

Gender Stereotypes and A-Level Subject Selection in Masvingo District, Zimbabwe: Influence and Strategies to Reduce Bias

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Abstract

This study investigates how societal norms and gendered expectations shape Advanced Level (A-Level) subject selection in Zimbabwean secondary schools, a domain that remains underexplored within gender and education research. The study aimed to explore the role of societal norms in shaping subject selection, examine the influence of gender stereotypes on A-Level girls, assess the influence of these stereotypes on A-Level boys, and evaluate the efforts made by schools to promote gender equity in A-Level education. Guided by TGH, the study extends this framework beyond its traditional application in media studies to interrogate how learners internalise, negotiate and occasionally subvert gendered discourses within school contexts. Anchored in an interpretive phenomenological design, the research was conducted in two purposively selected secondary schools in Masvingo District. The study engaged twenty-four learners (twelve female and twelve male) through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and ten teachers through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), complemented by document analysis of primary class records to triangulate perspectives and enhance trustworthiness. Field insights, thematically analysed through a three-stage narrative process, indicate that gendered subject selection is sustained by socio-cultural expectations that associate scientific and technical subjects with masculinity and arts-related disciplines with femininity. However, the findings also reveal moments of resistance, as some learners make counter-hegemonic choices that challenge these stereotypes. These dynamics underscore the negotiated nature of gendered hegemony in Zimbabwean schools, revealing its operation through everyday interactions, peer cultures and parental expectations rather than formal policies alone. While schools have gender equity initiatives, their rhetorical nature and weak implementation limit transformative impact. The study contributes theoretically by localising TGH within the Zimbabwean schooling system and practically by proposing community-anchored, stakeholder-inclusive interventions to disrupt gendered subject segregation at its socio-cultural roots.

1.0 Introduction

The influence of societal norms and gender stereotypes on education is well-documented, with significant effects on learners' subject choices and long-term opportunities (Brown, 2021; Chari, 2023). In Zimbabwe, the heritage-

based A-Level curriculum offers both challenges and opportunities for addressing these disparities. This study investigated the role of societal and cultural factors in shaping subject preferences among A-Level learners, guided by James Lull's Theory of Gendered Hegemony. The research employed an interpretive qualitative approach, focusing on two purposively selected schools in Masvingo District for a phenomenological inquiry. It explored the role of societal norms in subject selection, assess gender stereotype influences on A-Level girls, examine their impact on A-Level boys, and appraise school efforts toward gender equity in A-Level education. The significance of the study lies in its localisation of gendered hegemony within Zimbabwean schooling, offering context-specific insights that deepen theoretical understanding and inform more responsive educational policy and practice. The article proceeds as follows: First, the literature review discusses the interplay of societal norms, stereotypes and subject selection, before outlining the theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning the study. The methodology comes second, followed by the findings, which are reported for each research objective. The conclusion summarises the key insights and discusses the study's limitations, and the paper ends with recommendations organised into implications for policy, practice and future research. Central to this study is the argument that gendered subject selection in Zimbabwean A-Level schools emerges from the interaction of entrenched socio-cultural expectations, institutional practices and learner agency, revealing gendered hegemony as a negotiated rather than fixed structure within local educational decision-making.

2.0 Literature Review

This section reviews scholarship on gendered subject selection, demonstrating how societal norms and institutional practices shape learners' choices and positioning this study within broader debates on gendered hegemony. While earlier studies highlight societal gender roles in shaping subject choice (Brown, 2021; Chari, 2023), few scholars have interrogated how these dynamics unfold within Zimbabwe's A-Level context. To address this gap, the review is organised into three subsections. The first (Section 2.1) examines how societal expectations, cultural norms and family influences shape subject selection differently for male and female learners. The second (Section 2.2) explores the role of gender stereotypes in reinforcing these patterns and constraining learners' autonomy. The third (Section 2.3) evaluates strategies proposed in the literature for reducing gender biases in subject selection, focusing on interventions spanning pedagogy, mentorship, community engagement, and policy. Together, these subsections illuminate the multi-layered nature of gendered educational choices and provide the conceptual grounding for the present study's focus on gendered hegemony in the Zimbabwean A-Level context.

2.1 The Role of Society in Subject Selection for Female and Male Learners

Society profoundly influences learners' subject choices, embedding cultural expectations, economic pressures, and gender norms into decision-making processes. Boys are often directed towards STEM fields, associated with higher economic and professional status, while girls are steered toward Arts and Humanities, deemed more socially appropriate for traditional feminine roles (Makoni, 2022; Paechter & Menzies, 2023; Chari, 2023). Media portrayals and family expectations amplify these biases, limiting autonomy and perpetuating inequalities as choices often reflect societal priorities over personal interests (Thompson, 2021; Biddix, 2021). Maphosa and Bhebhe (2019:6) state that "decision-making is a learning process meaning that choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality." The current study was motivated by the need to explore this changing reality in subject selection.

On one hand, female learners face societal and institutional barriers that discourage participation in STEM fields, perceived as unsuitable for them. Stereotypes about women's abilities and the lack of female representation in STEM reinforce these biases, making it harder for girls to envision STEM careers (Thompson, 2021; Makoni, 2022; Nguyen & Wang, 2021). While cultural attitudes toward women's education often define it as enlightenment rather than a tool for economic empowerment (Makoni, 2022), further limiting girls' aspirations in male-dominated fields, Rudhumbu, du Plessis and Maphosa (2020:190) find that, "Women can perform as much as men

in business if given the necessary support.” Family and community expectations also influence girls toward caregiving roles, aligning with Arts disciplines (Hlaise, 2023; Paechter & Menzies, 2023). Limited STEM resources and gender-insensitive teaching methods exacerbate these challenges, undermining girls’ confidence (Chari, 2023).

On the other hand, boys face societal pressures tying masculinity to STEM, emphasising financial provision and leadership while discouraging Arts pursuits (Gwatura, 2021; Bhunhu & Green, 2023). Cultural norms position STEM as inherently male, dissuading boys from Arts due to fears of stigma and diminished status (Makoni, 2022; Chari, 2023). According to Makoni (2022), boys’ subject preferences are often shaped by societal perceptions of prestige and career opportunities in technical fields, further entrenching gender disparities.

2.2 Stereotypes and Their Influences on Subject Selection

Gender stereotypes act as pervasive barriers to equitable subject selection, categorising fields of study into masculine and feminine domains. STEM subjects, often depicted as rigorous and intellectually demanding, are linked to male learners, while Arts and Humanities, seen as more emotional and creative, are associated with female learners (Thompson, 2021; Biddix, 2021; Nguyen & Wang, 2021). This categorisation discourages female learners from pursuing STEM and male learners from engaging with Arts, perpetuating inequities in education and subsequent career opportunities (Makoni, 2022; Paechter & Menzies, 2023). Studies by Gwatura (2021), Makoni (2022), and Bhunhu and Green (2023) reveal that these stereotypes are often reinforced by teachers, parents, and peers, creating a cycle of gendered expectations that limits learners’ potential and aspirations. Over time, these stereotypes entrench disparities in representation across professional fields, shaping societal attitudes and expectations.

2.3 Strategies for Reducing Gender Bias in Subject Selection

Reducing gender bias in subject selection requires a multifaceted approach that targets societal norms, institutional practices, and learner empowerment. Tafirei, Makaye and Mapetere (2013:242) suggest the consideration of “Every aspect of the ordinary curriculum, including lesson content, teaching methods, attitudes, relationships, staff management, parental involvement and contribution of support services”. Mentorship programs pairing learners with role models who have succeeded in non-traditional fields can inspire confidence and broaden aspirations (Bhunhu & Green, 2023; Chari, 2023; Makoni, 2022). Gender-sensitive teaching practices, such as incorporating diverse examples in curricula and ensuring equitable access to resources, can help challenge stereotypes and promote balanced preferences (Nguyen & Wang, 2021; Thompson, 2021). Awareness campaigns targeting families and communities can highlight the value of gender diversity in education and careers, encouraging support for non-traditional subject choices (Paechter & Menzies, 2023; Hlaise, 2023).

Policy interventions, such as scholarships for underrepresented groups and inclusive career guidance programs, can also foster an environment where learners are free to explore subjects based on interest and aptitude rather than societal expectations (Gwatura, 2021; Bhunhu & Green, 2023; Chari, 2023). Makoni (2022) underscores the importance of promoting gender-neutral learning environments where resources and teaching approaches are tailored to encourage both boys and girls to explore STEM and Arts equitably. These strategies must be integrated into a broader framework aimed at dismantling gender biases at every level of education and society.

Building on these debates, the next section outlines the theoretical lens that frames the study’s analysis of how gendered discourses shape subject selection.

2.4 Theoretical and conceptual grounding

This section outlines James Lull's (2011) TGH as the analytical lens through which the study interprets how gendered discourses are produced, reproduced and negotiated within Zimbabwean A-Level schooling. Drawing on TGH, this subsection explores how institutional and cultural forces perpetuate gendered academic patterns. TGH provides a dominant lens for understanding how gender norms are produced, reproduced, negotiated and occasionally contested within everyday social practices. Although originally developed within media studies, its conceptual tools are well suited for examining how gendered discourses circulate through schools, families, communities and peer networks to shape A-Level subject selection.

TGH rests on three core assumptions that align closely with the aims of this study. First, gendered hegemony operates through everyday cultural practices, not simply through overt rules or policies. This principle resonates with the study's interest in how gendered expectations emerge in subtle interactions among learners, teachers, parents and communities. Second, hegemony is dynamic and negotiated, meaning individuals may internalise, resist, or reinterpret dominant gender norms. This assumption underpins the study's focus on both conformity to and resistance against gendered subject pathways, particularly noting how some learners make counter-hegemonic choices. Third, gendered hegemony relies on institutional reinforcement, whereby schools, curricula, and assessment structures subtly legitimise certain gendered identities over others. This supports the study's attention to the institutional culture of A-Level schooling in Zimbabwe, including school routines, teacher practices, and the symbolic value attached to different subject clusters. Together, these principles justify the use of TGH as a theoretical guide for analysing how gendered meanings become embedded in educational decision-making. The theory enables an interpretation of learners' and teachers' narratives not merely as isolated opinions, but as expressions of wider cultural and institutional structures that sustain gendered educational trajectories.

From this theoretical base, the study draws on three key concepts to construct its conceptual framework: (1) gendered discourses, which refer to the societal narratives that define certain subjects as masculine or feminine; (2) institutional enactments, which capture how school practices, teacher attitudes, and resource allocation reinforce or challenge these discourses; and (3) learner agency, which highlights the capacity of learners to either absorb or contest gendered expectations in their subject choices. The interaction of these concepts guides the study's phenomenological exploration, shaping both the research questions and the interpretation of the emerging narratives. This theoretical and conceptual grounding therefore establishes a coherent analytical frame for understanding how gendered hegemony is lived, negotiated, and reproduced within Zimbabwean A-Level subject selection. Having established the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the study, the next section details the methodological decisions made to explore participants' lived experiences.

3.0 Methodology

This section describes the interpretive phenomenological design used to explore learners' and teachers' lived experiences of gendered subject selection and explains how the research design supports the core argument of negotiated gendered hegemony. It outlines the qualitative methods employed to explore educational gender dynamics from the perspectives of local A-Level learners and their teachers, corroborated by selected primary records. For this purpose, two Masvingo District secondary schools were purposively chosen to capture variation in subject offerings and community context. Within each school, a twelve-learner panel was selected through criterion-based purposive sampling to ensure equal gender representation across subject streams namely sciences, commercials and arts. Data were collected through these two FGDs with A-Level learners (each lasting approximately sixty minutes) and ten KIIs of forty-five to sixty minutes with A-Level teachers, conducted in English and Shona as appropriate. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Document analysis of class registers and school records provided contextual corroboration. Data were analysed through a three-stage narrative process involving open coding, thematic categorisation, and interpretive synthesis, guided by Lull's TGH. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of methods and participants, as well as member validation of emerging interpretations. This methodology prioritised understanding participants' lived experiences and the meanings they assign to social phenomena, as emphasised by Cardano (2020).

To enhance contextual understanding, the study provides a detailed description of the Zimbabwean A-Level system and the socio-institutional profiles of the two participating schools, thereby offering the background necessary to interpret the emerging narratives. Zimbabwe's education system follows a thirteen-year structure, with A-Level positioned as the final two years of secondary schooling (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, MOPSE, 2020). A-Level subject selection is a high-stakes process, as it determines entry pathways into tertiary education and subsequently shapes learners' professional and economic trajectories. The curriculum, reorganised under the heritage-based framework introduced through a protracted reform process between 2013 and 2024, encourages a balance between academic disciplines, practical competencies and cultural relevance. Despite this reform agenda, long-standing gendered patterns persist: sciences and technical subjects tend to attract more male learners, while arts and humanities remain feminised spaces (Bhunu & Green, 2023; Chari, 2023). These dynamics are reinforced by wider socio-cultural beliefs, labour market narratives and parental expectations, all of which influence learners' perceptions of what constitutes 'appropriate' or 'successful' subject choices.

Policy-wise, Zimbabwe's education system is guided by inclusive and equity-oriented provisions articulated in the Education Amendment Act (2019) and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's gender policy directives (MOPSE, 2020). However, implementation at school level varies considerably, with many institutions demonstrating commitment at the rhetorical level but struggling to translate policy into meaningful practice due to resource constraints, entrenched attitudes, or limited teacher training in gender-responsive pedagogy (Makoni, 2022; Nyamanhindi, 2022a). This gap between policy intention and everyday practice forms a critical backdrop for understanding gendered subject selection.

Two schools participated in this phenomenological study. On one hand, School 1 is a long-established government day school located in an urban area of Masvingo District. The school enrolls learners from mixed socio-economic backgrounds, predominantly from surrounding high-density suburbs and nearby rural communities. With an A-Level offering centred on the humanities, commercial subjects and selected sciences, School 1 has a moderate academic profile but faces resource constraints typical of public schools in Zimbabwe. Gender equity initiatives exist—such as career guidance sessions and the presence of a school counsellor—but these are inconsistently implemented due to staffing shortages and competing administrative priorities. The school's cultural environment reflects strong community expectations regarding 'appropriate' subject choices for boys and girls, making it a fertile site for exploring how learners negotiate societal pressures.

On the other hand, School 2 is a mission-affiliated boarding school situated in a rural area approximately fifty kilometres from Masvingo city. It has a strong academic reputation and a comparatively well-resourced science department, attracting learners from a wider geographical catchment. The school offers a broader range of A-Level subjects, including Sciences, Commercials, Arts, and emerging technical pathways. Its ethos emphasises discipline, academic excellence and moral leadership, with structured guidance and counselling programmes. Despite these advantages, gendered enrolment patterns remain pronounced, especially within STEM subjects, reflecting persistent cultural beliefs within the communities from which the students originate. As a residential institution, School 2 provides a unique lens into how peer cultures, teacher expectations and institutional norms shape subject choices in ways that may differ from day schools.

Together, these institutional profiles illustrate the 'rich diversity' of everyday schooling environments in Zimbabwe—one urban, state-owned and resource-constrained, the other rural, mission-run and better resourced. By situating the findings within these socio-cultural and institutional contexts, the study foregrounds the ways in which gendered hegemony is enacted, reproduced and challenged across different school environments. This contextual grounding supports a deeper interpretation of learners' and teachers' narratives and enhances the credibility of the phenomenological insights.

The purposive selection of learners and teachers ensured what Bhunu & Green, 2023:126) designate as "diverse, data-rich perspectives." The researcher ensured the learners represented all academic departments, and teachers

included subject specialists and career guidance counsellors, reflecting Aryeh-Adje's (2021:80) recommendations for engaging "specific area experts." Data collection employed three methods: learner FGDs captured collective experiences, semi-structured teacher KIIs provided institutional insights, while document analysis of class registers and marks identified trends in subject selection and participation. This triangulation, recommended by Johnson and Clarke (2021:89), "strengthens the validity of findings." Guided by Busetto et al. (2020) and Makoni (2022), the researcher employed thematic analysis, involving data coding to identify themes, focusing on societal norms, stereotypes and institutional practices influencing subject selection.

The study adhered to established ethical standards for research involving human participants as recommended by Biddix (2021). Formal ethical clearance was obtained from the Great Zimbabwe University's Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. 2023/02) prior to data collection. Additional authorisation was granted by the Masvingo District Schools Inspector, the Masvingo Provincial Education Directorate and the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The school heads of the two participating institutions also granted ethical approval to the researchers. Because the research involved minors, written informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians of the learners, and the study purpose, procedures, and participant rights were explained in age-appropriate language. Participation was strictly voluntary, and learners were informed that they could withdraw at any point without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained throughout: code names were assigned to all participants and schools; data were anonymised during transcription; and digital recordings and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researchers. Group discussions were conducted in safe, familiar school settings to minimise discomfort. These procedures ensured that the dignity, safety, and rights of all participants were safeguarded in line with institutional and international ethical research guidelines.

This study is underpinned by Lull's TGH explained above, which provides a critical lens for examining how social power and gendered ideologies are constructed, maintained and occasionally resisted through everyday practices. According to Lull, hegemonic gender relations are not imposed through overt coercion but are perpetuated through subtle cultural processes and routine interactions that naturalise inequality. This framework aligns closely with the study's purpose of understanding how gender stereotypes influence learners' A-Level subject choices. Applying TGH within the educational context extends its use beyond media and communication studies, allowing for an exploration of how school environments become sites where gendered meanings are produced and negotiated. The theory guided both the research questions and the interpretive phenomenological design, shaping how insights were generated and analysed. Specifically, it informed the construction of FGDs, KIIs and document analysis protocols that explored learners' and teachers' experiences with gender stereotypes, as well as the interpretive focus on how learners internalised or contested such norms. By grounding the study in Lull's TGH, the analysis moves beyond descriptive accounts of gender disparity to interrogate the deeper socio-cultural mechanisms through which gendered subject preferences are sustained or disrupted. This theoretical framing thus provides coherence between the research problem on one hand, and the methodological approach and interpretive analysis on the other.

Regarding the analytical procedures and emergent themes, these were primarily guided by TGH to illuminate how cultural practices, institutional norms and everyday social interactions shape learners' A-Level subject choices. The analysis followed an interpretivist phenomenological approach that prioritised participants' subjective meanings while situating those meanings within broader hegemonic structures represented in the theory. This approach enabled the researchers to examine not only what learners and teachers said, but also how their narratives reflected the subtle, often normalised power relations that Lull identifies as central to the reproduction of gendered social order.

Data analysis proceeded in three interconnected stages. First, all interview and focus group transcripts were read repeatedly to identify significant statements relating to gender, power, social expectations, and subject preference. These statements were grouped into initial meaning units. Second, through iterative coding, these meaning units

were clustered into broader conceptual categories that captured patterned experiences across the two schools. During this stage, Lull's assumptions about hegemonic processes—such as the internalisation of gender norms, the legitimisation of gendered roles through cultural institutions, and the reproduction of gendered identities through everyday practices—served as sensitising concepts. They guided decisions about which patterns held explanatory value for understanding subject selection in the Zimbabwean context.

The third stage involved synthesising these categories into four overarching themes that underpin the findings: (1) societal influences on subject selection, (2) stereotypes affecting A-Level girls' subject selection, (3) stereotypes influencing A-Level boys' subject selection and (4) the effectiveness of school interventions in closing the gender gap. These themes did not emerge as isolated topical areas; rather, they reflect interrelated dimensions of how gendered hegemony operates in learners' academic decision-making. For example, narratives about economic aspirations among boys were interpreted in relation to hegemonic ideals of masculinity, while accounts of girls' reluctance to pursue STEM subjects were linked to internalised cultural expectations surrounding femininity and care-oriented futures.

By anchoring the three-stage thematic analysis in Lull's framework, the emergent themes function as more than descriptive categories. They provide a coherent structure through which the study advances its central argument: that gendered patterns in A-Level subject selection are not static, but dynamically negotiated within intersecting societal, cultural, and institutional contexts. This thematic structure also serves as the organisational spine of the findings and discussion sections, ensuring that evidence, theory, and interpretation interact consistently throughout the paper.

With the methodological approach clarified, the following section presents the findings that reveal how gendered hegemony is enacted and contested in schools.

4.0 Findings

This section presents the thematic insights that emerged from learners' and teachers' narratives, as well as primary class records, showing how prevailing gender dynamics reflect and complicate the workings of gendered hegemony in school contexts. It highlights learners' and teachers' perspectives on the role of societal norms in shaping subject selection, the influence of gender stereotypes, and the efforts made by schools to promote gender equity in A-Level education. The findings are organised into key objectives-based themes and subthemes, supported by insights from learner FGDs, teacher interviews and document analysis. Each theme is interpreted through Lull's TGH to illustrate how gendered expectations are reproduced, negotiated, or resisted within educational settings.

4.1 Learners' views about society's role in their selection of subjects

Learners' perceptions of societal influence on subject selection are organised into subthemes (Table 1). These reveal how gendered norms are internalised, reinforcing TGH's assertion that gendered hegemony operates subtly through everyday social interactions rather than explicit institutional policies.

Table 1: Learners' views about society's role in their selection of subjects

Theme	Subthemes	Insights from participants
Learners' views about society's role in their selection of subjects	Influence of gendered subject labels	Society labelled Mathematics, Physics, Biology, and Chemistry as "hard" sciences, discouraging female learners from engaging in these fields and reinforcing gendered stereotypes. Terms like "high schools" marginalised girls, limiting their participation in advanced education. Male learners avoided Arts due to societal stigma associating it with weakness and femininity. Boys were driven

		toward Sciences for their perceived prestige, often under parental pressure, with schools facilitating transfers to meet these expectations. Teachers noted that Sciences were viewed as inherently challenging, further cementing their association with male learners.
	Influence of traditional gender roles	Traditional gender roles influenced subject choices, with girls deterred from pursuing male-dominated fields or advanced education due to societal beliefs prioritising their roles as homemakers and future wives. Humanities and home-oriented subjects were encouraged to maintain cultural stability and avoid challenges to traditional norms.
	Classroom gender dynamics	Classroom gender dynamics reflected societal biases, with male dominance in Science teaching discouraging girls and fostering stereotypes. Teachers' actions and school policies further shaped subject preferences, while societal norms positioned girls' education as secondary, limiting their confidence and aspirations.
	Socioeconomic considerations	Socioeconomic factors heavily influenced access to education, with advanced schooling seen as elitist and favouring boys. Wealthier families directed children towards Sciences, while the underprivileged were relegated to Commercials or Arts, with limited scholarships exacerbating inequities.
	Role of external funding	External funding significantly influenced subject selection, with limited school funding encouraging reliance on donor support. Organisations like Econet prioritised Sciences, attracting learners with scholarships, job offers and bonded labour contracts, while industrial biases reassured boys but deterred girls.
	Parental expectations	Parental expectations heavily influenced subject choices, with many parents dictating their children's career paths based on societal norms, personal aspirations and perceptions of gender roles. Boys were pushed toward Sciences, while girls faced restrictions aligning with traditional views on family stability.

The following is a thematic interpretation of the above table offering first-hand perspectives from the different triangulated sources. Themes emerged from iterative coding and were triangulated across learners, teachers and school records to ensure trustworthiness. In each subsection, the participants' accounts support the interpretation, linking to objectives and theory.

4.1.1 Influence of Gendered Subject Labels

Society's labelling of certain subjects as hard sciences reinforced gendered stereotypes. Girl 3 (FGD1) stated, "Society labelled some subjects as hard, and we often considered them as such. Most of us believed it when Mathematics, Physics, Biology, and Chemistry were nicknamed hard sciences." Boys, conversely, avoided Arts due to social stigma, "I listened to several negative labels that described boys who did Arts... described as girlish, ever-babyish, sluggish, backward, and cowardly" (Boy 3, FGD2). Teachers highlighted that Sciences were socially perceived as challenging and male-dominated (Female Teacher 2, School 2). These perceptions illustrate

TGH in action, where routine social labelling reproduces gender hierarchies, guiding learners' choices and internalising societal expectations.

4.1.2 Influence of Traditional Gender Roles

Traditional gender roles constrained girls' academic agency. Girl 1 (FGD1) explained, "We thought twice, if not thrice, before choosing any one of the subjects that society previously reserved for boys. We believed it was like that for a reason." Boy 2 (FGD2) added, "Shona traditions said that girls must not pursue education too far up because they would cease to be ideal future wives." This belief positioned higher education, especially in sciences, as a threat to cultural stability, limiting girls' opportunities. Similarly, Girl 3 from FGD2 observed, "Society gave examples of women who studied Humanities and ended up claiming so much liberty as to challenge everything about culture and traditions." This perspective revealed a societal fear of educated women disrupting traditional gender roles, steering them toward Arts subjects that aligned with perceived domestic responsibilities. These accounts highlight the subtle cultural mechanisms through which gendered hegemony maintains dominance, steering girls toward Arts and reinforcing the male-science association.

4.1.3 Classroom Gender Dynamics

Classroom interactions reproduced societal norms. Girl 2 (FGD1) observed, "Girls were scared away by the numerical dominance of male teachers, especially in Sciences. If a subject was taught by a woman, it practically meant that it was a girl subject." This dynamic not only reinforced the perception of Sciences as male-dominated but also highlighted the need for more female representation in these fields. Additionally, classroom interactions sometimes undermined confidence. Girl 6 from FGD2 noted, "Whenever I presented or conducted an experiment, the teacher posed questions which switched off my confidence." Such experiences discouraged active participation and reinforced the perception that Sciences were unsuitable for girls. Teacher interventions, such as lowering entry requirements, mitigated but did not eliminate the effect, reflecting partial resistance to TGH. These findings show that classroom micro-dynamics serve as channels through which societal gendered expectations are operationalised.

4.1.4 Socioeconomic Considerations

Economic status reinforced gendered subject choice. Boy 4 (FGD1) noted, "Society made us believe that advanced education was for the elite, so many potential A-Level learners were prevented from attempting at all." This elitism, coupled with societal pressures, directed boys from affluent backgrounds toward Sciences, while girls and learners from lower-income families gravitated toward less resource-intensive subjects, such as Arts. Male Teacher 2 from School 2 elaborated, "Society was organised such that the propertied sent their kids to study Sciences, while the working class sent theirs to study Commercials, and the underclass had no choice but to make do with the Arts." This dynamic perpetuated class-based disparities, further marginalising female learners from science disciplines. Document analysis confirmed disparities in enrolment, illustrating intersectionality between class and gender, which magnifies hegemonic patterns in access to STEM.

4.1.5 Role of External Funding

Funding incentives influenced subject enrolment, "Donor organisations exerted significant influence on which subjects to select. For example, Econet sponsored learners largely in Sciences" (Male Teacher 1, School 1). Such funding attracted learners to Sciences, not necessarily out of interest but for financial incentives. Girl 4 from FGD2 explained, "There was a literal spree to enrol in Sciences, not necessarily out of career drives but for the allure of funding." Thus, learners' choices were shaped not solely by interest but by opportunity, showing how structural factors reinforce gendered hierarchies in alignment with TGH.

4.1.6 Parental Expectations

Parents dictated subject selection along gender lines, perpetuating societal norms, “My parents had specific aspirations for my professional development that I found difficult to comprehend, as they selected the subject combination I pursued” (Girl 6, FGD1). This highlighted a common theme where parents dictated academic paths, often aligning boys with Sciences and girls with Arts, based on traditional expectations. Boy 3 from FGD2 observed, “Society believed that what a parent failed to accomplish, it was the child that must accomplish it for the parent.” This reflected how societal and familial expectations shaped learners’ academic trajectories, often reinforcing existing gender norms. The emerging narrative aligns with TGH as it demonstrates the social reproduction of gendered hegemony within family structures, constraining learner agency.

Overall, the findings highlighted how societal norms, classroom dynamics, socioeconomic factors, external funding and parental expectations collectively reinforced gendered disparities in A-Level subject selection. Verbatim accounts revealed the internalisation of stereotypes, with boys steered toward Sciences and girls toward Arts, perpetuating entrenched inequalities in education. It can be highlighted that internalised self-doubt and classroom dynamics illustrate TGH in practice. These insights underscored the need for comprehensive interventions addressing societal beliefs and structural barriers to foster equitable subject selection. These narratives demonstrate that gendered subject choices are not solely determined by individual interest but are shaped by the interplay of societal hegemony, classroom interactions, and family expectations, illustrating the operational sway of gendered hegemony in Zimbabwean A-Level schools.

4.2 The influence of stereotypes on female learners’ subject selection

This section examines how societal stereotypes shape girls’ A-Level subject choices. Using TGH, the analysis shows how gendered hegemony operates subtly, shaping learners’ internalised beliefs, decisions, and confidence in STEM fields. Data were triangulated from FGDs, KIIs, and class records to ensure robustness. The participants’ contributions are summed up in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Girls’ subject selection as influenced by societal stereotypes

Theme	Subthemes	Insights from participants
Girls’ subject selection as influenced by societal stereotypes	Societal expectations, not individual interests	Girls’ subject choices were heavily influenced by societal expectations rather than personal interests, with families prioritising boys’ education and steering girls towards traditional roles, less costly options, and non-scientific fields due to cultural and economic biases.
	Perceptions of intellectual capability	Girls faced discouraging perceptions of their intellectual capability, with stereotypes suggesting declining aptitude as they advanced in education. Many were disheartened by societal beliefs undermining their potential in scientific fields, perpetuating doubts about their ability to succeed.
	Economic and familial pressures	Economic and familial pressures led families to prioritise practical, low-risk subject choices for girls, emphasising quick employment over long-term careers. Limited resources and societal expectations often deemed girls’ education less valuable than boys’, constraining their options.

	Internalised self-doubt	Societal stereotypes fuelled self-doubt in girls, leading them to underestimate their abilities, especially in Sciences. Many avoided challenging subjects, opting for perceived easier options. Teachers identified psychological barriers and stressed the need for confidence-building and encouragement.
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The above findings are expanded in the below interpretation where the sources are triangulated and verbatim accounts presented under each respective subtheme. Each of these subthemes reflects TGH, showing how external pressures and internalised beliefs coalesce to limit girls' educational agency.

4.2.1 Societal Expectations versus Individual Interests

Societal expectations strongly dictated girls' choices, limiting agency. Girl 1 (FGD1) noted, "A woman has no normal space in post-basic education." Girl 2 (FGD1) added, "My family showed me examples of women who studied too much and failed to establish stable relationships." Teachers corroborated economic bias, "Families were generous with money when funding boy education, but for girls, the cheapest choices were considered excellent" (Male Teacher 4, School 1). TGH frames these pressures as mechanisms of gendered social control, guiding girls into socially sanctioned, "safe" educational roles.

4.2.2 Perceptions of Intellectual Capability

Persistent beliefs about female inferiority in STEM emerged, "Girls are brightest at infancy, and their intellectual fortitude continues on a downward spiral as they advance in education" (Boy 1, FGD1). This sentiment perpetuated the myth that girls lacked the cognitive capacity to excel in demanding subjects like Sciences. A female learner shared a disheartening encounter with a professional woman who stated, "It's not a career for everyone, especially for women. You'll have to work twice as hard, and even then, you might not get the recognition you deserve" (Boy 5, FGD1). Such comments discouraged girls, further entrenching stereotypes about their capabilities. Teachers confirmed societal doubt, "There was a prevailing belief that women lacked sufficient intelligence for Sciences" (Male Teacher 3, School 1). These beliefs exemplify internalised gendered hegemony, where societal ideology becomes part of learners' self-conception, deterring them from pursuing rigorous subjects.

4.2.3 Economic and Familial Pressures

Financial considerations reinforced gender norms, "Pick subjects that won't waste money. If you fail, it's a small loss, but if you pass, you must get a job quickly" (Girl 3, FGD1). This reflected the prioritisation of immediate financial returns over long-term career aspirations for girls. According to Male Teacher 2 from School 2, "Families with limited resources viewed investing in a girl's education as risky." The data illustrated how economic and social pressures worked in tandem to steer girls toward Arts and Humanities while excluding them from STEM fields. It can be interpreted that economic constraints intersect with cultural norms, producing structural barriers to girls' participation in STEM, consistent with TGH's emphasis on systemic reproduction of gendered hierarchies.

4.2.4 Internalised Self-Doubt

Girls' self-perceptions limited their ambitions as internalised self-doubt emerged as a significant barrier for them pursuing STEM fields. One learner confessed, "I always heard that Sciences are for the geniuses, and I never saw myself as one. So, I chose subjects that seemed easier" (Girl 5, FGD1). Another boy observed, "Many girls were discouraged before they even tried because they'd been told so often that they wouldn't make it in Sciences" (Boy 3, FGD2). These internalised beliefs, shaped by societal messaging, eroded girls' confidence and deterred them

from exploring their full potential. Teachers emphasised that “The biggest challenge we faced was changing the mindset of girls who had been conditioned to believe they were not capable of succeeding in certain subjects” (Male Teacher 1, School 2). Addressing this psychological barrier was deemed critical to empowering girls and expanding their academic choices. TGH explains this internalisation as the subtle operation of societal power, shaping learners’ choices even in the absence of explicit institutional coercion.

All in all, the class registers and teacher observations confirmed that girls remained underrepresented in Sciences, with societal stereotypes, economic pressures, and internalised doubts collectively limiting their participation. The findings highlighted a systemic issue in educational settings where societal norms dictated subject choices, perpetuating gender inequalities. Addressing these barriers required concerted efforts to dismantle stereotypes, promote confidence, and create equitable opportunities for girls to pursue their interests and ambitions.

4.3 The influence of stereotypes on male learners’ selection of subjects

Boys’ choices were influenced by societal expectations and masculinity stereotypes, steering them toward STEM and away from Arts. Triangulated data reveal the interplay of social pressure, parental expectations, and peer influence. The subthemes and issues around boys’ subject selection as influenced by stereotypes are captured on Table 3 below:

Table 3: Boys’ subject selection as influenced by stereotypes

Theme	Subthemes	Insights from participants
Whether boys are influenced by stereotypes in their selection of subjects	Too high expectations for boys	Parents and society were said to generally perceive boys as naturally superior to girls, especially in STEM fields. There was highlighted a belief that boys must excel academically to fulfil their role as primary providers and custodians of the economy.
	Stereotypes around masculinity	The participants reported rigid gender stereotypes where masculinity was associated with STEM fields and outdoor careers, while the arts and humanities were seen as feminine and unfit for boys. There was pressure on boys to excel in sciences, even if they struggled with the subjects.

The following paragraphs analyse and interpret the finding presented on the above table using the identified subthemes. Findings indicate boys’ choices were constrained by high expectations and rigid masculinity stereotypes, steering them toward Sciences and away from Arts, consistent with societal hegemonic norms. Verbatim accounts confirm that parental pressure and peer stigma reinforced gendered academic trajectories.

4.3.1 High expectations for boys

Findings from learners, teachers, and documents demonstrated the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes on A-Level boys’ subject selection, reflecting societal expectations that position boys as future economic leaders. Learners highlighted how parents impose high expectations, with one boy stating, “My parents have had too high expectations of my academic potential being a boy. They often remind me that being a boy I must not find schoolwork being as problematic as my sisters do” (Boy 4, FGD2). Teachers echoed this sentiment, observing that societal norms deem boys as inherently superior in Sciences, with one teacher noting, “The social order out there is such that boys are more proficient than girls in scientific spheres. Their numeric dominance in the Sciences class is in tandem with this belief” (Male Teacher 2, School 1). Document analysis confirmed this trend, showing boys’ significant enrolment in Sciences and their minimal representation in Arts, highlighting how societal

pressures shape academic choices. TGH highlights how hegemonic norms construct boys' identities around STEM competence, producing pressure and limiting exploration of non-traditional subjects.

4.3.2 Stereotypes around masculinity

Stereotypes surrounding masculinity also deterred boys from pursuing Arts, reinforcing rigid gender norms. One boy shared how societal disdain for Arts subjects impacted his choices: "I have listened to several negative labels that describe boys who do Arts. Such boys are described as girlish, ever-babyish, sluggish, backward and cowardly" (Boy 4, FGD1). Another revealed parental disapproval when choosing Literature: "Both my parents were of the same mind to advise me that the men's world of work is believed to be in the outdoors or at least away from home" (Boy 2, FGD1). Teachers confirmed the societal stigma attached to boys pursuing non-Science subjects, with one commenting, "Boys are self-important, that is, they consider easy subjects feminine. I've seen someone drop the Shona subject saying that it was too easy to preserve his status as a schoolboy" (Female Teacher 2, School 2). Document analysis further supported these findings, showing boys' declining numbers in Arts while their representation in Sciences remained dominant. Thus, gendered societal expectations were found to constrain boys' subject choices, reinforcing hegemonic ideals of masculinity, consistent with Lull's TGH.

Taken together, these findings revealed how societal and familial expectations, coupled with stereotypes of masculinity, constrained boys' academic freedom, perpetuating the divide between Sciences and Arts while reinforcing traditional gender roles.

4.4 School efforts to address gender issues in A-Level classes

Building on the preceding discussion of societal influences, this section examines how schools attempt to challenge gendered subject norms. Schools implemented policies to promote gender equity, but structural and cultural constraints moderated their effectiveness. In this section, the researchers focused their inquiry on the efforts made by respective schools to address gender issues in A-Level education. This theme and the emerging subthemes are reported under Table 4 below:

Table 4: Findings on the schools' efforts to address gender issues in A-Level classes

Theme	Subthemes	Insights from participants
School efforts to address gender issues in A-Level classes	Unequal distribution of chores and study time	The school perpetuated gender inequality by assigning labour-intensive chores to girls, restricting their study and recreation time compared to boys. Policies enforcing earlier dormitory curfews for girls contributed to academic disparities, especially in Sciences.
	Institutional efforts	Schools implemented various measures to address gender inequality, including diverse teaching techniques, career guidance, and gender-inclusive policies. Teachers encouraged girls in STEM and boys in Arts, but challenges like limited female Science teachers and subject restrictions persisted.
	Gender-neutral policies and school environment	The school promoted gender-neutral policies through mixed-gender enrolment, seating arrangements, and staff collaboration. Admission was based on merit, fostering inclusion and confidence among learners to pursue subjects without gender-based stereotypes or segregation.

Below is the analysis and interpretation of the table, with verbatim quotations substantiating each emerging subtheme. While schools implemented progressive policies, unequal chores, curfews and staffing shortages maintained subtle gendered hierarchies, demonstrating the partial resistance to TGH in practice.

4.4.1 Unequal Distribution of Chores and Study Time

Learners were vocal about their schools' failure to address gender inequality in the distribution of chores and study time. Some learners expressed frustration with girls being assigned laborious tasks while boys enjoyed more leisure and study time. For instance, one learner lamented, "Instead of addressing gender inequality, the school is rather perpetuating it. For example, they assign girls to kill chickens and dress them instead of letting boys share a part of the work" (Boy 1, FGD1). Another reinforced this sentiment, stating, "I concur that the school is not fair regarding the dining chores. While we are dressing chickens, the boys are either resting or reading books, and it is so unfair" (Girl 2, FGD1). The unequal allocation of study time was also highlighted as a critical issue, with learners emphasising its impact on academic outcomes. Girls described being required to adhere to strict curfews, as one explained: "The school has a compulsory policy for all girls that they should be in their dormitories by seven. This means they must leave the classrooms or the library, but boys remain there for as long as they want" (Boy 4, FGD1). Another added, "Boarding mistresses too have a cut-off time for girls to be awake, reading. You can't be seen to be still reading beyond 9 PM when you are a girl, but boys can be up throughout the night" (Girl 5, FGD1). These restrictions were perceived as limiting girls' opportunities to excel in revision-heavy subjects like the Sciences. Document analysis corroborated these findings, showing that boys outperformed girls in Science subjects, despite being assigned similar homework loads. Such disparities suggest that unequal task allocation and study opportunities may contribute significantly to the observed academic performance gaps. Even in institutional settings, gendered routines reproduce hegemonic norms, restricting girls' opportunities for academic excellence (TGH).

4.4.2 Institutional Efforts

Teachers highlighted various institutional efforts aimed at reducing gender inequality, emphasising their role as catalysts for change. One teacher stated, "We have challenged social stereotypes by embracing diverse teaching techniques and fostered a sense of empowerment among all learners. Specifically, we have actively encouraged girls to venture into STEM subjects while also advocating for male influx into Arts" (Female Teacher 1, School 1). Another teacher noted, "This school has tried to level the playing field for A-Level learners by implementing policies that challenge traditional stereotypes and encourage girls to pursue subjects such as STEM, which are traditionally dominated by males" (Male Teacher 1, School 1). However, limitations to these efforts were acknowledged. A female teacher admitted, "While girls are increasingly gathering courage to tackle Sciences... female teachers are lacking in the Sciences department" (Female Teacher 2, School 2). Another teacher pointed out that subject offerings were still problematic, adding, "Girls who would have preferred to pick Food and Nutrition as a standalone Science subject are disappointed because it is not offered as a Science but a Practical, which is confusing" (Female Teacher 3, School 2). These insights indicate that while institutional policies are making strides in challenging gender norms, systemic gaps such as staffing shortages and limited subject options continue to hinder progress. Policies reflect partial resistance to TGH, but structural gaps limit transformative impact.

4.4.3 Gender-Neutral Policies and School Environment

Learners acknowledged positive aspects of gender-neutral policies, particularly in fostering inclusivity. For example, one learner shared, "The school has a gender-neutral policy on learner enrolment. There are no subjects considered feminine or masculine" (Boy 2, FGD2). Another learner appreciated mixed-gender seating arrangements, stating, "The seating arrangements are mixed, and this promotes a sense of inclusion. You do not feel that you are in a boys' or girls' class. We all participate equally, and it helps diminish the gender divide" (Girl 5, FGD2). These policies were credited with building confidence among learners in choosing non-traditional

subjects. As one female learner explained, “Being in a school that does not segregate based on gender has made me more confident in choosing subjects that I previously thought were only for boys” (Girl 3, FGD2). However, despite these progressive policies, the persistence of unequal study conditions and gendered chore allocations undermines their overall impact. Document analysis revealed that while boys and girls were assigned similar workloads, the disparities in their out-of-class experiences continued to reinforce traditional gender roles. While gender-neutral policies build confidence, TGH highlights that subtle, daily inequalities (chores, curfews) continue to reproduce gendered hierarchies.

The above analysis establishes that, while schools have implemented commendable efforts to promote gender-neutral policies and challenge stereotypes, learners’ experiences reveal persistent inequalities in daily routines and academic opportunities. Unequal distribution of chores and study time, combined with systemic gaps in subject offerings and staffing, continue to disadvantage girls, particularly in STEM subjects. Greater focus is needed on addressing these structural inequalities to create a truly inclusive and equitable educational environment for all learners.

4.5 Summary

Findings show that societal norms, stereotypes, classroom dynamics, parental expectations, economic pressures, and institutional practices interact to reproduce gendered inequalities in subject selection. TGH provides a lens to understand how these patterns are maintained subtly, through everyday social interactions and internalised beliefs. Triangulation across learners, teachers, and documents ensures analytical rigor, and the findings directly address the study’s objectives while informing strategies to promote gender equity. Learners’ accounts reflected societal expectations that align masculinity with scientific subjects and femininity with the arts, substantiated by primary records in the participating classes. Teachers’ perceptions of boys’ confidence in sciences reflect the operation of gendered hegemony, wherein masculine traits are hyped in traditionally high-status subjects. These findings provide the basis for the subsequent discussion, where they are interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework and wider literature.

5.0 Discussion

This section interprets the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and existing scholarship, demonstrating how the study advances the argument that gendered hegemony in A-Level subject selection is dynamic and negotiated. To structure this interpretation, the discussion is organised into three parts. Section 5.1 examines how societal norms and economic pressures shape gendered patterns of subject selection, reinforcing or challenging established expectations. Section 5.2 explores the influence of gender stereotypes on learners’ choices, highlighting points of convergence and divergence with theory and existing literature. Section 5.3 evaluates the effectiveness of school-based interventions, assessing the extent to which institutional efforts mitigate or reproduce gender disparities. Together, these subsections situate the study’s findings within broader scholarly debates and illuminate the ways gendered hegemony is reproduced, resisted and reshaped within the Zimbabwean A-Level education context.

5.1 Societal Influences on Subject Selection

The study highlighted that societal norms and cultural beliefs significantly impact subject selection, with boys leaning towards STEM subjects due to the perception that these subjects are associated with economic success. On the other hand, girls were found favouring Arts due to the perception that these subjects nurture societal feminine roles. These findings align with Dube and Mavhunga (2020:90), who note that “socioeconomic factors in rural Zimbabwe drive students’ decisions, particularly reinforcing traditional gender roles.” Similarly, Aryeh-Adje (2021) observe that societal expectations in Ghanaian schools influence male learners to view technical subjects as more prestigious, a finding consistent with the studied Zimbabwean context.

Another point of convergence between this study and prior studies is the role of economic conditions, as highlighted by Gwatura (2021). The current study agrees with Gwatura that financial stability aspirations drive boys to STEM and Commerce, although societal pressures often overshadow individual interests, especially for girls. Makoni (2022) notes a similar trend, emphasising that economic hardship exacerbates these biases, pushing families to guide boys towards subjects with perceived higher earning potential. However, this conclusion diverges from earlier findings by Maphosa and Bhebhe (2019:6) who state that “choosing what to learn ... is seen through the lens of a shifting reality” rather than the utter perpetuation of traditional mores. The current study also contradicts Thompson’s (2021) argument that the impact of societal norms is diminishing in regions where targeted awareness campaigns and community-level dialogues are effectively reshaping perceptions. Such efforts, while visible in Zimbabwe, remain superficial, with limited penetration into rural communities, the current study can reveal.

5.2 Stereotypes Affecting Female and Male Learners

Gendered perceptions of subject difficulty and prestige emerged as significant barriers. Female learners avoided STEM due to societal discouragement, while boys steered clear of Arts for fear of diminished status. Brown (2021) underscores this, arguing that gendered curricula reinforce stereotypes by labelling subjects like Mathematics and Physics as inherently masculine. Similarly, Paechter and Menzies (2023) suggest that societal narratives around male superiority in Sciences perpetuate systemic barriers for girls.

However, this study’s findings on participation stereotypes differ from those of Nyamanhindi (2022a), who posits that girls’ performance in STEM improves significantly in environments with gender-sensitive pedagogy and mentorship. In contrast, the current study reveals that even with such interventions, societal discouragement persists, illustrating the deeper entrenchment of these stereotypes in Zimbabwean society. The view on Arts subjects emanating from this study depicts a notable departure from Tsimba et al. (2022). While these scholars suggest that societal trends in urban areas are shifting to neutralise biases against boys pursuing Arts, the present study found learners from a peri-urban setting being significantly stigmatised for choosing Arts, highlighting regional disparities in societal norms.

5.3 Effectiveness of School Interventions in Closing the Gender Gap

The study revealed that school interventions, such as STEM-focused initiatives and mentorship programmes, had limited success due to unequal resource distribution and a lack of female role models. Boys were found to be benefiting from longer study hours than girls, and this also exacerbated gender disparity. This finding is consistent with Chari (2023), who notes that resource allocation inequalities often undermine efforts to promote STEM for girls in rural Zimbabwe. Bhunu and Green (2023) provide an additional analytic layer, arguing that STEM interventions often fail to address structural barriers, such as household chores disproportionately assigned to girls, which limit their study time. The present findings reiterate this, showing how societal expectations outside the school fuel the challenges faced by female learners.

In contrast, Ndlovu and Chikohomero (2023:84) highlight successful interventions in certain Zimbabwean schools, where “gender-sensitive teaching and community collaboration significantly improved girls’ participation in STEM.” However, the current study demonstrates that these successes are not uniformly replicated, suggesting variability in implementation and outcomes from school to school. The debate extends to mentorship as well. While Nguyen and Wang (2021) advocate for mentorship as a transformative tool, the current findings emphasise its limitations in Zimbabwe due to a shortage of female mentors in STEM fields. This underscores the need for wider or universal reforms rather than isolated interventions, in line with Tafirei et al. (2013:242) who suggest the consideration of “every aspect of the ordinary curriculum”.

The findings of this study largely align with prior research, such as Makoni (2022) as well as Bhunu and Green (2023), in underscoring the deep-rooted influence of societal norms on subject selection and the pivotal role of

economic aspirations in shaping boys' choices. Both this study and Chari (2023) converge on the critical issue of resource inequities, which continue to hinder progress toward achieving gender equality in education. However, the study diverges from Nyamanhindi (2022b) by highlighting the persistent societal discouragement faced by girls in pursuing STEM subjects, even in the presence of targeted school interventions. Additionally, the findings challenge Tsimba et al. (2022) by revealing that the stigmatisation of boys pursuing Arts subjects remains a significant issue in rural settings, thereby pointing to an urban-rural divide in societal attitudes toward subject selection. These findings call for a multidimensional approach to addressing gender disparities (Tafirei et al., 2013). Beyond school-level interventions, community engagement and systemic reforms are essential for creating sustainable change as advocated by Dube and Mavhunga (2020) as well as by Aryeh-Adje (2021). The following conclusions synthesise these insights and outline their implications for policy, practice and future research, whereas the study limitations are taken consideration of.

6.0 Conclusions and Limitations

This section summarises the study's key insights, reflects on their theoretical and practical implications, and reaffirms the central argument, while acknowledging the limitations of the study. The study underscores how Lull's concept of gendered hegemony manifests within Zimbabwean A-Level subject selection, as societal norms subtly shape learners' academic self-concepts. Addressing these entrenched dynamics requires deliberate gender-sensitisation in school counselling and curriculum planning, as expanded in the conclusions subsection below. Study limitations are also explained to avoid undue confidence in the study as well as to invite more ongoing research efforts from other scholars.

6.1 Conclusions

This study highlights the persistent influence of societal norms, stereotypes and resource inequities on learners' subject choices, revealing entrenched gender disparities in studied institutions within Zimbabwe's A-Level education system. While some progress has been made through school interventions aimed at promoting gender equality, significant challenges remain in addressing societal biases and ensuring equitable access to resources. These findings call for a more comprehensive approach to dismantling structural barriers and fostering an inclusive learning environment, aligning with Lull's (2011) Theory of Gendered Hegemony, which explains how dominant societal ideologies reinforce traditional power structures and roles. Throughout the paper, gendered subject selection in Zimbabwean A-Level schooling appeared to be shaped by the interaction of socio-cultural expectations, institutional practices and learner agency, revealing gendered hegemony as a negotiated rather than fixed process.

The findings underscore that societal norms and expectations, as theorised by Lull, perpetuate gendered hegemony, shaping learners' subject choices and reinforcing traditional gender roles that disadvantage both boys and girls. Boys are steered towards STEM subjects due to perceptions of economic success and status, while girls face societal pressures to conform to nurturing roles, leading them to favour Arts and Humanities. These dynamics reflect the hegemonic ideals that define what is acceptable for each gender, constraining learners' aspirations. Stereotypes further create structural barriers, limiting opportunities for learners to explore their interests and talents. Female learners are often discouraged from pursuing STEM subjects due to perceptions of difficulty and societal doubts about their capabilities. Male learners, on the other hand, avoid Arts subjects to protect their social status, underscoring the restrictive and self-perpetuating nature of these stereotypes.

Despite the implementation of school-based initiatives, such as mentorship programmes and STEM-focused interventions, resource disparities persist. Female learners often lack access to role models in Science-related fields, perpetuating the hegemonic belief that STEM is a male domain. Moreover, societal biases continue to undermine the effectiveness of these initiatives, as they fail to challenge the broader societal structures sustaining

these inequalities. Lull's theory provides a lens to understand why these interventions alone are insufficient; hegemonic ideologies require systemic and societal shifts to disrupt their hold. Addressing these persistent barriers may require reforms that extend beyond the school environment, targeting societal attitudes, challenging stereotypes and ensuring equitable resource distribution. Through such comprehensive strategies, learners may realise their full potential, free from the constraints of gendered expectations.

6.2 Limitations

The study's focus on only two schools presents a significant limitation, as it may not fully capture the diversity of socio-cultural contexts and educational practices across Zimbabwe. Variations in urban and rural settings, economic conditions and school policies could influence the findings, potentially limiting the generalisability of the results. Additionally, the study relied heavily on qualitative data from FGDs and interviews, which, while rich in detail, are inherently subjective and may reflect individual stances rather than broader trends. The absence of a longitudinal approach also restricted the ability to explore how societal norms, stereotypes and school interventions evolve over time, which could have provided deeper insights into long-term impacts. Finally, the study's emphasis on learner and teacher perspectives did not incorporate the views of other key stakeholders, such as parents, policymakers and community leaders, whose roles in shaping educational outcomes are critical. These limitations suggest the need for future research that includes a more representative panel, diverse methodologies and a broader range of stakeholders to build a more comprehensive understanding of gender issues in education.

7.0 Recommendations

This section presents actionable insights derived from the study's findings and interpretive analysis, aimed at addressing gender disparities in A-Level subject selection. The recommendations are organised into three subsections. Section 7.1 outlines policy-level strategies, including equitable resource allocation and gender-sensitive curriculum reforms, to create systemic support for balanced subject choices. Section 7.2 focuses on practical interventions for schools and teachers, such as inclusive pedagogy, mentorship programmes and extracurricular initiatives that foster learner confidence and cross-gender engagement. Section 7.3 highlights avenues for future research, identifying gaps in understanding the long-term impact of stereotypes, parental influence and community-level interventions. Together, these recommendations provide a multi-layered approach to reducing gendered inequities in Zimbabwean A-Level education and other related contexts, linking institutional, societal and individual spheres.

7.1 Policy Recommendations:

To address gender disparities in education, policies must mandate equitable resource allocation across all subjects, ensuring that learners in Arts and STEM disciplines have equal access to quality teaching materials and learning environments. Additionally, gender-sensitive curriculum reforms should be enforced to eliminate biases that reinforce traditional gender roles. For instance, integrating examples of successful female scientists into STEM lessons and highlighting male contributions in Arts subjects could challenge stereotypes and encourage balanced subject selection. Policymakers should also consider incentivising schools to promote gender-neutral enrolment practices through grants or recognition programs. The call for gender-sensitive curriculum reforms reflects the researchers' interpretive synthesis of how the current curriculum context reinforces traditional gendered subject identities—even if this was not directly articulated by participants.

7.2 Implications for Practice:

Training teachers in inclusive pedagogy is critical to fostering an equitable learning environment. Professional development programmes should focus on identifying and challenging implicit biases, as well as equipping educators with strategies to support diverse learners. Expanding mentorship opportunities in STEM for girls can also help bridge the gender gap. Partnering with industry professionals and female role models in STEM fields can provide learners with tangible examples of success, demystifying perceptions of difficulty and promoting

confidence. Schools should also implement extracurricular programs that encourage cross-gender collaboration, such as mixed-gender science fairs or arts exhibitions, to normalise diverse interests and abilities.

7.3 Suggestions for Future Research:

Future studies should investigate the long-term impacts of stereotypes on career trajectories, exploring how subject choices made during schooling influence learners' professional paths and economic opportunities. Such research could provide valuable insights into how early interventions might mitigate negative outcomes. Additionally, strategies for engaging parents in reshaping societal attitudes should be explored. Parents often play a crucial role in reinforcing or challenging stereotypes, and understanding their perspectives can inform more effective outreach and education programs. Other potential areas of inquiry include the role of community organisations in fostering gender equity and examining the effects of emerging technologies, such as e-learning platforms, on subject selection and gender dynamics.

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