the study.

## Findings and discussion

The study explored the experiences of female students in choosing career paths while registering to study at TVET colleges in South Africa. The following are the main findings of this study.

## Determinants of career choices for female technical and vocational education and training - registered students

The results of this study reveal that gender stereotypes had no bearing in influencing the career choices of most participants. Instead, most participants indicated that their career choices were influenced solely by personal interests, not gender and societal expectations. These views were shared by both engineering studies-registered and business studies-registered students. These findings differ from those of the prior research studies, which revealed that gender stereotypes play a pivotal role in influencing the career choices of students registering at institutions of higher learning (Andrew & Flashman, 2017; Ayiah-Mensah et al., 2014; Hilal & McGrath, 2016; Ledman, Nylund, Rönnlund, & Rosvall, 2021). Many of these studies reveal that women are most likely to enrol in what is perceived as 'feminine' programmes, for example, Business Management, Hospitality and Clothing. On the contrary, male students are most likely to enrol in what is perceived to be 'masculine' programmes such as Civil and Electrical Engineering. In one of the interviews, one participant mentioned that:

'I don't really weigh myself down to that and say, "this is for males and this is for females". I chose this because I wanted to, not because I'm a woman'. (Licebo, Individual Interview, Lives in Booyens Park)

These findings are congruent with those of earlier results by Valls (2020). In a study titled *Influence of Gender Stereotypes on Career Choice*, Valls found that gender stereotypes had no bearing on how women make decisions relating to their career choices. Instead, women's career choices are often influenced by expectations, abilities, interests and personal tastes (Valls, 2020). This clearly indicates that women no longer base their academic choices on their gender but on their personal interests. This view was placed into perspective by one interviewee named Sindiswa. According to Sindiswa, women should not allow gender stereotypes to hinder them from pursuing so-called male occupations. She argued that with self-belief and determination, women could excel even in professions requiring physical endurance, such as construction, regardless of gender. She dismissed the idea that women are not physically strong enough to execute physical duties related to construction work as a product of patriarchal thinking. This view was supported by many of the interviewees who participated in the study. These findings seem to dismiss earlier findings that portray women as active participants in perpetuating patriarchal thinking because of the internalisation of their own inferior identity compared with that of men (Fawole, 2018; Lerner, 1986; Perez, 2019). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that women are slowly emerging from living under the shadows and are ready to rise above the societal limits set for them through long-held gender stereotypes and compete with men on an equal footing.

There is also general congruency among participants that women are equally capable of executing duties and

responsibilities of previously male-dominated professions. These findings are a clear indications of a change in the trajectory of how women used to view themselves in comparison to men. Women seem determined to change the popular and mostly misguided narrative that women belong in the kitchen. The following excerpt is representative of the views of most participants on the issue:

'You would get those people that [*sic*] think that women cannot do ... like for example, engineering and stuff. Yes, you would find women there but before, that was not the case, they were mostly male dominated. Most women think that they ought to do softer jobs, an office you see, not hard labour. But now things have changed, you get women doing hard labour, building houses, all of that.' (Sindiwa, Individual Interview, Lives in Matatiele)

## The role of male lecturers and male employers in influencing female students' career choices

The findings further reveal that while female students believe that personal interests and not gender stereotypes influenced their career choices, the behaviours of some male lecturers and male employers make them question their ability to succeed in their chosen careers. The majority of participants revealed that some male lecturers and employers demonstrate behaviours aimed at discouraging female students from pursuing engineering-related programmes because of their gender. The following excerpt from Sindiswa demonstrates such behaviour:

'It shouldn't be like that, because most of the time we can do what you [*men*] can do. I can do the installation normally but if we can go to submit our CVs at [*Name of Electricity Company*], always they prefer the guys because they think he can step on the ladder [*sic*] ... he can carry... you see! It's always the case. Even the lecturers here do that. When we do practicals they tell you that 'you know what, don't carry that'. Who's gonna carry it for me if I don't?' (Sindiswa, Individual Interview, Lives in Matatiele)

These responses demonstrate how employers and lecturers continue to perpetuate gender stereotypes actively. This is despite the determination of female students to break the barriers resulting from the perpetuation of these stereotypes. The findings of this study demonstrate how some lecturers within the TVET sector continue to hold patriarchal and gender-stereotypical views that consider female students as unsuitable candidates for vocational programmes such as engineering studies. These lecturers use 'subtle bullying' tactics to discourage female students from pursuing engineering and science-related qualifications (Makarova et al., 2016). These findings are congruent with that of an earlier study by Matenda (2020). In studying the experiences of female students at a TVET college, Matenda (2020) found that lecturers within the engineering field would make undesirable comments about female students registered for engineering programmes to discourage them from pursuing engineering. This behaviour often damages the students' academic performance, who often feel that their ability to succeed academically is being questioned solely because of their gender (Matenda, 2020).

One of the main themes emerging from this study is the acknowledgement that being a woman comes with challenges, highlighting that women often face heavier burdens than men. The findings of the study further reveal that gender stereotypes further extend to the workplace. As with lecturers, certain employers, particularly in engineering, continue to view female graduates as unsuitable candidates for engineering-related jobs. The findings of this study and that of Matenda demonstrate that gender stereotypes remain prevalent within academic institutions and workplaces. Despite all the efforts that women make in challenging stereotypes both at school and at work, it seems that their ability to freely participate in what is considered a 'men's professions' environment will always be hindered by a few men with patriarchal attitudes who will always remind them that they did not belong. Their situation is further exacerbated by motherhood, which often throws a spanner in their academic endeavours.

Of all the female participants who partook in this study, only three did not have children at the time of the interview. Those with children had to pause their educational pursuits at some point to care for their children. Licebo and Nolubabalo, for example, had to work to support their children. This is a common phenomenon, particularly among young mothers. Their situation is further exacerbated by a lack of support from family members and fathers of their children, who are often absent fathers. Nomhle expressed this during the individual interview, stating that children slow down one's advancement. This is primarily because women typically take on the responsibility of caring for and looking after the children, especially in cases where the father is absent.

Based on the findings of this study, it is safe to say that to truly comprehend the dynamics of career choices for women truly, it is essential to understand the internal and external forces influencing individuals making those decisions.

The careership theory emphasises that life is a holistic experience and should not be fragmented or segmented. Career decisions are intertwined with the overall life journey of the decision-makers (Hodkinson, 2008). Although the career choices of women who participated in this study were influenced by personal interests (internal forces), the discouraging behaviours of male lecturers and employers and motherhood issues (external forces) played a role in their academic success. For instance, Licebo and Nomhle could not freely choose an educational programme because of the limitations imposed by their prior life experiences.

## Conclusion

Society is changing, with an increasing number of women entering fields traditionally dominated by men, albeit with lingering traces of gender stereotypes in various areas. Gender still holds significance in individuals' life choices. While it may not always be accurate to say, 'I chose A or B because I am a woman' or 'I did this or that because I am a man', the experiences of men and women differ, and these experiences shape their actions and choices in distinct ways. While enrolling

for the course of their choice in a post-school education and training institution was seen as a miraculous achievement for most participants considering their poor backgrounds, academic success requires exceptional determination. In addition to dealing with discouraging comments from male lecturers, students still face the daunting task of convincing male employers that they are worthy employees.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the project supervisors, Dr Lesley Powell and Prof. Shervani Pillay, who supervised the doctoral study but are not part of writing this article. Data were collected during 2018 and 2019 for a doctoral thesis titled 'Rethinking our understanding of career decision making: The views of students at a selected South African TVET college on what influences their career decisions'.

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Authors' contributions

M.G.N. is responsible for putting together the article, correspondence, writing and editing, and finalising everything. L.M. is responsible for the original research project, editing and writing, and data analysis. T.S. is responsible for the literature review, initiating drafts and proofreading.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

Although the data are not made publicly available, and there is no unique identifier or accession code or number, the thesis contains some parts of the data. The data are available in terms of transcripts that are kept private and can be requested from the corresponding author L.M. upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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