

**WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL
EDUCATION AND TRAINING.**

**EXPLORING THE UNIQUE PERSPECTIVES OF FEMALES FROM
VOCATIONAL INSTITUTES: A CASE STUDY OF NAKAWA
VOCATIONAL TRAINING INSTITUTE (NVTI)**

by

Claire Linette Seremba

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my Late Mother Rosemary for she was and remains my greatest inspiration to pursue more and more excellence in life.

“Mukama a’beniwe Mummy” (God be with you always)—Gone too soon but forever in our hearts!

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ABSTRACT

In Uganda, women have achieved significant progress in technical vocational education and training (TVET), both in institutions and in the workplace. However, entry and retention rates remain low, and women continue to face numerous challenges. The primary goal of this study was to determine how these young women interpret the concept of empowerment in the context of TVET. This study begins by investigating the experiences of female Nakawa students and graduates, including their decision to attend Nakawa, their challenges at Nakawa and in the workplace, and their interactions with male students and instructors. The participants' perspectives on empowerment are highlighted in this study through two themes: social and cultural attitudes, and individual sense of self. Overall, the young women's experiences show that Nakawa created an environment that was conducive to empowerment, since they established boundaries for fair enjoyment of rights inside the institute. Graduates, on the other hand, reported more difficult experiences because of discriminatory actions at their workplaces. Through the analysis of this data, empowerment is identified as a 'process' centred on the respondents' individual experiences.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

NVTI Nakawa Vocational Training Institute

BTVET Business Technical Vocational Education and Training

ICRW International Centre for Research on Women

GPI Gender Parity Index

UBOS Uganda Bureau of Statistics

STEM Science Technology Engineering Mathematics

TVET Technical Vocational Education and Training

MOETS Ministry of Education Technology and Sports

WID Women in Development

GAD Gender and Development

PGN Practical Gender Needs

SGI Strategic Gender Interests

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Uganda has a dominantly patriarchal society, which influences the lives of women and men differently. For a long time, it has supported gender equality and women's empowerment through education by placing a strong emphasis on access to education for the girl-child as a prerequisite of empowerment of girls and women. Nevertheless, there is a clear male child preference, and the status of women has been guided by numerous spoken and unspoken patriarchal values, traditions and practices that remain a part of the cultural milieu. In 1995, the Ugandan Constitution provided several reforms that are in favour of gender equality and equity,¹ providing guidelines for gender mainstreaming and implementation of policies and laws that promote and protect the rights and privileges of girls, boys, women, and men respectively (Kwesiga, 2002).

1.1 Women's Empowerment and Education in Uganda

At the 1995 UN Women Conference in Beijing, the 'rights' perspective was strongly reasserted ushering in popular notions of 'Education for All', as a way forward to the achievement of gender equality and empowerment. This has since become a popular unquestioned motto amongst most donor agencies, state/government agencies and NGOs (Parpart, 2002). The underlying assumption is that if girls and women understand their

¹ The concept of gender equity refers to "fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different, but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations, and opportunities" (International Labour Office [ILO], 2007). It is distinct and different from the concept of gender equality, which is the effective equality between men and women, that entails the concept that all human beings, both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypical views, rigid gender roles, and prejudices. Gender equality means that the different behavior, aspirations, and needs of women and men are considered, valued, and favored equally. It does not mean that women and men have to become the same but that their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female (ILO, 2007).

conditions, know their rights, and learn skills traditionally denied to them, empowerment will follow (Medel-Anonuevo, 1995). According to the World Bank, investment in the education of girls delivers a host of advantages such as improved maternal health, reduced fertility rates, poverty and population reduction, improved family welfare as more children go to school since more resources will be put to cater for the family, and most obviously economic prosperity (Global Monitoring Report, 2007).

With the increasing dominance of technology and a turn to industrialization by late catch-up economies, especially in developing nations like Uganda, more recent emphasis has been placed on skills development through Business Technical Vocational Education and Training (BTJET). Therefore, vocational education plays a key role in attaining the goal of reducing inequalities.

A recent review of the literature by International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) (2005) shows a correlation between higher education (emphasis on post-primary), women's autonomy, empowerment, and gender equality. It states a girl with a higher-level education (other than primary education), is more likely to say no to discriminatory tendencies, and more likely to push forward in a biased work environment. She will be better placed to negotiate and overcome the oppressive socio-cultural constraints in society that may create structural changes, thereby aiding to further liberate women. Despite the higher impacts of an investment in higher levels of education, vocational education for girls and women is still poorly developed with wider gender imbalances in vocational education programs than other areas of education (ICRW, 2005).

In Uganda, the Gender Parity Index (GPI)² for pre-primary and primary education indicates that a 50:50 ratio for males and females has been reached for net enrolment levels. However, as the rate of enrolment at that lower-level increases; it is the inverse in secondary and tertiary as young women's enrolment ratios fluctuate. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS, 2012), the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for Business, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (BTJET) is 0.25 (i.e., the proportion of male to female enrolment in BTJET is 100 to 25). This indicates young women's unequal enrolment in the skill-oriented institutions.

Additionally, young women partake in traditionally female courses such as hair dressing, home economics, tailoring and design and so on, as opposed to males who dominate in science and technical courses such as electronics, electrical engineering, metal works and wood works and so on. However, this dynamic has begun to steadily change with an increase in the number of females interested and enrolling in science and technical courses (BTJET Strategic Plan, 2011/2022).

The Ugandan Government implemented measures to combat gender inequality, such as the implementation of National Strategy for Girls' Education in Uganda,³ application of affirmative action during the appointment of personnel into the education service commission, formation of the gender policy in education ministry, development of a road map to kick start the process of drafting guidelines for teenage pregnancies and motherhood

² A GPI of 1 indicates parity, or equality, between the school participation ratios for males and females. A GPI of less than 1 indicates a gender disparity in favour of males, that is, a higher proportion of males than females attend that level of schooling. A GPI that is higher than 1 indicates a gender disparity in favour of females (UBOS, 2012).

³ The purpose of the NSGE is to establish a clear framework for identification, implementation and coordination of interventions designed to achieve promote girls' education in Uganda.

in school, menstrual hygiene management conference and ordinance, continued implementation of 1.5 bonus entry points to females who qualify for University, education training and setting up bursaries to specifically facilitate entry of females into universities and vocational institutions through the Government Scholarship funds and the BTVET Education bursaries. None the less, there remain structural hinderances and such interventions have had minimal effects on the ground.⁴

1.2 Statement of The Problem

Over time, the dialogue on women's pathways to empowerment has focused on initiatives that primarily look at what women do for development. These initiatives focus on instrumental gains such as driving economic growth, impacts on child growth, improved infant health, improved women's health, family sustainability and even increased female political participation. This presents empowerment as shot-gun solution to development, with women as a means to end. However, a shift in direction now highlights the process of empowerment, paying close attention to women's perceptions and identifying the dynamic dimensions of their life experiences within the different pathways to empowerment (Cornwall, 2014; Cornwall, 2016).

Over the years, Uganda's education system has undergone numerous changes especially with respect to gender equality and equity. Girls' education has become more central to the policy frameworks, and mainstreaming gender has become second nature in most government initiatives. The education focus has taken a shift to promote science and

⁴ In 1990, government introduced affirmative action of 1.5 extra points for all female students joining public universities

technological courses to attain the goal of a technology-based economy. This in turn has created an opportunity for the advancement of women's status, as it opens the floor for the discussion of women within the sciences.

Due to an urgency to reduce the rising youth unemployment rate—currently at 14% for women and 9% for men (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2017)—vocational studies are fast becoming a new pathway in Uganda. Based on this premise, females have been encouraged to take up science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) subjects within vocational education. It has been credited as a viable pathway to empower women, as they would be equipped with skills to enhance their lives (BTVET Strategic Plan, 2011/2022).

The Ugandan Government's commitment to gender equality and equity in vocational education, can be seen through several efforts to foster increased enrolment of females. For example, tuition bursaries for girls in TVET, preferential access to instructors training for female graduates, as well as the introduction of females to TVET institutions through open house school tours to encourage them to apply to these institutions (Mbabali, 2018). However, girls' attitudes towards science subjects remains low especially in technical vocational education and training (TVET), mostly due to the entrenched socio-cultural gender norms, practices, and values.

My research study intends to examine the experiences of women/girls in vocational institutions, and to further unpack the concept of empowerment, especially in terms of what is known and understood about this concept. As such my research question is: ***“How do female students in and graduates of Nakawa in Uganda construct, and understand empowerment in relation to their education?”***

The educational experiences of girls and women in vocational institutes are often influenced by their socio-cultural contexts such as the family backgrounds, social contexts, beliefs, behaviours, and attitudes of the society. Empowering women should not only be based upon presence in the schools, but also on creating enabling environments (Manuere & Phiri, 2018). Education initiatives have focused more on access and entry—creating ways to increase girls’ enrolment into schools—with little or limited emphasis and focus on their lives in or out of school. As such the contexts within which the girls/women are located are overlooked; yet these are core in addressing the systematic root causes of discrimination. (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014).

Therefore, it is problematic for current development ‘solutions’ to emphasize any one dimension, be it education or political participation, assuming empowerment will automatically follow (Malhotra, et al, 2002). Most literature focuses on statistical correlations, which can be misleading because they present simplistic certainties that obscure the complex realities of life and what is on ground. As such, it is necessary to critically analyze the experiences of girls currently in this pathway of vocational education. This will bring to light experiences and views that will inform the development planning process in and for Uganda. This will hopefully aid to prevent the continuation of policies that are mere lip-service and have minimal impact on the lives of recipients, and even less on advancing women’s empowerment.

As Parpart et al. (2003) argue, development ‘solutions’ focusing on empowerment deserve to be critically examined. There are numerous ways in which the concept of empowerment is perceived, defined, idealized, and constructed. It is more important to focus on creating a meaningful process of empowerment rather than primarily the measurement of

empowerment goals (Parpart, 2002). As vocational education becomes a focus of the Ugandan government, with streams of entry opened up to women, it is important to understand the impacts on women.

1.3.1 Main Objective

The primary objective of this thesis is to assess the perceptions of the concept and process of empowerment by female students and graduates in Nakawa in Uganda, and how the experience of vocational education influences their conceptualization of empowerment.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

1. To assess the factors that influence young women to join TVET institutions, such as Nakawa Vocational institute, specifically why they chose to take technical and science related courses.
2. To examine the positive and challenging aspects of being a female vocational student and a female graduate in the work force.
3. To analyze current students' and graduates' understanding of the concept of empowerment within the context of vocational education. What does empowerment, as a concept and process, mean to them?
4. To identify the factors or interventions needed to provide a more conducive environment for female students to fully experience their potential within the vocational education settings.

1.4 Significance of This Research

There has been a shift overtime from academic certification to skills development emphasizing Business Technical Vocational Education and Training (BTVET). The assumption is that equipping females with skills training will improve their competitive advantage, which will lead to increased income earnings, improved human welfare and economic prosperity, therefore, resulting in empowerment (BTVET Strategic Plan, 2011/2022). Therefore, it is paramount to engage in a discourse to rethink the concept of empowerment, with a focus on the specific knowledge of the recipients of development strategies aimed at empowerment. This study informs the ongoing debate on empowerment by creating a nuanced understanding of the concept from the experiences and narratives of young women in vocational institutions.

This discourse speaks to the researcher's experience as an African student in a Western university. It is important to highlight women's voices, especially women in the developing world, in defining concepts which are applied to them. As such development strategies should be founded on women's local understandings as they have an epistemic advantage—that is the individuals who are actively living in this context/situation. This is more likely to promote agency, ownership, and choice to ensure sustainability. The study set out to understand what it is like to be a girl in vocational institution and how this has shaped their view, ideas, opinions and understanding of the concept of empowerment.

1.5 Research Methodology

This research lies within the social constructivist paradigm; this assumes that an individual's reality is socially constructed and determined by their context embedded in

social practices, norms, and values. Individuals attach meaning to certain phenomena from lived experiences, which influence interpretations and understandings about concepts, events, and problems. This type of inquiry allows for multiple meanings to emerge, providing the researcher with a holistic understanding of the phenomena or concepts, within their natural setting (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

This research applied the case study method of qualitative inquiry, exploring Uganda's vocational education and women's empowerment (Creswell, 2009). This study focused on obtaining primary data focusing on the lived experiences of current students, graduates, and instructors from Nakawa Vocational institution. It explored the perspectives of 22 female students & graduates, their opinions, and views of empowerment based upon their social backgrounds, values, expectations, challenges, and their general experiences within the vocational/skills-based pathway of education.

This study examines how the informants navigate different challenges such as financial worries, limited housing, conflicting social backgrounds, family expectations, scrutiny from male peers, gender bias within their work placements, societal biases against females transgressing social norms in trades/skills industries. These young women are battling between conforming to prevailing social norms/ideals and their own interests in their chosen fields, as well as the enabling factors and obstacles within educational institutions. The study examined these emerging themes, it assessed their views of the concept of empowerment, based on their lived experiences. As they are navigating being 'female' in this predominantly male environment, this research shows the possibilities and limitations provided by this pathway in relation to empowerment.

1.6 Area of Study

The field work was conducted at Nakawa Vocational Training Institute (NVTI) located in the business district of Uganda's capital city, Kampala. Nakawa Vocational Training Institute is one of four public formal vocational training Institutes directly operated and administered by the Ministry of Education, Technology & Sports (MoET&S) through the Business Technical Vocational Education and Training (BTJET) Department.

This is one of the oldest Technical vocational institutes in Uganda, opening its gates officially in 1968. The primary objective of the establishment was to provide vocational training skills to school leavers and apprentices in enterprises and to upgrade and assess competencies of industrial workers. Since 1971, it has had a long-standing partnership with the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) through the first JICA project, "Uganda Vocational Training centre." This partnership has aided the improvement of Nakawa: such as the construction and rehabilitation of workshops and building infrastructure; provision of training equipment and instructors training courses and management programs in Uganda and Japan. (Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), 2018).

There are eight departments: Electricity, Electronics, Machining and fitting, Motor Vehicle Mechanics, Carpentry, and joinery, Plumbing and Sheet metal, Welding and Fabrication and Building and Concrete Practice. The newly created Pedagogy department addresses the development of the BTJET Instructors' training delivery skills. All 8 departments are managed by a Head of Department (HOD), 2 senior instructors, 3 Instructors and 2

Assistant Instructors. Nakawa also combines vocational schooling with structured learning on-the-job, which enables students to have rounded education experiences.

Nakawa Vocational Training Institute (NVTI) was chosen because it offers unique science courses. These courses are because of its ongoing partnership with JICA. The institute also over the years set up bursaries to encourage the recruitment of girls to Science, Technology and Mathematics courses (STEMS). In Ugandan society, these courses are still viewed as predominantly male courses. At Nakawa, a class will comprise an average ratio of 5:50—that is 5 girls for every 50 students in each programme.

1.7 Data Collection

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The data collection took place between October to November 2016. This data remains relevant as research related to women and empowerment in TVET in Uganda is limited. Student informant recruitment was premised on these parameters: the age of the informant needed to be 16-30 years; the type of courses being taken - in particular, sciences, and their willingness to partake in the study to discuss their experiences.

This study employed two complimentary research strategies that is semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions using open-ended questions. Overall, 33 participants participated in this study. There were 10 current female students, 7 female graduates, 6 instructors (3 male and 3 female instructors)⁵ and lastly 10 current students in two focus group discussions (1st group – 5 male students & 2nd group- 5 female current

⁵ Female instructors were also previous Nakawa students

students) who were interviewed.⁶ The researcher investigated the participants' own accounts and analyzed their interpretations of the concept of empowerment.

Participants in this study come from various regions of Uganda, as well as various tribes, age groups, and family backgrounds, making this sample diverse. This provides a range of viewpoints that will enrich the data collected. Six of the seventeen current and graduate female participants are from central Uganda, three from Western Uganda, five from Northern Uganda, and three from East Uganda. Participants were mostly from poor family backgrounds, with some having family in rural areas and had travelled to Kampala to study at Nakawa. Participant age group ranged between 18-25 years. As each participant comes from a different region and thus a different tribe, one would expect their perspectives to differ. Interestingly, most participants held similar views about this concept. The limits to this aspect of heterogeneity were the lack of time and resources to explore other institutions in other regions.

The semi-structured interviews provided privacy for the females to discuss their perspectives without any undue influence; they took place in quiet areas (inside and outside) far from other students close to their department worksites. This brought to light sensitive issues and enabled the informants to speak honestly and freely about their experiences. On the other hand, the focus group discussions were set up in a free open non-threatening space in an empty student leisure room, which enabled an open dialogue with the informants. This strategy also enabled the researcher to probe further on the similarity and differences in their experiences. The informants were encouraged to share their views,

⁶ The 5 female current students in the FGD are different from the first 10 female current students

as well as respond to questions set by the researcher and those that arose from other members in the group.

This research took place in three stages: The first set of interviews were with current female students at Nakawa. Current students provided a contextual understanding of the vocational education environment. It provided an in-depth look at the life of a girl in a vocational school, how she navigated different goals, expectations, school-work-life balance, achievements, challenges and how she addressed them, where did she fit and why, why she chose this pathway and what influenced her choices. This provided insight into her life experiences.

Secondly, interviews with former female students who had graduated in the past 5 years provided insights into life-after-the institution. They shared their successes such as starting their own business to finding jobs. They also shared their challenges and fears such as the burden of proving themselves to their male colleagues in their predominantly male workplaces and, the task of finding meaningful industrial placements to sustain their livelihood. This study unearthed all these dynamics and analyzed how they have influenced their perception of empowerment.

Thirdly, focus groups discussions were conducted. These provided a conversational space to find out diverse viewpoints. There were two sets of focus groups: one with current female students and one with current male students. I decided to add male students' perspectives due to the consistent reference by current female students to their significant relationships with male students. The female students pointed to the changes in their interactions with male students and indicated that their male classmates were great support

systems and pillars. This prompted the examination of the views and attitudes of male students towards the presence of female students in what is still referred to as a male-dominated field. This focus group also provided an understanding of male student views on the concept of empowerment.

Lastly, interview with key respondents comprised of instructors who also were heads of departments. Most of the instructors started out their careers at Nakawa and would have good standing knowledge of its policies and overall knowledge of different aspects of students' life and the interactions with their instructors. Their interviews were carried in instructors' offices at Nakawa providing for privacy, comfort, and flexibility. These key informants were selected to provide insights into the student life and how Nakawa policies affect the young ladies' experiences. The female instructors were previous Nakawa students, so they provided in-depth student & graduate experiences for women from Nakawa. The male instructors provided the information on interactions with female students. Their knowledge gave more insights into the full experiences at Nakawa.

In each interview and focus group discussion the information was recorded, and notes were taken. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form to show they agree to be a part of the study and were also given a brief introduction to the research such as what the research was about, the goals, the objectives and the area of study and scope. The researcher also briefly introduced herself to create a point of relation with each participant and this made them feel more at ease to share. Each participant was made aware of the voice recording and note taking, this cleared any confusion or doubts.

1.8. Content Analysis

The primary data was analysed to determine central themes arising during the research. The data was sorted using a coding system, these codes/themes were derived from research questions, patterns, connections, as well as statements made by participants. For example: females students shared that they related empowerment to being able to do what boys can do, standing on their own and breaking stereotypes. The themes are discussed in chapter five.

1.9. Limitations To the Study

The respondents were drawn from only one vocational institution. It would have been best to conduct a more comprehensive study, however the available resources in terms of finances and time would not accommodate a more diverse study to be conducted. Similarly, students were hesitant to have a sit-down as they had a busy timetable and schedule that was quite constraining.

In the onset of the research, it was difficult to establish trust with the students at the institute. The researcher posted notices on school notice boards, was introduced to department heads; however, students were not as willing to freely approach the researcher. Some participants had research fatigue; they had numerous researchers approach them, however, they did not see any results from all the studies conducted at the institutions, they felt like guinea pigs hence the initial reluctance to participate.

This was later resolved through a formal introduction to the different classes by the Deputy Head teacher, who also provided time slots within the existing timetable for participants to

meet with the researcher. This seemed successful as the female students quickly gained interest and cooperated to partake in the study. Regardless of all initial roadblocks, the field research was completed, and all participants gave valuable insights that informed the research.

1.10. Chapter Outline

Chapter two provides the theoretical basis for the analysis of the research findings. This chapter discusses the theoretical underpinnings related to the concept of empowerment. The conceptual framework breaks down the unique concepts that encompass empowerment: the intrinsic relationship between power, choice, and agency. It also explores the power relations which influence women's experiences through the Gender and Development framework.

Chapter three provides an overview of Uganda's education sector and the status of women in Uganda. It reviews how society perceives women; how this impacts the overall national and international goal of gender equality and empowerment. Furthermore, it examined the policy reforms that initiated changes around women's issues and the rationale behind it all, nature of vocational education and training in Uganda, and lastly a literature review of the experiences of females in Uganda within the vocational institution context.

Chapter four undertakes the analysis of the research findings. Using the content analysis based off emerging themes, it analysed the perceptions, experiences, expectations, opinions, challenges, successes, and changes faced by female students and graduates in Nakawa vocational institute in Uganda. Through the assessment of the field data, it told

the story of what it is like to be a 'female' in a vocational institute in Uganda, focusing on their description of their lived experiences.

Chapter five analyses the understanding of empowerment of the women in TVET from Nakawa. What do they know about this concept? What are their views, ideas, understanding? The analysis will highlight the concept of power (power to, within & with). It will show the shifts in understanding and/or differences in views amongst these young women. This will provide insights into the process of empowerment for these girls, shifting the dialogue from an outcome to a process based on their context (that is vocational education pathway). In conclusion, it highlighted the nuances of the empowerment process and unveiled how the unique experiences of these girls influenced their understanding and perceptions of empowerment.

The central argument of this study is that the concept of empowerment can be understood and experienced in a variety of ways depending on one's context. As a result, when seeking to empower women in diverse contexts, it is critical to design strategies that allow for the exploration of the recipients' perceptions of empowerment rather than relying solely on definitions from mainstream development. This unique understanding will guide critical analysis of development solutions, allowing one to focus on creating an effective and meaningful empowerment process rather than simply measuring abstract empowerment goals.

CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Many scholars (Kabeer, 2000; Batliwala, 1994 & 2007; Rowlands, 1995; Stromquist, 1999; Cornwall & Eade, 2011) have contributed to the literature on the concept of empowerment. Empowerment has been applied in different ways, critically and uncritically, in development thinking and practice.

The analysis of this research is structured by a conceptual framework based on the concept of women's empowerment. The chapter will explore the linkages between power, agency, and choice and empowerment. It will also use the theoretical principles within GAD theory to understand the factors that influence girls' perceptions of empowerment. In addition, it will examine the tenants of strategic gender interests and practical gender needs as they pertain to women's choices that inevitably influence empowerment. Lastly, it will assess the diverse body of literature that influences or shapes how the concept of empowerment is perceived.

2.1. Understanding The Concepts of Power and Empowerment

This section will unpack empowerment by analyzing the root concept of 'power' central to understanding empowerment. It will then go further to assess the diverse scholarly perspectives regarding the concept of empowerment.

Empowerment has become a popular and unquestioned term, common amongst development institutions and non-government organizations (NGOs). They all tend to agree on its importance and state it as a goal or an outcome of many initiatives and programs. For a while, the focus has been placed on access and entry, particularly as this

relates to education and employment. But this is only one part of the puzzle (Parpart, Shirin & Staudt eds., 2002).

Scholars challenge us to explore empowerment through the key concepts associated with it—the relationship between the choice, needs, agency, and the concept of power. These constitute the transformative nature of this concept as a process versus an outcome, so as to bring about social change (Parpart, Shirin & Staudt eds., 2002; Drydyk, 2013). Therefore, to generate a fuller picture of the nature of the empowerment process, it is necessary to analyze the root concept of ‘power.’ Power is understood and experienced in varying ways by diverse groups of people; this has an impact on the interpretation of empowerment.

2.1.1 Gender and Development (GAD)

In the 1970s, development practitioners came to the realization that development projects were failing to create lasting impacts, leading to the vital inquiry into the practices and policies emerging in the development agenda (Tinker 1990; Miller, C., & Razavi, S. 1995). Proponents of the Women in Development perspective gained ground in advocating for the importance of the women’s agenda. The WID narrative emphasized the inclusion of women in development through entry into the public sphere – particularly income earning. Overcoming subordination was seen to hinge on women’s relevance within the economic sphere, with the provision of education (Kabeer, 1999; Kabeer, 2000).

Central to the WID argument is that entry into public domain that would yield positive impacts on the economy—commonly referred to as ‘the trickle-down effect.’ Not only will

formal education have economic ramifications, but it will also have health-related impacts, such as lowering rates of fertility and of HIV infection and other diseases. Education and training are viewed as a key pathway to achieving this goal of integration into development.

The conventional definition of women's empowerment at the time, also emphasized the inclusion of women into the political or public sphere. Rowlands (1995) termed this as "bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it" (p.102). This seeks to highlight the broader sexual division of labour and the manner in which women had been left out of the development process. It asserts that it is essential to integrate women alongside men, to play their role in economic development making women's economic value visible (Kwesiga, 2000).

This mechanism unfolded in the language of 'Smart Economics' embodied in the contemporary development discourse of empowerment. This narrative presents empowerment of women as a 'business transaction' within which women are effective resources/tools to fulfill certain policy objectives. It has skewed development thinking to focus on economic empowerment (Chant, 2012; Rowlands, 1997).

Much of the early literature on empowerment focused on access and entry as the main elements of empowerment, but this was only one part of the puzzle. In the mid-1980s, a growing body of literature on the Gender and Development approach (GAD) emerged as a critique to the Women in Development approaches, for their neglect of the social, cultural, and political structures, which systemically lead to the subordination of women (Rowlands, 1997). GAD theorists posit that the social constructions of gender roles and gender relations embedded in our societies have prescribed expectations and status to women and

men. GAD questions ascribed roles to women and men, which are exclusionary, these roles keep intact the public-private divide (Rathgeber, 1989). This divide subscribes to women the role of homemakers and men the primary economic providers.

There is an emphasis on how relations of power in social structures determine the status of individuals within a given society (Miller & Razavi, 1995; Hegarty, 2010). The arguments of GAD theorists challenge assumptions by questioning the unequal relations in society that hinder gender equality and equity. The GAD framework seeks to identify familiar social norms that are a cause of inequality and disempowerment (Kabeer, 1994; Batliwala, 2007; Hegarty, 2010). Therefore, it involves much more than redistributing resources, but redistributing power (Miller & Razavi, 1995; Rowlands, 1997).

Within the GAD framework, there is a recognition of the heterogeneity of women, their contexts, and experiences as opposed to viewing women as a homogenous category—that influence how they understand empowerment. Women are not the same, their experiences are quite diverse, and as such their views and interpretation differ as well (Batliwala, 2007). The GAD approach enables a space to apply diverse approaches to bring about change in society. This will lead to power and structural shifts that are catalysts to holistic social transformation (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Rowlands, 1997); thereby, providing a framework from which to analyze the core concept of power within the empowerment. GAD provides the platform for transformation to occur, it challenges the existing gender roles and power relations prevalent in society for the change in values, norms, practices that are necessary to overhaul the persistent repressive status quo.

2.1.2 The Concept of Power

The dominant understanding of power has been to exert ‘power over.’ Power is, in this regard, often relates to control over resources, material assets, domination of institutions and agendas, and to influence the thinking of others (Rowlands, 1995). Power over is that wielded by men over other men or women in society; as one gains power, it diminishes the power of another (Rowlands, 1995). This manifestation of power is related to a relationship between the powerful (those who have power) and powerless (those who have less power)—commonly referred to as a zero-sum game. According to this perspective, power is something that can be given to women and can be taken away (Afshar, 1998; Parpart, Shirin & Staudt Eds., 2002).

Rowlands (1995) states that the meaning of empowerment is deeply rooted in one’s interpretation of power and the complex power relations within a given context. It takes more than just access to decision making for women to perceive themselves as able and entitled to possess such power (Rowlands, 1995). Policies and programs, be it education or health, in development thinking and practice make power appear ‘neutral.’

Policies and programs, such as in education or health, that make power appear ‘neutral’ ignore the underlying power dynamics that influence women's choices and agency (Eade and Campbell, 1999). For instance, enrollment of girls and boys in school in Uganda increased by 50% by 2015; however, girls’ retention continues to be affected by existing cultural norms, values, and practices such as female genital mutilation, early marriages, and menstrual cycles (Gender in Education Sector Policy, 2016). These have contributed to the higher (and earlier) dropout rate of girls compared to boys. Predominantly in rural

areas, parents consider it more beneficial to educate a boy-child, especially at secondary school level, as the male child will continue the family lineage, while a girl's potential bride price is deemed more valuable than the returns from her education (Kwesiga, 2002).

Batliwala (1993 as cited in Cornwall & Edwards, 2014) defines empowerment in relation to control over resources and material assets—power over. She states it as “the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining control over the sources of power” (p.130). Rowlands (1995) expounded three types of power: 1. ‘power within’, that is building personal confidence to undo the effects of internalized oppression, a sense of rights or entitlement; 2. ‘power to’ – individual ability to decide actions and carry them out, and 3. collective ‘power with’ others or collective action to achieve a broad impact than could not have been done alone (Kabeer, 2005; Galiè, & Farnworth, 2019).

This perspective of empowerment goes beyond just access to decision making, it also takes into consideration women's perception of themselves as able and entitled to have such power (Rowlands, 1995). Women's empowerment process must be greater than just having a medium of income, it should reflect the self-worth and independence of women. This will amount to the continuous transformation of the norm (Kabeer, 2005). Empowerment must emerge from the women themselves. This will, in turn, transform how society and people around them view and value women (Afshar, 1998; Kabeer, 2005). It delves into the process of how women negotiate these power relations, and how they construct their realities (Allen, 2014). Empowerment is not merely an outcome; it is a process to which women obtain self-consciousness and agency of the power within themselves to act, react and respond.

2.2 The Relationship Between Power, Agency, Choice, And Empowerment

To fully comprehend the process of empowerment, it is important to investigate the iterative relationship between choice, agency, and empowerment. This section will explore how these terms shape the understanding of the concept of empowerment.

According to Kabeer (1999), agency is "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Agency is about more than observable actions; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation, and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency" (Kabeer, 1999, p.438). In a similar tone, Sen referred to agency as "the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of 'being and doing'" (Sen, 1985 as cited in Kabeer, 1999).

Comparably, Jay Drydyk (2013) draws his interpretation of agency mostly from Sen's work in the capability approach, which focuses on the expansion of agency. He stresses that essential to empowerment is agency in the form of active decision-making (Drydyk, 2013). Sen asserts that it is essential for women to, "play active roles in whatever goals she has reasons to support or promote" (Sen 1995 cited in Drydyk, 2013, p.252). This perspective affirms that it is important to consider the socio-cultural, political, economic factors that influence one's ability to achieve this goal.

For the purposes of this thesis, agency will focus on autonomy, the extent to which the desired activities are one's own or initiated by the individual (Drydyk, 2013). Drydyk propounds four dimensions of autonomous agency: "(a) insofar as a person either performs an activity or plays a role in performing it, (b) insofar as this activity has an impact on the

world, (c) insofar as the activity was chosen by the person (d) for reasons of their own (in individual or group deliberation)” (Drydyk, 2013, p.252). Although personal involvement in activities leads to expansion of agency, empowerment is not reducible to what goes into these actions, but to the outcomes of said actions. Therefore, agency affects empowerment, as it influences the course of women’s lives (Drydyk, 2013). Agency will lean into the understanding of empowerment as it broadens the understanding of power. We will look at the linkage between power and agency, as it pertains to one’s power-to and power within. Power-to described in one’s ability to live out their life choices, playing an active role in their decisions. While power-within will be overcoming what curtails one’s ability and stifles one’s choices (Kabeer, 2005).

Kabeer (1999) posits that empowerment is a fundamental, underlying process of change which, “represents the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied” (p.436). This speaks more to women’s strategic interests suggesting that we must first consider how women strive to transcend these culturally/socially inscribed norms.

Kabeer (2000) explains the interaction between the three principles of choice, agency, and empowerment in the book *The Power to Choose*. There she explains how women navigate obstacles to access, and how these institutional restrictions decide women's choices and, above all, their agencies. She discusses how common differences limit women 's decisions, what negotiating power women have, and how they navigate power dynamics within these environments, whether public or private.

The analysis Kabeer (2000) seeks to advance is one that acknowledges an internalized normative structure, and how it is that the individual negotiates within these social structures. Essentially, it refers to how power within a particular context is negotiated by women. In the case of this thesis, how do girls in vocational institutions in Uganda navigate their contexts? How do power dynamics impact the choices they make? How does this construct their experiences? How this impact their understanding of empowerment? It is essential to note that women's pathways to empowerment differ. One woman can be empowered by a particular pathway, while another can be disempowered. Women and girls may have greater access to education and other areas of the public world; however, this may not translate into their ability to exercise full agency in other parts of their lives. Women are going to higher levels of education, but there are still persistent rigid power relations, such as within the family, home or at work that create oppressive environments (Cornwall, 2016).

As we discuss power, choices are a central part of this dialogue. Girls/women will make differing choices that will determine their experiences. Kabeer (2000) speaks of 'preference possibility sets' (p.331) that constitute one's reasoning: why that choice and not the other? She contends that one's context influences one's preferences, they are not neutral or rational as classical economists presupposed. She refers to these decisions as value-laden—the 'ought to' factor. They are an expression of societal expectations, beliefs, and values configured to ensure their reproduction over time. Essentially, these internalized values manifest in the different considerations when making decisions in and out of the home (Kabeer, 2000).

Therefore, when deciding what kind of work one ought to do, is the choice based purely on economic considerations, distress, expectations, or out of desires, passion, or aspirations? What may seem like individually informed choices may be the result of internalized societal value systems, prescribing the appropriate work for women and men, evident in the division of labor in the private and public spheres. The choices people make may be constrained and influenced by dominant groups or more powerful individuals within a group (Kabeer, 2000; Drydyk, 2013).

In conclusion, the conceptualization of empowerment is rooted in the concepts of power, agency, and choice. We can say that process of empowerment involves an individual or group making autonomous choices free of dominance by other groups or subjection by individuals within the group; as such reducing one's vulnerability (Drydyk, 2013). There are complex relations of power that occur which cannot be left out of any discussion on empowerment, as empowerment is multidimensional. This relationship lies at the core of defining the concepts that embody empowerment, unpacking these concepts will illuminate the process of empowerment within their specific contexts, hereby influencing their construction and understanding of this concept.

2.3 Practical Gender Needs (PGN) And Strategic Gender Interests (SGI)

When speaking of empowerment, women's needs are a definite part of the discussion. As women's experiences vary across the board, their needs will surely differ as well. Kabeer (2005) refers to these needs as one's achievements. She argues that the process of empowerment is not simply the fulfilment one's survival needs, she extends it to one meeting their specific needs. She affirms that wage labor may not necessarily correlate to

progress in empowerment; it only signifies a fulfillment of labor demand. In the case where it provides a sense of achievement such self-worth or independence, then it can be said to correlate to progress towards transformation of one's mindset and status. The different needs define one's understanding of the concept of empowerment.

In feminist literature, there is reference to two types of needs: practical and strategic. The difference between fulfilling these two categories of needs is just surviving and transforming the status quo. Practical gender needs and strategic gender interests were initially coined by Maxine Molyneux (1985), and then developed into a tool for gender and development planners by Caroline Moser (1989) using the term 'needs' rather than 'interests. Molyneux (1985) advances gender interests as, "those that women (or men) may develop by their social positioning through gender attributes" (232).

She then defines practical gender needs as:

... given inductively and arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender division of labor. In contrast to strategic gender interests, these are formulated by women who are themselves within these positions rather than through external interventions. Practical gender needs are usually a response to an immediate perceived need, and they do not entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality (233).

Molyneux defines strategic gender interests as:

... derived in the first instance deductively, that is, from the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist. These ethical and theoretical criteria assist in the formulation of strategic objectives to overcome women's subordination, such as the abolition of the sexual division of labor, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and childcare, the attainment of political equality, the establishment of freedom of choice over childbearing, and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women (232-233).

Thus, practical gender needs enable women to fulfill their reproductive and productive roles, whereas strategic gender interests are needs women identify because of their subordinate position in society. Meeting strategic gender interests assists women to achieve greater equality and change existing roles, thereby challenging their subordinate position. SGIs are more long term and generally less visible than PGNs. To realize the goals of equality, equity and empowerment, strategies that address both practical gender needs, and strategic gender interests are required (Moser, 1989; Molyneux, 1985).

How can the initiatives within the vocational education pathway enable women to fulfil and meet these needs? This study applied these definitions of needs to assess the variety of needs of women, it also speaks to who and what influences their needs process—such as family or environmental situations or their individual goals, which then influences their experiences within vocational institutions, thus impacts their conceptualization of empowerment.

Conclusion

To contextualize empowerment, we will need to reflect women's lived experiences and trace their journeys, not limit it to standardized norms of how an empowered woman ought to be and act. Rather than glorify investment in programs with set goals and expectations under disbursement pressures from donors; programmes should be geared towards transforming how to engage with women by supporting women's capabilities, trusting in their knowledge, and changing their representations in development media and language. Therefore, women will become 'true actors' in their life stories, moulded from their specific experiences, not a homogenous understanding of who they should be.

The conceptual framework above provides four important insights which will be applied in the analysis of the female students' perceptions of empowerment in this study. Firstly, that empowerment is relational. This involves understanding the complex power relations that constrain individuals' ability to make choices and to recognize that the inequalities in their lives are not normal, such as with inequitable gender relations (Cornwall, 2014).

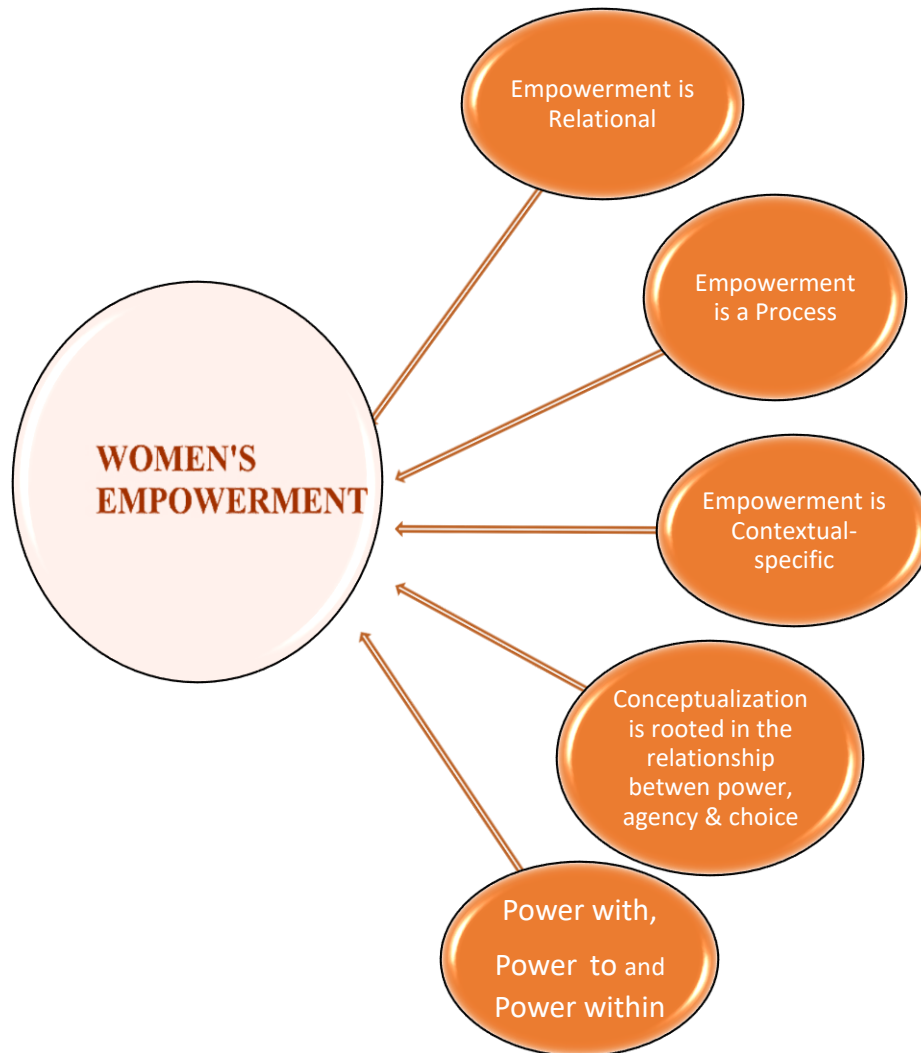
Secondly, it is an iterative process not merely an outcome; thus, it cannot simply be handed to someone with a set of indicators to be achieved, but rather obtained through praxis (Freire, 2000). It is achieved along certain pathways which are rigged with obstacles that shape its process. To have a comprehensive understanding of empowerment we need to assess the barriers to empowerment.

Thirdly, empowerment is context specific. As such, more attention should be placed on where it occurs and the structural and institutional constraints in which women/girls live

and work. Lastly, empowerment is multidimensional manifested in the relationship between power, choice, and agency—these concepts are core (see Figure 1 below). This can be understood through assessing women’s own accounts of empowerment by tracing their journeys.

Figure 1. Understanding the Concept of Empowerment

The figure below summarises the concept of empowerment, it shows the multi-dimensional nature of the concept.



CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN EDUCATION IN UGANDA

Introduction

This chapter examines the status of women in Uganda through secondary data. It discusses the policy reforms around women's access to education, drawing from the measures and approaches of the Ministry of Education, to address women's issues specifically in education and development. It will examine if technical vocational education and training can be a pathway to women's empowerment. This will be done through a review of vocational education and training in Uganda, a brief background of its inception and policies, specifically those directed towards girls and women. It will also examine the challenges and successes of women in technical vocational education, as it relates to empowerment.

3.1. Women's Access to Education in Uganda

Twenty years after the landmark Fourth World Women's conference in Beijing, major policy shifts have occurred in the global community as it transitions from the Millennium Development goals (MDGs) to the Post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At this interval, there is an overwhelming recognition of the need to achieve gender equity and equality; therefore, the global agenda has aligned its targets to make human rights a reality for all—with a special focus on the rights of women and girls (UN Women, 2015).

The commencement of the Decade for Women 1975-1985 was indeed a turning point for the female population. At the time, there was a growing urgency within development discourse and praxis to make full use of women's skills and capacities for better economic outcomes. For instance, the education of girls and women was viewed as paramount for families and communities to build better, healthier households and more educated children that would be proactive contributors to the development of their nations (UN Women, 2015; Miller & Razavi, 1995; Chant & Sweetman, 2012).

Within the Ugandan context, female students' entry into formal education did not take place until 1895 through the efforts of female missionaries. This was aimed at cultivating a crop of elite women who began to be formidable names in the public and political sectors of the State such as Sarah Ntiro⁷ (Tripp, 2004). Tripp (2004) puts forward arguments by early female educator Helen Neatby, who stressed the relevance of female education to enable women take an active role in public administration. This was quite similar to assertions by Feminist scholar Ester Boserup (1970) in her book *Women's Role in Development*. Boserup (1970) urged for increased participation of women in public arena to enable them to engage in meaningful debates regarding issues such as housing, juvenile delinquency, legal and economic reforms that would raise the status of women in Uganda. The World Bank has come to refer to this as "the payoffs to investing in women" (World Bank, 1995, p.22).

⁷ Famously known as Uganda's Rosa Parks, she was the first woman university graduate in East and Central Africa from Oxford University with a Bachelor of Arts (Hon) in History in 1954. She also known for holding her ground that led to breaking of the barrier on unequal pay. While at Gayaza High School, she offered the radical choice of working for free rather than putting up with the gender-discrimination imposing financial inequality on her abilities (Magoba, 2012).

Over the years, there has been considerable progress in women's position in society through increased access & entry into the economic, social, and political spheres across the globe. For example, the presence of women is registered in positions of power in governance systems, increased numbers in the education sector, growth of women's footprints in the private sector as business owners and leaders. However, amidst such improvements, women still stand at a disadvantage in comparison to men in the full enjoyment of rights. With the focus on producing a human capital base, women were turned into a valued commodity and a lucrative investment with numerous returns, harnessing women's time, skills, and energy to serve development goals (Chant & Sweetman, 2012; Rowlands, 1997).

In 1995, the churning of the political wheel in Uganda ushered in a receptive political regime with then President Museveni supporting initiatives towards the realization of women's rights and gender equality. The increased political commitment sparked off a process of change within the Ugandan education sector, bringing about the introduction of gender focused policies and programming that changed the face of female education such the gender-based affirmative action policy incorporated in 1991 to provide girls with 1.5 points for university admission⁸. Ugandan education policy orientation took on an 'education for productivity and efficiency' model, which has its roots in the Women in Development (WID) framework. WID focused on women as a productive resource, emphasizing the integration of women alongside men to play their role in economic development (Kasente 2003, Kwesiga, 2002; Kabeer, 2000, Kagoda, 2019).

⁸ There are a specific number of points required for university entrance in Uganda depending on the course one desires. The affirmative action policy allowed more girls the opportunity to obtain the required number of points

3.2. Policy Reforms in Access to Education for Women

Uganda has made considerable progress to integrate women into the country's development and decision-making structures. The alignment of political interests and ideas among the National Resistance Movement (NRM) regime (1995), international donors, and the rural constituencies amidst the constant pressure from the then uprising women's movement, fostered increased political commitment to promotion of the goal for gender equality, equity, and women's empowerment. This was further bolstered by the signing and ratification of international and regional legal frameworks and agreements, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all sorts of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)—Article 10, the Maputo protocol (2003) to the African Charter on Human rights and People's rights and the Rights of Women in Africa, the Millennium Declaration of 2000, the 'Education for All' (EFA) mandate enshrined in the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) and the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) (MOET&S Participatory Gender Audit, 2013; Kasente, 2003; Kagoda, 2019). As a signatory of these agreements, Uganda is obligated to uphold the rights of all children with respect to education in their policies, programs, and governance structures, and ensure non-discrimination in access to education.

Furthermore, Uganda's commitment to pursuing interests that furthered women's empowerment are enshrined in Article 32 of the Constitution of Uganda: "the State shall take affirmative action in favour of groups marginalised on the basis of gender, age, disability or any other reason created by history, tradition or custom, for the purpose of redressing imbalances which exist against them." (The Constitution of Uganda, 1995). This was then envisioned through the Sector Wide Approach (SWAP) framework in the

Education Strategic Investment Plan (ESIP) 1998-2003 later modified as the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) and implemented through the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) (Department for International Education-DFID, 2006).

In 1997, Government of Uganda introduced the National Gender Policy (NGP) providing a framework to assess and address gender inequalities across all sectors. This mandate propelled the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in January 1997 and in 2007 the Universal Secondary Education (USE). The Education Sector Strategic Plan (2007-2015) was later revised bringing the ESSP into alignment with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), specifically Goal 2: “to achieve Universal primary education by 2015”. Currently this is contained within Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030” (ESSP, 2017).

The introduction of UPE was followed by an increase in gross primary school enrolments from 3.1 million in 1996 to 7.6 million in 2007 to 9.4 million in 2016/17 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics Statistical Abstract (UBOS), 2017; Uganda National Household Survey (UNHS), 2016/17). The survival rate⁹ of pupils who reach primary 5 stood at 58.6% for males and 61.1% for females, with primary 7 completion rate 63% for females and 59% for males. Additionally, the net enrollment rate (NER) in secondary education increased from 2.2% to 21.8% (22.1% for males; 21.4% for females) in 2015/16 to 24% (25% for males; 23.1% for females) in 2016/17 (MoET&S Annual Performance Report, 2017).

⁹ Percentage of a cohort of male students enrolled in the first grade of lower secondary education in a given school year who are expected to reach the last grade of lower secondary education, regardless of repetition (UNESCO)

By 2015, Uganda had achieved 50:50 gender parity in primary education enrolments, with enrollment of females in primary and secondary education at 50.1% and 37.2%, respectively, of all students (MoET&S Education Abstract, 2017). The female-male divide has narrowed significantly, for instance at primary level the gap is 92:90 girls to boys, indicating that there are more girls attending primary school, while in secondary schools it is 15:17 girls to boys and 4:5 at the tertiary level (Education Management Information System (EMIS), 2002-2016).

Furthermore, in support of girl-child education, the government instituted affirmative action policies to increase women's access to tertiary education in 1990s through the introduction of 1.5 bonus entry points¹⁰ to address the poor enrollment of women into higher education first implemented at Makerere University on a 5-year trial basis; this resulted in a significant increase in female admissions at Makerere University from 23% in 1989 to 41% in 2002 to 44% in 2014 (Kwesiga, 2002; Muhwezi, 2003; Gender in Education Policy (GEP), 2016). The 2016 Education performance review indicates an increase in the enrolment rate for tertiary education stood at 54% for males and 44% for females in Universities (Education Management Information System (EMIS), 2002-2016). Additionally, the net completion rate for tertiary level indicates that completion rates for males (11.3%) was more than for the females (10.7%) of the same age group aged 22-25 years (Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), 2017).

Furthermore, the promotion of a conducive policy environment to promote gender equality was translated into sector-specific strategies implemented at all levels from budgeting,

¹⁰ In 1990, government introduced affirmative action of 1.5 bonus entry points for all female students joining public universities

planning, analysis to building staff capacities. For instance, the Uganda Gender Policy (2007) under the Ministry of Gender, was a framework to guide all levels of planning, resource allocation and implementation for mainstreaming gender. The Gender in Education Policy (GEP) was developed in 2016 to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the mainstreaming of gender in government bodies. The National Strategy for Girls' Education (NSGE, 2015-2020) seeks to address the most pressing issues in the education sector that further impede the full participation of girls and women and highlight the roles of all stakeholders. The Equity in the Classroom policy (EIC) aimed to enable equal participation of girls and boys in the classroom. Finally, in 2009 the Ministry issued a directive to allow pregnant girls or mothers into classrooms to sit their exams (NSGE, 2010).

Recently, there has been awareness-raising related to teenage pregnancy and early marriages in Uganda. According to a report by Uganda Bureau of Statistics, a total of 41% of the births among 15-19 -year-old women are reported as inopportune or completely unwanted (Uganda Health Demographic Survey UDHS, 2012). This has increased school dropout rates to 35% (UNICEF, 2015; Uganda Health Demographic Survey UDHS, 2016). The practice of early marriages is prevalent especially in rural Uganda accounting for the reduced access to secondary education for young women. There is no set policy on teenage pregnancy within the Ministry of Education; however, measures are being taken to protect the rights of girls with debates arising around re-entry programs and maternity leave. These initiatives have enabled women to make inroads to political and policy-making spaces, although the process is continuous and on-going.

Aside from policy reforms and programs, the Ministry of Education, Technology and Sports has continued to champion girls' and women's rights through the establishment of gender machinery specifically targeting mainstreaming gender across all sectors within the governance system such as the Gender unit and the Gender task force. These units focus on coherent gender analysis, monitoring & evaluation across the board. This is implemented through: 1. the dissemination of gender focused materials to school, departments and line ministries, 2. the promotion of gender sensitive programming across all line ministries, 3. the analysis of Ministry data to ensure that the data is gender disaggregated, 4. the training of Ministry staff and senior management through workshops and seminars to promote gender sensitive programming across the board, and lastly, 5. the creation of the Gender desks within the Ministry to coordinate activities to address gender imbalances within the education sector (NSGE, 2010).

In conclusion, these policy reforms and various initiatives are central to the successful inclusion of girls and women into education. The policies not only removed the physical barriers to girl-child education, but also created platforms to re-envision the way women are valued in society, challenging, and changing the perspectives about women's work and roles in the development process. Furthermore, these policies advanced the goal of women's empowerment.

However, they are a means not the final goal. There remains much work to realize changes in the structures of power, which are the main inhibitors to the full realization of women's rights. Unless the efforts—be it strategic policies, campaigns, or program initiatives—focus on debunking the structures of power within the systems of governance and go further to challenge the 'status-quo' rather than regurgitating shiny policies that only touch

the surface of the problems in society, all efforts will be but an added band-aid while things will remain as they are.

3.3. Uganda's Vocational Education and Training Sector

The following section will discuss the history, nature, and changes in Uganda's technical vocational education and training (TVET) sector. It will also assess current trends in this sector with the goal of better understanding women's experiences in vocational institutions.

Uganda is an agricultural country that requires a consistent supply of skilled labour. Over the years the focus on academic education has left a shortage of this type of labour. With the rise of the unemployment rate, especially among youth, the government has taken strides to respond to these gaps through *Skilling Uganda*. This will focus on providing skills training for technical, business, scientific, entrepreneurial, and innovative jobs relevant to the growing economy to curtail the shortfalls in the employment sector.

After independence, Uganda adopted the British system of education, with the aim of educating future leaders to set up a stable administration. The post-colonial education policies were administered through the 1959 White Paper on Education. This system highlighted principal objectives for educational development, such as universal literacy, train a large class of technicians, teachers, craftspeople and artisans, and responsible citizenry needed for self-governance (Scanlon, 1965).

During the post-independence era, Uganda enjoyed stable and booming growth in the economic and social sectors for over a decade. However, it underwent a phase of economic instability in the 1970s, during the reign of President Idi Amin Dada and the unprecedented expulsion of Asian settlers from Uganda. This event led to a decline in the business

industry, as most of Uganda's professional & technical labor force encompassed Asians and some Europeans. Most of the lucrative businesses began to collapse in the hands of unqualified personnel, thereby creating an adverse impact on the economy. Aside from the decline in the economy, Uganda experienced a significant decline in the education sector as the war had left learning institutions desolate, lacking staff or facilities for training students (Lugujjo and Manyindo, UNESCO, 1996).

The focus of the education system at the time was to create a labor force with an intent to fill white-collar jobs to create an elite class of policy makers for civil service in the new nation. This resulted in neglecting the labor-intensive ('blue collar') jobs in sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing, which even today remain the backbone of the Ugandan economy. Many graduates shunned these types of work due to the lack of stability associated, as well as the long hours and low wages when compared to the benefits of working in civil service. Furthermore, the civil service sector grew immensely with the opening of new parastatals, which absorbed most of the graduates (Lugujjo and Manyindo UNESCO, 1996).

The Government of Uganda set up the Education review in 1989 to extensively review the education sector and to make the sector more relevant by remodeling the programs and services implemented. As part of the efforts to grow the economic base, vocational education became a big part of the changes in April 1992. The Government of Uganda integrated vocational education into the Ministry of Education mandate. In 1998, several departments in Uganda got reshuffled and a fully-fledged department was created in the Ministry of Education and Sports called the Business, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (BTVET) department. This department spearheaded the development of the

TVET policy, prior to which there existed no policy to guide Business, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (Uganda National Commission for UNESCO, 2001).

The system of formal education in Uganda is divided into a four-fold system. It starts with pre-primary school, which is for three years; onto primary school for seven years. Secondary school is composed of the Ordinary (O) level for four years and the Advanced (A) level for two years (UNESCO IBE, World Data on Education. Revised 9/2010). Students can choose to join the technical schools, which are for about three years from the primary level, however, they are also encouraged to join after the completion of O level, or A level. There are two streams to join technical institutions after O level: either by joining a Primary Teachers College (PTC) or Lower-level health institutions. After this level, students are expected to join a University, National Teachers college or a Vocational Institution. At each level students are examined nationally and awarded certificates of merit that enable them to move from one level to the next.

With an outcry from Ugandan youth to address the rising rate of unemployment for youth between 15-30 years, the political leadership developed new strategies to address the critical skills gaps. In 2012, the new '*Skilling Uganda*' program was tabled to redress this escalating economic situation. Along with this strategic plan, came a paradigm shift focusing more on "skills and competencies—practical learning— as opposed to academic certification—the theoretical, relevant to the labor market in Business Technical Vocational Education" (Skilling Uganda: BTVET Strategic Plan. (2011-2020). This emphasis tallies with the government mandate to create job creators versus job seekers.

3.4 Women's Experiences in Technical Vocational Studies in Uganda: Successes and Challenges

The Uganda Business, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (BTVET) Strategic Plan 2011-2020 gives female BTVET graduates preferential access to BTVET Instructors Training. It is also targeting over 35% of female enrolment in industrial training programmes. However, while the data shows a gap within vocational education, women remain even more underrepresented in sciences and technical education (Madara & Cherotich, 2016).

The new BTVET Skilling Uganda Strategic plan also has placed a focus on increasing access to disadvantaged target group to relevant skills training. The strategic plan put in place a Gender in BTVET Strategy, which includes a national gender awareness programme, improvement of hostel facilities for girls, special assistance in job placements, strict policies on sexual harassment and abuse, special incentives, or quotas for girls in the bursary system for low-income families initiated in 2014 in cooperation with the Joint Admission Board (JAB) (BTVET Strategic Plan, 2011/2022).

Although access and entry policies are in place, the reality is that enrolment and completion rates are poor. In 2019, only 3 of the 991 females who majored in science-related fields sat for the BTVET National examination out of a total of 5251 students. Female enrolment is influenced by factors out of their control, such as socio-cultural factors, as well as the poor development of the BTVET program in the Education ministry. Prior to the Skilling Uganda funding, this sector was poorly funded as more attention was placed on university education (Wambua, 2007).

There is a skewed mindset of vocation education for girls/women in Uganda, which has been largely influenced by culture and social norms creating gender-based discrimination. Within the Ugandan society, science, and math (STEM) related courses are referred to as courses for men/boys. Women/girls are made to believe they are not able to handle the machinery, or they lack skills to manage the workloads in these courses. Therefore, many girls shy away from courses like engineering, due to such attitudes they encounter by family members, teachers, and peers (Mawanda, 2020).

Girls also develop a poor self-image. Girls believe they are weak, and if they engage in STEM-based studies, they will fail as this is not within their skill set (Okorafor. A, Woyengidubamo & Okorafor. E, 2015). Girls are also discouraged from enrolling as they view this pathway as masculine and unappealing, preferring to maintain their femininity in more traditionally female courses like tailoring. These negative thoughts derail the girls from what could be a lucrative opportunity (Okorafor. A, Woyengidubamo & Okorafor. E, 2015).

Ugandan society has adopted a mindset that largely continues to assign roles according to traditional male and female roles. As a result, males tend to dominate in engineering courses such as mechanical, electrical, agricultural, fisheries, considering these to be ‘hard’ manual labor roles, while females will take up ‘soft’ fields, such as tailoring, catering & hospitality, beauty, hairdressing & cosmetics, considered more suitable for women. Society believes girls should not engage in courses which may reduce their marital eligibility or in which they could harm themselves with dangerous machinery. Similarly, some of the girls believe they will be more suited to work in courses that promote more feminine growth, as they fear to lose their feminine sides and be considered boys/men due to working in dirt or

hard labor jobs (Mbabali, 2018). More so, society has long since considered vocational education as the last resort for those who are unable to get into university (Okello, 2013). This perception has gradually been changing; however, generally it is considered unattractive especially more so now as more women have enrolled into the sciences (Okello, 2013).

Furthermore, women/girls are subjected to discriminatory treatment within the workplace. Females experienced slimmer chances of getting jobs in their fields of study and even lower wages as compared to their male counterparts (Wambua, 2007). Employers during their apprenticeships and industrial placements will double or even triple the workloads of the females (Wambua, 2007). Females have to prove their capabilities, worth and skills; they have to show their colleagues and peers that they belong and can keep up to the expected workflow, without slowing the projects down. Another challenge is that employers' clients are reluctant to allow females to work on their projects as mechanics, electricians, or plumbers, making difficult for even those employers who might be willing to hire women to do so and, therefore, creating another impediment for women to break into the industry. (Wambua, 2007).

Conclusion

Despite the growing numbers of women in higher institutions taking sciences related degree courses, gender-based occupational segregation persists in vocational education. Society still perceives STEM courses as dominantly masculine, relegating females to more feminine subjects such as nursing, home economics or clerical/secretarial courses (Chinen, de Hoop, Alcázar, Balarin & Sennett, 2017).

STEM related areas of study and employment have been identified as a lucrative source of economic development, as well as a credible pathway for empowerment. However, women are quite underrepresented in STEM areas. The exclusion of women from all parts of this process is considered a loss of ideas, labor, and input of nearly half of the country population. These challenges can be solved sufficiently to encourage women's participation and as such ensure the fulfilment of practical and strategic needs (Okorafor. A, Woyengidubamo & Okorafor. E, 2015).

CHAPTER FOUR: WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES IN TVET AT NAKAWA VOCATIONAL TRAINING INSTITUTE (NTVI)

This chapter analyzes perceptions of empowerment particularly from females in technical vocational education and training (TVET), who are taking science-based courses. This area of study was selected due to a change in the focus by the Ugandan Government to concentrate on STEM courses (science, technology, engineering, and maths) in the ‘*Skilling Uganda*’ development strategy. Additionally vocational education has been propagated by policymakers as a tool for enhancing self-reliance among young people, encouraging the notion of generating a crop of job creators versus job seekers.

Historically, women in vocational institutions were more prominent in programs like hairdressing, cooking, secretarial or cosmetology. Recently, there has been a rise in the number of women participating in science programs such as electrical engineering, electronics, agriculture, plumbing, brick laying, running machinery and mechanics. As the previous chapters have highlighted, the increased opportunities for female in all levels of education is incredibly important, it is thereby prudent to investigate where females will stand in this new development strategy.

This research evaluates the unique perspectives of 33 participants: a mix of 10 current female students, 7 graduated female students, 6 instructors (3 male and 3 female instructors) and 10 current students in two focus group discussions (1st group – 5 male students & 2nd group - 5 female current students).¹¹ This chapter discusses the diverse experiences of female students and graduates of the Nakawa Vocational Training Institute

¹¹ The 5 female current students in the FGD are different from the first 10 female students interviewed.

(NVTI) by examining the field data and cross-referencing literature discussed in previous chapters.

Furthermore, this chapter examines the journeys of current students and graduates of Nakawa Vocational Training Institute (NTVI): how they came to join the institute and what factors influenced their decision to pursue a career in vocational education. It then analyses current students' classroom experiences, including how they navigated being women in what is still considered a man's terrain; how male students respond to having female classmates; females' relationships with instructors (both male and female); and finally, their challenges within Nakawa and during apprenticeship training, and how they respond. Additionally, it discusses the experiences of female graduates from Nakawa Vocational Training Institute (NTVI) in their respective workplaces: it examines the nature of their working environments, such as their relationship with their employers and colleagues, how they navigated the highs and lows, and lastly their lessons and challenges.

The discussion reveals nuances and complexities, demonstrating that the female participants have undergone several changes since joining Nakawa. From the outset, the research showed that there are various mitigating factors that influenced their journey to TVET. The experiences of both current and graduated students illustrate the existing gendered power relations at play in their daily lives, both at school and at work, and demonstrates that while there are some positive experiences for students and graduates in school and at work, the masculine culture of both results in inequitable gender relations, expectations, and divisions of labour.

4.1. The Choice of Vocational Education and Training: Female Students' Journeys at Nakawa Vocational Training Institute

Uganda is a patriarchal society, with a patrilineal system of lineage. Culturally, men are socialized as heads of the family, and scales tip to their benefit in all respects as they are perceived to be more valuable. At present, a boy child is still considered a source of prestige for families, especially in most rural areas where tradition still prevails. This has set a precedent of male preference that continues to reign even amid the surge of equality and equity campaigns for women.

Numerous opportunities have been generated for women to pursue higher education and to take up more male-dominated career paths such as science and engineering. However, women are still under-represented in these courses, fields, and careers. These fields/courses are stereotypically referred to as masculine fields and, as such, females are considered transgressors of the current gendered boundaries (Makarova, Aeschlimann and Herzog, 2016). Despite the existing social expectations, women in technical vocational education and training pathways have managed to crack the ceiling. They are not inhibited by the societal preconceived notion that they do not belong; they have set their sights on this path and do not look back. However, this is not without several challenges along the way.

Female students and graduates of Nakawa Vocational Training Institute are one of the unique examples of the increasing interest from young women in STEM, especially in the technical vocational studies. These women have ventured into brand new waters. As such, it is necessary to explore how and why they transitioned into technical vocational education

and training, examining the variables that influenced their choices to become students at Nakawa Vocational Training Institute.

4.1.1. Why They Chose This Pathway of Education

This section will explain why and how these students chose to pursue a technical vocational path. The section below looks at the needs of these female students and graduates. The needs are related to their strategic and practical gender needs. Practical gender needs refer to meeting their immediate needs, such as financial. Strategic gender needs, refers to longer-term needs associated with overcoming a subordinate position in society (Moser, 1989), such as females not being fully accepted in STEMs vocational courses and jobs. Assessing the influencing factors, it became clear decisions were influenced by respondents' needs, such as financial stability, independence/autonomy, changing how women are perceived in TVET, and personal growth and success.

One of the strongest influencing factors expressed by most female participants in this study was their networks – both male and female – these would be the people around them who are in the same field of study or individuals they know in similar careers or professions. According to the research data, 95% of the female student participants (n=21)¹² attest to the involvement of family members, friends or mentors who also are in similar vocational fields/trades. They affirm that without their guidance and support they would never have considered putting STEM courses in their top three choices when applying for post-secondary studies.

¹² N is the number of female student participants from study

The networks that existed in their social and professional spaces offered insights into the real-life experiences in vocational studies and the skills and trades job market. These different relationships offered a means to engage with people to discuss a variety of interests, such as life prospects after school and the intricacies of the job market. As they made their decisions, they had already been introduced to good knowledge of these courses and the ability to grow and succeed.

Within the context of Nakawa Vocational Training institute, the female participants shared that most of them were provided with an initial tour and introduction to the courses. They gained firsthand knowledge of what could happen when they selected a certain course through conversations with instructors and alumni, as well as what the opportunities were in the skill and trades job market. Through this process, they gained access to future mentors who had a deeper understanding of the realities of the industry, and how to be a success and overcome challenges.

In addition, the presence of female role models and mentors inspired them and demonstrated the possibilities for females in these new spaces. Some of the participants, about 45% (n=10), conveyed that their sisters were part of their journey as compelling trendsetters being among the first females in their families to go to TVET institute, also acting as their sounding boards for direction, and support. The girls were surrounded by a group of exemplary women who gave the impressions that women can study and eventually work in TVET sector. They helped them to change their minds, by proving that it is no longer impossible for a woman to take on a STEMs courses or jobs such as electrical wiring of a house, metal fabrication, or even fixing a radio or TV and fridge; thereby exposed

them and broadening their options. One graduate female student shared that her sister was her main incentive:

My sister is a great motivator in my life, because she also studied plumbing from there, and from there she upgraded, so I would say she played a big part in my decision to pursue a vocational career and to go to Nakawa. (G005 Female graduate student)

Similarly, close family members engaged in TVET studies or jobs also set a good example. One of the current female students shared: "I have always wanted to be a civil engineer since I was a senior student. I have heard about it from my uncle, who is a teacher here at Nakawa (C004, Current female student training to be an Instructor in Civil department). The existence of such close relatives, who are also in the TVET world, instilled an ardent desire to pursue these courses. They were persuaded of their choice to undertake TVET because they trusted those who advised them seeing that they had firsthand knowledge. These advisors instilled a sense of confidence in the participants' preference for STEM related courses, since they were successful and were instructors at these institutes. As such it seemed like a viable choice to these young women.¹³

One current female student shared that she was motivated by a close relative's lifestyle that attracted her to pursue vocational studies:

¹³ It was easier to believe them because they were in it and the girls believed they knew what they were talking about when they advised them to join TVET institutes

My uncle did mechanical engineering, and he has a lot of money and a good life. So, I wanted to follow in his footsteps. (FG2-CF005, Current Female student at Nakawa during Focus Group 2)

It is worthy to note that female students shared that even if their family members were in full support of them taking up TVET, there were parts of society, including relatives, who doubted they had what it takes to be in this field because this was still considered a male domain. Despite the encouragement they received, they still had to contend with many doubts from family and society at large, but they were not deterred.

On the other hand, it also is important to emphasize that for a few (N=2) respondents, their choice was based on strong insistence from parents or benefactors (such as scholarships from non-profits), who are their sources of education funding. A current female student recalls how her father was adamant she joins Nakawa and would hear nothing else:

Well at first, I did not want to do that, but just because I did not have a choice to make my own choice and say that... you know what I want to go for is nursing because that is what I wanted. But my father made that choice for me, so that is how I came here.
(C003, Female current student at Nakawa)

For these two students it was not their choice to enrol at Nakawa. Of the two female participants, one was glad to have made this choice as she enjoyed her course, whereas the other was upset due to the competitive job market that prevented her from actualizing her dream of working in her field and the expected financial benefits. However, this was

just a small portion of respondents, most attest this was a choice they made and are happy to have gone in this direction.

The findings of this study go further on to demonstrate that the female students and graduates also chose TVET because of their own personal aspirations tied to hopes of lucrative job prospects. The female participants were very practical and forward thinking in their decision making. 96% (n=21)¹⁴ of the female participants recognized the benefits of their chosen courses. Most of the female participants are profoundly proud of their choice. It is important to note that regardless of how they came about in entering STEM vocational field, they enjoyed the challenge of their degrees and were inspired.

Most of the respondents also believed that their reasons for pursuing STEM related vocational studies was influenced by their own personal life goals. The study showed that there is a strong association between the high prestige and financial benefits of STEM career paths. Female participants attest that a good educational background contributes to a better life and this desire influences their entry into the vocational sciences world. They speak of the pride they feel when they see a fellow female conquer and thrive in what once was a male domain. This has created a mindset shift that has motivated young women to chase their dreams of working in different vocational professions, such as plumbing, mechanics, electronics, electrical and even brick laying. A current female student recalled how she was inspired and confident to keep going in this direction through a school trip to a Coca Cola Manufacturing Corporation, where she saw other females in this role:

¹⁴ This would include current, graduates and females in FGD2, excluding instructors

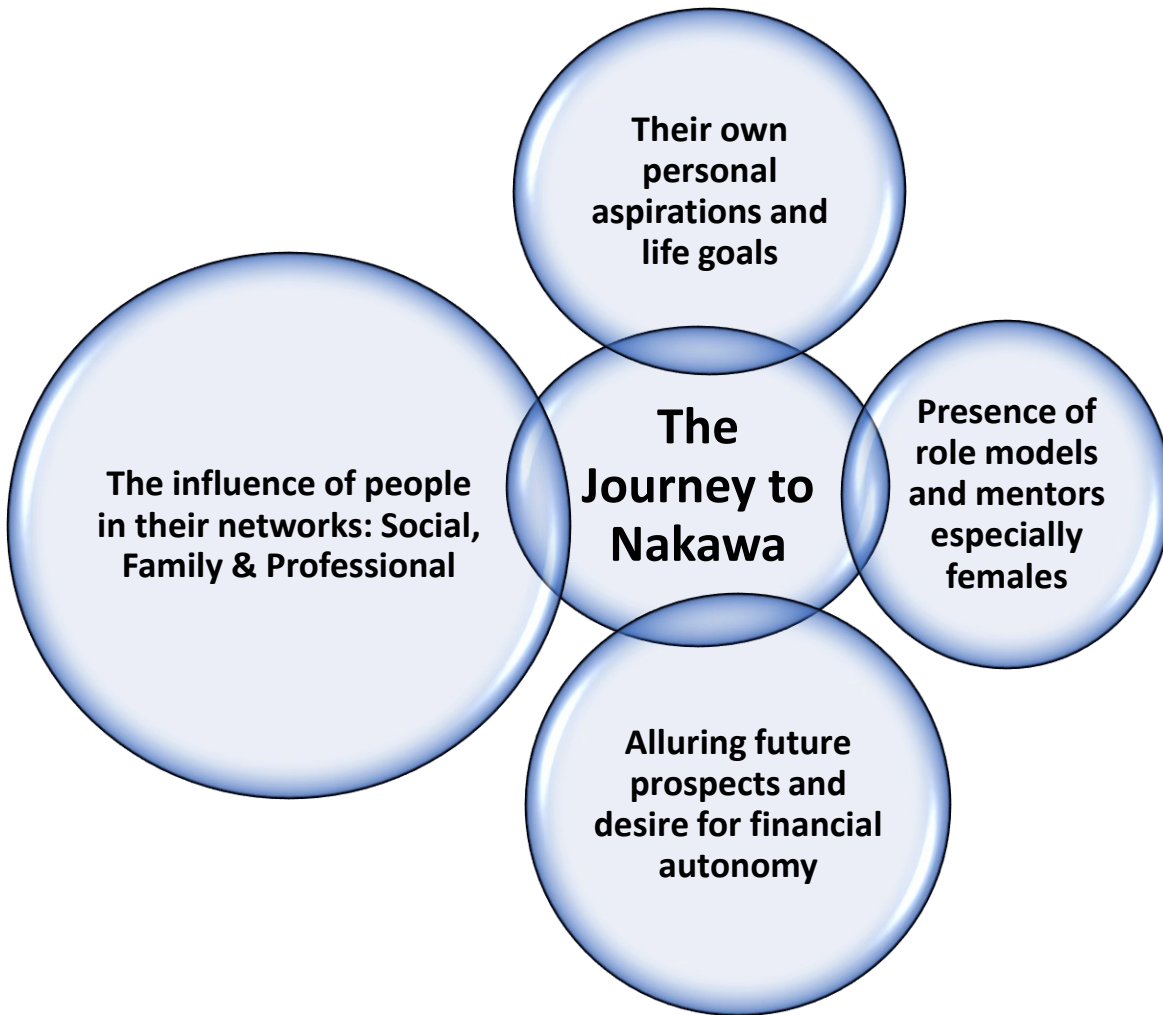
My course is about machine operation, and when I visited a company (coca cola) and saw a lady running a machine, and I was like I wish I could do it, that is how I was inspired, and even my brother did it, and he told me to join me. (C0010, Female current student at Nakawa)

Finally, the need for financial autonomy ranked among the pull factors in the respondents' narratives. They confirmed that the possibility for faster employability if they joined the VET institution was an incentive to take up this pathway. They reveal that at their secondary school's career days they were informed of the benefits of vocational studies as an ideal path offering the opportunity to acquire various practical skills enabling them to build their own businesses. These young women have decided to join this industry, as they have assurances that they will have the means to start their own enterprise to help them provide stability through income.

Hence, most female participants were strongly influenced to pursue TVET at Nakawa by their different social networks, especially within their families, the success stories, positive examples, and counsel from individuals in similar fields. They pursued it in the expectation of a better future, despite obstacles. The participants also demonstrated that choosing TVET was advantageous because it broadened the variety of opportunities open to them to live an independent life in which they make their own choices and be sure in their ability to succeed. Furthermore, the greatest pull factor was their networks, especially the influence of male family members who supported and encouraged them to join TVET. This highlighted an important shift in the understanding of gender appropriate roles, indicating there is a changing perception within the society—females too can be in these roles.

Figure 2. Summary of the Factors that Influence Choice Of TVET

The figure below summarises the factors that influenced the female students' and graduates' choice to TVET in particular their journey to Nakawa from their post-primary institutions. These factors are representative of most female participants though they may differ from one participant to another.



4.2. The Experiences of Female Students at Nakawa

This next section will address the experiences within Nakawa focusing on current students. It will be divided into (i) interactions with male students and (ii) interaction with instructors. It is important to understand how these young women have negotiated their way in this learning environment as it remains a male-domain.

4.2.1 Interactions Between Female Students and Male Students

Positive Experiences

Since these fields/courses are still considered by most a male domain, it is critical to recognise the role male students play in establishing a welcoming learning environment for females in their classrooms, as this relates to their TVET education experiences. The nature of the interactions and environment are crucial because it makes one feel valued and recognized, thereby adding meaning to learning (Dahri, Yusof and Chinedu, 2018).

Female participants explained the positive nature of the interactions between females and males at Nakawa. Male students in TVET were, for the most part, accepting of females; they encouraged and fostered positive relationships with female students. The male students often encouraged and helped them in class. They would help them in practical training coursework or explain to them if they did not understand certain class topic/subjects. They all got along well, were polite, and respectful of each other. Current female students in the focus group discussion unanimously agreed that male students were good to them:

They are not bad, they encourage you, they help you out and when there is something you do not understand they will come and

correct you. The boys are helpful in class, they helped us think out of the box. (Current female students at Nakawa in FGD 2)

The female and male students worked together in a friendly manner and the young women were able to count on their support in many ways. A current student in one of the focus groups stated that her relationships with males at Nakawa were similar to interactions with her male siblings making it easier to co-exist:

I was happy that I joined this institution and there is no day I regret to have done this course. I do not find it hard associating with the boys, because since my childhood I have grown up with boys, so it is not a problem. (Current female students in FGD 2)

The male students who were interviewed in the focus group 1 expressed their support and empathy for females enrolling in TVET programmes, stating that having females in the class is beneficial. The male students genuinely felt the female students brought a challenge in that they were smart, and this motivated them to do better as they were able to help each other. During the focus group discussion with a few male students at Nakawa from different departments, they attested to the great relations with fellow female students:

Girls know things that we do not know, so it is easy to consult and share with a girl than fellow boys. There is a girl in our class, she is good at mathematics, so we usually consult her. So, I encourage girls to join technical institutions. (FG1-CM001, Male current student at Nakawa during Focus group 1)

Having girls in class has helped us as boys to think out of box because they challenge us. It helps me work hard and compete with them. (FG1-CM002, Male current student at Nakawa during Focus group 1)

According to their own testimony, the female students feel well integrated, socially, and academically, at Nakawa and they confirm that they have experienced limited prejudice as compared to outside in the working world, such as during apprenticeships. The female respondents see NVTI as a haven where they can express themselves and be themselves. One of the current students shared:

They give you chance to express yourself. They give you attention as a girl. They make you love what you are doing here in Nakawa.... (FG2-CM002, Female current student at Nakawa during Focus group 2)

The Challenges at Nakawa

Despite the current students' portrayal of Nakawa as their sanctuary, the conversations also disclosed that female students experienced incidents of negative gendered interactions that did impact them. However, they claim that this did not dissuade them from their goals, and that they found ways to overcome and cope. These experiences, however, demonstrated that sometimes females were subjected to tricky situations that, even if they were resilient, it was discouraging and created an unwelcoming environment.

The young women admitted that they were well aware that some male students regarded them as frail and weak, particularly in departments such as metal fabrication and brick

laying. As a result, when they needed to carry heavier equipment, the males were quick to offer ‘*assistance*’ so that the women did not *injure* themselves. From the conversations the female participants felt the boys were allies who would provide needed assistance in schoolwork. The only area of negativity was when they wanted to offer help to carry heavy things. Although this was welcomed, it indicated that the boys felt the girls could not handle it. One FGD male participant iterated that administration should find ways to help the girls, or the girls should do courses at Nakawa where no heavy equipment is required, which are non-existent as the most courses are labor intensive. This demonstrates that even though they welcomed females, females were still regarded as the weaker sex. As a result of such skewed mentalities, females are more likely to suffer the negative consequences of sexism.

Furthermore, female students shared their experiences of prejudice, such as patronising remarks from male students. The male students would pass comments like, “Girls are not meant to do so much work, they need to find a way to make the easier for them” (Current female student in FGD 2 at Nakawa). This was later affirmed during the focus group with the male student where one shared: “yes girls should be allowed into vocational schools, but there are things they cannot do, the schools need to find ways to help them, so they do not get hurt” (Male student in FGD1 at Nakawa). Such statements go on to assert that females do not belong because of their physical strength, thereby exacerbating the gender role stereotyping that prevents females from pursuing TVET. One male student added that during placements females are not allowed to operate construction equipment. When asked why he stated:

When it comes to construction, girls cannot handle heavy weights, it is their nature. (Male student in FGD1 at Nakawa)

With further probing to ascertain why women were not allowed to operate such machinery, even if they had undergone the same practical training as men, the male student went on to say:

Because they think girls are not capable, its men's nature. (Male student in FGD1 at Nakawa)

To make matters worse, the females were the targets of misogynist language on social media platforms such as WhatsApp. The female students felt disrespected and belittled because of these conversations and rumours that circulated. One of the current students stated that because boys outnumbered girls in the classrooms, they were subjected to mistreatment:

We are few girls in the class, at times only 2 girls to many boys. We have gotten disrespected; some boys will insult us on WhatsApp groups calling us names. They can even send us ugly messages and so on. It does not help us; we do not feel good about this. (C001, Current Student from Electronics at Nakawa Vocational)

Even though female students appeared to get along well with males, the stereotypical beliefs and underlying gender role expectations persist.

4.2.3 Interactions Between Female Students and Instructors

Positive Experiences

The teaching faculty plays a key role in promoting a favourable learning environment that encourages the success of female students in this male arena. Instructors are passionate about both male and female students; they are particularly mindful of creating the environment and opportunities to ensure that female students can be successful. The instructors are invested in their students; they provide advice and guidance to help them prepare for the realities of vocational education. Females typically have more reservations about joining TVET, and orientation and guidance help to solidify their decisions and provide confidence. One of the female key informants, an Assistant Instructor at the Digital Electronics Department at Nakawa for five years, shared one of the strategies put in place to help female students adapt to the new environment:

During orientation week [female] students, are advised and asked to give their opinions as to why they like engineering, or the courses they decide to pursue, to consider the kind of work they are expected do after. We ask them what they want to do. We [provide] advice [and] good reasons why [we] think that course is good for them to take on. (KIF006- Female instructor from Nakawa)

The instructors demonstrate a high level of empathy for the female students, which is a required skill for fostering a positive learning environment (Dahri, Yusof and Chinedu, 2018). Female participants stated that their instructors, especially the female instructors,

showed concern and consideration for them when they were faced with various challenges when they first arrived at Nakawa and during their apprenticeship. They feel they could relate to them because they, too, had been through the TVET process and faced similar challenges.

They give you attention as a girl. They make you love what you are doing here in Nakawa.... They show us others who too have gone through this process, our instructors like Madam Agatha in Electronics department were also a former NVTI student, so we have many good role models. So, it is not bad. (C002- Female current students at Nakawa)

The instructors wanted girls to be on front seats not behind ones, the relationship was really positive, we could always be positive. Whenever one girl was missing; they would ask where this girl is, and the class would only start after 3 seats have been set-up for the 3 girls in the class. (G003- Female Graduate student from Nakawa)

Female instructors are also seen as positive role models by female students, who view them as examples of the possibilities available in TVET industry. Since they could relay and confide in them, these good relations created safe spaces for female students to speak about their worries, struggles, likes, and accomplishments. They also learned firsthand from the female teachers about different facts, such as how to work on practicals or tasks, how to navigate relationships with parents, male colleagues, or employers, how to cope with

difficulties, and how to adjust to the working environment, through these close relationships. These teachers are admired by the students, through whom they too can succeed in these STEMs courses.

We receive career guidance from the instructors for example about behaviors when we are looking for work, like being patient as we search for jobs and work hard to progress. (C003, Female Current student at Nakawa)

Interviews suggest that instructors genuinely care to improve the learning experiences and practical skills of their female students; they present them with opportunities to grow their skills in their course/craft by giving them additional on-job training opportunities. Female students value this on-the-job training because it improves their competencies and capabilities while also allowing them to put their in-class theoretical training into practise. One of the graduates shared how the instructors would favor girls and give them work and even pay them for their portion of the work, all to retain their interest in engineering:

The instructors did not want us to be all that lazy, so they could bring something difficult, to know if we have/ have not learnt. Our instructors were also engineers, clients would give them equipment to repair; so, they could give us electronics to repair, they wanted us to learn more. Afterwards they would tell us, ‘Do you remember the devices you repaired, I was paid 200,000 UGX, and the instructors would give us our share of the money. We used to feel good because we could repair things and they could come

out like the way we expected, we could make them work. (G003,
Female Graduate Student in Electronics form Nakawa)

According to the interviews, the relationships between female students and their instructors are positive. The instructors provided opportunities for their students to excel, gain confidence, and improve their capabilities to achieve success. As a result, for the majority of female students, their instructors facilitate constructive learning experiences. While Nakawa has predominantly male instructors, the teacher/instructor training programme at Kyambogo University and a new similar programme offered at Nakawa, opened up opportunities for female graduates from NVTI take on teaching positions at the institute. This provides an opportunity to increase the number of female role models and leaders in the TVET sector. Such strides will go far in encouraging more females to enrol in TVET-STEMs courses.

Challenges Young Women Faced

Current students, however, continue to face challenges that make women feel unwelcome in TVET. This next section will delve deeper into the challenges they experience at Nakawa.

The practice of extra supervision imposed on female students in the vocational institute is a detriment to their advancement. Females shared feelings of disgruntlement towards some instructors who would not apportion assignments to the females, especially during practicums. They shared that the females were either assigned a male student to supervise or not assigned any work at all. As a result, as shared in the focus group with female students: “we do not have chances to train as much as boys and found at end of the day we

could not fix things.” As such, to get ahead of the work they needed to stick to the boys like glue to help them since they had prior knowledge of certain practicums. This creates a stressful school environment, in which these women are less confident and not as well trained.

When it comes to certain practicals like repairing the electronics, we are left out only the boys are called. And yet when we go back home, we are expected to fix things, but we cannot because we do not have the training/skills. (C002, Current student at Nakawa Vocational Institute)

This preclusion of females from much needed practicums put them at a disadvantage – they might not be fully trained but still sent to placements. The female participants did not understand the reasons behind the exclusion. As a result, females would be less prepared than males and this would only serve to contribute to the stereotype that women are not suited for this field. This results in fulfilling expectations of society and potential employers that women cannot do/are not suited to this type of work.

4.2.4 Experiences in Field-Work Placements for Current Students

During their industrial training/placements, female current students also experienced inequities. Employers were not only hesitant to hire a female, but some were also opposed to the notion of a women in such roles. This outlook was fueled mostly by gender stereotypes as to the natural abilities and capabilities of females to last in the job or accomplish set tasks. Employers would also isolate females in existing female typical roles such as receptionists or secretaries even if they were in apprenticeships from vocational

institutions. In addition, there were instances of extra monitoring for the females, they were supervised when completing tasks so as to produce quality work. A current female student at Nakawa shared her own encounter in the field:

Girls are overlooked. For example, at industrial training they do not allow girls to work on repairs without boys to supervise them. (Current female student at Nakawa during FGD2)

This has created high levels of frustration for these students during placements. Due to these prejudices, female students were also overworked during industrial training/placements. They spent hours in training and then were overworked as the supervisors and colleagues were not confident, they could handle the work. They will work them twice as hard to prove they are capable, at times leading to burn-out.

At industrial training I was overworked, they would not believe we could do the work, so we got double tasks to test us. (C006, Current female student at Nakawa during Focus Group 2)

Current students also reported being paid less compared to their male peers:

If a girl finished her work first at work [during placement], it is not believed and sometimes she is paid less. (C008, Current female student at Nakawa)

Current students also shared a challenge of discrimination during their search for placements. They shared experiences of harassment in the field during the internship process, some employers would demand for sexual favors in exchange for a job. Females

who rejected these sexual advances would be refused employment. Those who finally do get a job, find themselves in compromising positions and have had to quit to protect themselves. This curtailed their ability to find gainful work experiences necessary for their education.

Outside school ladies still face a problem of sexual harassment, the bosses tend to recruit the ladies, but with sexual motives in mind. Once you refuse to give in, they fire you, like when you refuse to sleep with him (C004, Current female student training to be an Instructor in Civil department).

Despite this, students did not remain silent and shared their experiences with the career counsellor and their department heads during the debriefing following their placements. The students also discussed their concerns with the guild cabinet,¹⁵ which raised them with the administration. The NVTI administration conducted investigations and held meetings with guild representatives to discuss the challenges of the students during practicums and to come up with some potential ways to mitigate their new terrains. However, one of the female instructors stated that sometimes they do not follow-up, so cases are shelved, resulting in a lack of oversight for employers, thereby perpetuating these biases:

We conduct meetings to find out the administrative solutions however, sometimes we do not follow up. That is a challenge.

¹⁵ Guild Cabinet was the Student Leadership appointed through election

(KIF004 Female instructor and Acting Head of the Welding Department at Nakawa)

4.2.5 How Has Nakawa Catered for Female Students

As Sen (1999) argues, social practices are crucial in determining whether an individual's liberties expand or diminish. Female respondents believed they had more options to pursue whichever courses and careers they wanted at Nakawa. They did not have as many options as they had in the past, notably during and after their tenure at Nakawa. They acknowledged that Nakawa provided an environment in which they could thrive, but they also stated that they had encountered discrimination from peers and tutors, which, while subtle at times, posed numerous problems.

As Sen (1999) argues, practices play a key role in the expansion or contraction of an individual's freedoms and agency. The female respondents felt they had more opportunities to pursue any course and jobs of their choice. They did not have a limit to their options as before, especially during their time at Nakawa. They attested that Nakawa provided a space for them to flourish, but there were also instances when they experienced discrimination from peers and tutors; though this was subtle still created challenges.

Female enrolment rates in the STEM courses at Nakawa remains low; however, this has not deterred Nakawa from its goal of inclusiveness and to make the learning environment more favorable for women. A current female student from the electronics department shared that her class only had 5 females compared to about 20 males. According to a female instructor who was the Acting Head of the Welding Department:

This term we got one girl, but if we had gotten many, we would take them on. (KI003, Female Tutor at Nakawa).

There were a growing number of inclusive initiatives promoting female participation in TVET. The Gender in BTVET Strategy in the Skilling Uganda BTVET strategic plan, for example, has encouraged female enrolment by improving the training environment. Nakawa Vocational Training Institute has also pledged to create a welcoming environment where women can fully integrate and have access to the resources, they need to achieve their full potential in TVET. To structure their institution, they have implemented several initiatives in accordance with the Skilling Uganda BTVET Strategic Plan. Female students are given special quotas in the Institute's bursary programme and are also offered in-school accommodations (two self-contained hostel units that can sleep 20-30 girls) and provided with separate sanitary facilities to ensure females students feel safe and comfortable. With the existing hostel accommodation facilities for female students, students can avoid long commutes from home to school and improves on student safety and privacy. These accommodations current exist for male students so with these additions they provide female students with same advantages as their male peers.

Other policies and practices that have furthered the inclusion agenda include special assistance in job placements by drafting good recommendations for referring female students and connecting with viable employers, strict zero tolerance policies on sexual harassment and abuse for students and staff, access to specialized bursary programmes,

and finally student referrals to the scholarship to Nakawa's certificate in vocational teacher training course.¹⁶

Nakawa has also provided guidance and counselling to female students, both prospective and current, to help them navigate the school landscape. Once students are admitted to a course/program, NVTI administration provides one-on-one verification interviews to students during orientation week, life skills training classes and invites guest speakers from specialized fields. They use the interviews to gauge if the students have a good understanding of the course they selected to pursue. These practices assist students to navigate their new environments. If students have any concerns, they can seek advice from guidance counsellors. According to administrators at Nakawa:

When they are here, we invite speakers from different industries but focused especially on the real world of work skills, entrepreneurship, so that we empower them in all aspects. (KIM001, Principal at Nakawa).

We have an arrangement with the counselor who works with Makerere University, he counsels girls about different skills especially outside school. (KIM003, Head of Department of Machining and Fitting)

One student shared how these supports from administration was instrumental in their experience at Nakawa:

¹⁶ This training was provided for those who qualify or show interest to become instructors. They would be able to teach courses in TVET at be possibly retained at Nakawa.

When joining, one of our instructors, Mr. Omoo (Current Principal) encouraged us that we can make it and to always have a positive attitude. When I went for an internship, I loved the course even more because I took on his advice to have a positive attitude. (Current student in FGD 2).

Despite such policies and processes put in place to support students, the females still felt isolated and inadequate to face workforce realities. They shared that training was lax and at times they were not sure if they had enough skills to do the job. A current students shared:

We had limited knowledge: many instructors bring the work but will give it to the boys to practice alone (C007, Current female student in machine and fitting).

Female students also shared that they experienced stigma, they felt inferior because they were already considered too slow to keep up. They would be left out of many training exercises, due to the fast pace, but still sent out to placements. This undermined their full potential to succeed.

We felt stigma: like boys are more efficient and knowledgeable so us girls they take us as incompetent, and we even fear to ask not to be stigmatized or feel inferior (C004, Current female student training to be an Instructor in Civil department).

4.3 The Experiences Of Graduates from Nakawa

Interviews with female graduates revealed a variety of experiences ranging from interactions with fellow male colleagues, employers, and finally how they managed to integrate into the world of work.

4.3.1 Positive Experiences

Graduates attest that pursuing TVET was a great opportunity for them, notwithstanding the challenges. The female graduates from Nakawa spoke of their achievements along the way that enabled them to thrive while transitioning to the world of work. There are some shared positive experiences that highlight the advantage of the TVET pathway and, as such, legitimize the young women's continued belief that they can make it in this male dominated sector.

The opportunity to pursue vocational studies benefited the majority of female graduates because it provided a direct source of gainful employment. Graduates account for 31.8%¹⁷ of female respondents among the participants. According to the research, 6 out of 7 of the graduates in the study were able to obtain jobs in their specific fields; however, one graduate was dissatisfied because she was unable to obtain a job in her field of electronics. Participants say they are glad they took this path because one of the motivators for joining Nakawa was the lucrative opportunities to gain income-generating skills to support themselves and their families. They did share that despite finding jobs, the job market was stiff and competitive and segregates women, as society still believes this as a man's work.

¹⁷ n=7 graduate participants of the 22 female student participants (excludes the instructors)

The ability to find work has provided a sense of independence through the money they earn, thus enhancing their lives. The graduates stated that they could now afford to live and support their families, as well as achieve lifelong goals, such as starting their own business and preparing for future educational goals such as an advanced degree. The ability to access their own funding allows them to imagine and dream bigger, propelling them to greater heights. A graduate shared that she was able to start her own business with her acquired skills:

I am currently self-employed. I do repairs. T.V, Radio, Decoder, it is where I specialized you know I was working in a certain company, but I found it more profitable to employ myself.

(C003, Graduate from Electronics at Nakawa)

Even though women have been able to achieve these skills and financial stability, many changes are required to provide a safer working environment that protects women from workplace discrimination. Graduates may feel accepted and at home in their positions, but they nevertheless face challenges that obstruct their progress.

4.3.2 Challenges Graduates Face

88% of the current students and graduates interviewed in this study (22 out of 25),¹⁸ share they had a more challenging time in the workplace than at NVTI. As these women described their experiences, the most prominent factor was the levels of discrimination, including assumptions about gender roles by employers and customers, prejudices within the workplace based on assumptions about females' physical abilities, and being

¹⁸ These include the current female students, graduates, current student from FGD

undervalued. The female participants shared that they were often given the impression that they were in the wrong place. According to the respondents, co-workers, supervisors, and customers clearly had misgivings about women in what is still considered a male role.

Respondents shared how customers would be apprehensive to receive services from a female. Some customers had little faith in their expertise and skills¹⁹ and would be utterly shocked to even see a woman present in such a field or environment. One of the young female graduates working with Kampala City Council Association in the Electric Installation department, was the only female in her team of 10 during the electric maintenance at a new building complex. She recalls one of her experiences:

They can give you a cable to lay it from one point to another but in this process, they will keep asking, “can she do it.” In their minds, they think ladies are weaker, [so they only want to work with men] (G007, Female Graduate from Nakawa).

Another female graduate who took the auto-mechanic course at Nakawa and had started working at an auto-garage in the city, reported she was often ignored or passed over for jobs from clients who were always surprised to see her in overalls working in the garage. They would rather wait for two or three days for their regular male mechanics to work on their vehicles, it could be days before she worked on a car. She remembers several degrading remarks from clients and even fellow male co-workers:

¹⁹ The customers who didn't want a female would insist on being appointed a male worker. But the female still worked on other projects as she was still working for this same employer at time of this interview

In this field they think it is for men, not for ladies, men think ladies cannot do it, and if there is some work to do, they would tell me—you cannot do it. At the garage where I was, some customers would say this girl cannot work on my car, they would refuse to let me touch it. (G005, Female Graduate from Nakawa)

Comparably, another female graduate also recollects her experience of discrimination from her community when she first opened her Electronics workshop in her local community in Nabweru,²⁰ a few months after graduation. She recollects an experience in earlier days when she had just started her business:

Even close family and friends would take their TVs, radios, decoders, phones, and other devices for repair to other shops. No one trusted me or thought a female had the ability to do a good job on their devices, they thought I would only ruin them. (G002, Female Graduate from Nakawa)

The female graduates voiced that they were still considered the minority as most of the sciences-based VET professions have for a long time been considered masculine and remain so, therefore majority of those who enroll in these courses and professions are men. These young women are seen to have crossed the appropriate gender boundaries and are reminded of this by fellow male classmates, supervisors, co-workers, and clients. They

²⁰ Nabweru in Wakiso District (Central Region) is located in Uganda a little north-west of Kampala, the country's capital town.

undergo constant rejection because of discrimination. An electronics graduate student shared a disappointing experience during her post graduate job search in 2019:

... recently some company advertised that they wanted a technician. I went there to apply, but they said they wanted boys only and when I asked for reasons, they did not have any. (G001, Female Graduate students from Nakawa).

The young women interviewed expressed there is a constant focus on female physical strength and appearance, often accentuated by fellow co-workers and classmates that refer to women's delicate constitution and tend to offer ingenuine support meant to humiliate, not encourage, these women. These fields of study and career paths, such as plumber, electrician, brick layer, mechanic, welder and so on, have traditionally been constructed as male domains. Due to this masculine perceptions and stereotypes, there are assumptions that females do not belong and so are continuously deterred (Ngui and Muthima, 2017). A female graduate from Nakawa further stressed:

Most women are not given big posts because they still believe that we are weak like in rush milling, they want quality and ladies cannot produce quality work. (G003, Graduate student from Nakawa vocational)

The reports of sexual harassment and assault were the most disturbing. Both current students and graduates share experiences of sexual harassment: from employers seeking sexual pleasure in exchange for job offers, employers threatening to fire them if they do not give in to their sexual advances; fellow male students and coworkers insistently

pursuing them even after multiple refusals to give in to their sexual advances. Throughout the course of this study, the female participants slowly unfolded about the state of affairs, what seemed like a safe place within the institute soon became daunting; graduates share that what was their pride turned into a place of torment. Out of the 10 graduate female participants, there were 6 who had experienced a form of sexual harassment, additionally 4 current students also shared experiences of sexual harassment but did not discuss specific incidents. One of the graduates recounted her experience in tears as it has created such a challenging work environment:

Sometimes I was sexually harassed especially bad touches because I am the only lady. It happens when you are new, everybody wants to do that, and this frustrated me. And these that give in, they are liked, but I did not so they isolated me, and it is a challenge. (G006, Female Graduate from Nakawa)

When asked how this has affected her work, she shared that:

It has made my work so hard. I feel am isolated, frustrated at work, and I have no one to talk to. When I brought this to the attention of my supervisor, who is also a female, she scheduled me to work in a different building from everyone else, to protect me. None of these guys was ever confronted, they still work there. I see them every day, and now I work all alone in the new building, it is quieter, but I would like to have some people work with me too. (G006, Female Graduate from Nakawa)

Some parents and even employers still undermine the value of vocational education regarding it as a place for academic failures, for children who are not able to get grades to get into the University and as such a second choice with low job prospects and remuneration. Employers at times disregard the credentials from the vocational schools seeking University graduates. This can be a deterrent to students as it hinders them from gaining on-job firsthand knowledge. One of the graduates shared why she does not believe TVET would be profitable to focus only on a diploma from Nakawa. She urged students should continue to university for better chances of employability:

It is wastage of time and would advise some to continue with advanced level to the university. Because there is a place, I went for to look for a job and they wanted a data Clark and the requirement you must have at least finished S.6; they did not even look at the certificate which [I] had [from] [the] vocational school (G002, Female Graduate Student from Nakawa).

Conclusion

According to the experiences of female respondents in this study, TVET is a viable sector that can benefit women and provide opportunities for them to gain knowledge and skills that they can use to live a good life. The respondents shared a few successes since joining Nakawa, such as starting a small business, finding work in their fields, and increasing their confidence to take on new challenges in the workplace. In contrast, by examining the experiences of female graduates who have stepped into the working world, the research revealed that they were discouraged and lack job security. Their employers do not respect

their needs, or consider them competent of handling assigned tasks, as such the work environment is less than supportive. This has reiterated the gender divisions and enforced the organizational structures within workplaces and even within vocational institutions, thereby women remain isolated and underrepresented. Despite the growing numbers of females joining vocational institutions, especially in the sciences, which are considered nontypical study fields for women, the masculine culture within most vocational study fields reinforces the masculine image of these fields and professions (Makarova et al., 2016).

CHAPTER FIVE: WHAT THEY KNOW OF AND HOW THEY EXPERIENCE EMPOWERMENT

Introduction

Gendered attitudes and norms towards women/girls in the private sphere, particularly when assigning roles, still strongly influence Ugandan society. However, with the mainstream discourse of empowerment growing and permeating Ugandan society, these attitudes and perceptions are evolving. This is, in part, because the girls' education movement is becoming increasingly popular both domestically and internationally. As a result, investment in education and empowerment for girls, particularly in STEM courses in vocational education, is becoming vital.

Chapter five sets out to answer the main research question of this study: *“How do female students in and graduates of vocational institutions in Uganda construct, and understand empowerment in relation to their education?”* Drawing on the conceptual framework in chapter two based on assessing the concepts that encompass the concept of women’s empowerment, specifically power, agency, and choice. The following sections will explore and analyse the perspectives of the 22 female participants in this study—both current students and graduates. This will breakdown their views and opinions in relation to the concept of empowerment, specifically, what they know and how they experience empowerment. This section will further highlight empowerment as a process rooted in concept of power.

Defining empowerment as a process requires examining the power relations in this process and recognising that empowerment is multi-dimensional and relational, and thus it cannot

be reduced to any one component. Understanding empowerment as a process, shifts the focus from individuals to changing social structures. Social structures are derived from the social norms, the norms determine what economic space women can occupy in both formal and informal institutions, and consequently influence how women can then benefit from these spaces. Essentially, these norms undermine the transformative potential of empowerment initiatives (Jones, 2011).

Nevertheless, identifying the essence of the empowerment process is challenging due to the wide range of interactions that women have, resulting in fluidity in the definition of this concept as opposed to the one-size-fits-all from mainstream development conceptualizations. Since empowerment is an ever-evolving composition of women's lived realities, based on their unique ways of experiencing the world at various stages of their lives; it is critical to evaluate their individualised conceptualization of this concept.

This research aims to expand the discourse on empowerment, questioning prevailing views, which dismisses this nuanced concept as an antidote in one-size-fits-all programs. These programs have simplified the realities of women by concentrating on development goals that rely on the numerical representation of women in public sphere, reducing women to agents, and downplaying the value of the empowerment process (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014). The chapter is divided into themes that arose from interviews with the research participants. These themes illustrate the nuanced nature of the concept of empowerment and the diverse experiences of women enrolling in STEM courses at Nakawa vocational institute. Furthermore, it demonstrates the diverse perspectives of participants with respect to empowerment in an area of study and work that has traditionally been reserved for males.

5.1. Conceptualizing Empowerment by The Female Participants from Nakawa

Empowerment is a well-known concept in Uganda, where it is promoted through various channels such as magazines, newspapers, advocacy newsletters, television, and non-profit groups. This concept is widely known because it is incorporated into the mandates and goals of numerous organisations, whether locally, nationally, regionally, or internationally. This provides numerous avenues for female students and instructors to gain knowledge of this concept. As the participants shared, it was clear that the concept of empowerment was well-known to which the participants could relate in their daily lives.

During interviews, all female participants (22 of 33 participants)²¹ stated that they learned most of their information regarding empowerment from local media, community organisations, and from seminars at the Nakawa Vocational Institute and what they had read on their own.

This next section will discuss how the participants perceive and understand empowerment. This will breakdown their views and opinions in relation to the concept of empowerment and how to they experience empowerment. Thereby further highlighting empowerment as a process, relational and rooted in the concept of power. It will explore two separate, but interdependent areas, that will highlight the process of empowerment in relation to the experiences of the young women from Nakawa. That is, the societal and cultural attitudes and the individual sense of self. These are all contribute to the empowering and disempowering processes these young women experience.

²¹ The current students, graduates, current female students in the FGD2, excludes male participants and instructors

5.2 Societal and Cultural Attitudes

Social attitudes and practices result from social norms, these norms determine what spaces women can occupy, both formally and informally and consequently influence how women benefit from these spaces. Societal norms and attitudes can support or undermine the transformative potential of empowerment initiatives. The young women shared those supports from people in their immediate society provided conducive environment for them to thrive. This further contributed to their understanding of empowerment as a concept.

Giving support to girls to thrive

The students interviewed for this study passionately believed that by supporting women, by validating their importance/relevance in the sector, it opens room to slowly accept females in TVET. This support restores their hope and confidence, challenging attitudes that girls cannot participate in skills and trades industry. This concurs with the ‘power with’ notion that focuses on a group of people working together for a common goal to ignite a change.

These excerpts describe the experience of a female current students who shared their view of empowerment:

[For me it is] helping the girls so they too can help themselves; enabling them to build themselves to survive and be better. One girl who went to school can be of assistance to the other who did not have an opportunity to go to school, we can build each other so that they are not undermined. People will be respected. They did not get the same opportunity, so they have to get jobs as

house-girls. I do not want such a life in the future. I believe it is necessary to support all girls in whatever way to prevent them from such lives, so they can be better. (C001- Current students from Electronics department)

The breaking of stereotypes

Female graduates of Nakawa have broken through gendered barriers hoping this would inspire other females to do the same. They openly expressed their desire to grow in the TVET sector and were even confident they would succeed even amongst several challenges. A graduate shared how this defined her path:

Because I always wanted [to] challenge guys who said I could not. We grew up and our daddy would say girls are equally like boys, so he put that in us that we would make it. (G006- Graduate from Electrical installation)

5.3 Individual Sense of Growth

We Can Now Do What Boys Can Do

With Ugandan society being patriarchal and the skills and trades industry regarded as a masculine sector, females taking up the mantle in STEM courses and related jobs comes as a surprise (Okello, 2013). There is a slow rate of enrolment of females, as many are still hesitant to join and hence will primarily apply to the conventional female courses, such as cosmetology or other science-related courses like nursing and counselling services. STEM courses were mostly designed for men, with the belief that manual labor-intensive jobs can

be difficult for women/girls because they are considered physically limited to sufficiently handle this work. Female students and graduates from Nakawa are challenging this status quo and redefining what it means to be a woman in the TVET sector.

Participants expressed how much they enjoyed their courses, even if they were just one or two young women in a class of 40, and how pleased they were to be able to embark on these new experiences. As a result of enrolling in these courses, these young women feel confident that they have the capacity and knowledge to complete the courses and work in this field. One current student describes her view of empowerment as:

It is the right to acquire power as men. Like they would say, 'women cannot build' but now we can. It used to be for men but now it is for both, though the ratio of boys to girls is still too low. (C002, Current student training in Diploma in Technical Teaching)

Most current female students identified empowerment as dispelling the misconception that girls/women were not designed for such labor-intensive courses. Even though some participants admitted to being uncertain and fearful of the future at first, they continued to develop and evolve, reaching several milestones that transformed their attitudes towards vocational training. They began to take responsibility of their chosen paths, which drove them to work hard towards achieving their goals. They have, therefore, undone decades of internalized repressive beliefs that have supported TVET as a male realm, sustaining strict notions of gender roles in the workplace. One participant in Focus Group 2 affirmed that vocational STEMs are not just for boys anyone can do it:

I thought it would be a lot of hard work and take a lot of energy, but I then realized I can do it just like the boys (Current student from Electronics in FGD 2).

Notwithstanding the above victories, this shift does not go without disruption. The TVET sector is still riddled with challenges that continue to sustain the status quo. Even with the increase in female enrolment and policies in place to incentivize females such as financial aid bursaries, females are still considered weak and are not fully embraced within the sector. In Chapter 4, female students recalled experiences of harassment and rejection that stifle the above victories. But they still cope and push through all struggles to achieve their goals and dreams.

These female participants highlighted that empowerment extends beyond simply controlling resources such as income, though this is still important. The process of empowerment has now expanded to include the way an individual is valued in society. When females are negated in vocational studies and jobs, they are less able to thrive because males are given more attention. Changing the value systems would spark a shift in the norms and attitudes toward females in STEM fields in the TVET industry. These women believe that going against the grain is the best way to disprove the stereotype that women cannot fit in at TVET institutes or jobs. They are saying that they can and are doing it, they are living proof.

Empowerment for me is the ability to do anything. Yes, as a lady I have power better than some men, I studied graduated, the course I did, and there is money in it and some men out there are

not working of which I am better than them. I can repair, of which some men cannot do. I can start up my own business of which some men cannot (G004, female graduate student in motor vehicle mechanics from Nakawa).

Believing In Oneself

To a large extent, most current students' comments (n=10)²² described empowerment as the ability to do something that they previously could not do. The female participants agree that empowering women is synonymous with girls/women believing in their abilities to do anything, which is aided by providing women with the opportunity to work or attend school like men to achieve autonomy and independence. Although the young women did share that they initially felt less inclined to join TVET institutions, believing it was best suited for men. Later, during their studies, these young women shared that these fears were dispelled, especially once they were attending NVTI and started to enjoy the different their courses. This aligns with the concepts of power within and power to; the girls have gained inward confidence and are now able to take action in their lives. Two female participants in the focus group 2 shared:

[Empowerment is] [b]elieving in your own inner strength. I can do what boys can do and become what I want to become. (Female current student in FGD2)

I thought it would be a lot of hard work and take a lot of energy, but I then realized I can do it just like the boys. I realized I was

²² Number of female current participants

not scared of anything because I could do anything. To me empowerment is believing in your own inner strength. I can do what boys can do and become what I want to become. (Female current student in FGD2)

The society, family, and male peers, though supportive in many ways to encourage female enrolment in TVET, still had reservations about the young women's ability to survive in TVET. There was an overarching belief that females were weak, fragile, and would be best served in more female appropriate courses/jobs, where they could not be 'harmed' easily. However, the young women in this study shattered such notions. One current student disclosed that:

They said I was weak and lazy, 'how can she handle electrical engineering, she will drop out after one term.' [I wanted to] challenge my brothers who kept saying girls are supposed to be in the kitchen and do housework. (Female current student in FGD2)

Jones (2011) in her paper exploring girls' educational experiences in relation to the National Strategy for Girls' Education in Uganda (NSGE); asserted Longwe's view that empowerment takes place when women recognize the gender issues that stand in the way of their advancement. The breaking of such internalized oppressive mindsets and overcoming these societal/family attitudes was a steppingstone to changing the value systems that continually repressed females' full potentials in the TVET sector. As the young women came to unravel these gendered beliefs, they began to advance gradually taking on different courses like electrical, electronics, mechanics and so on. Though their

achievement seemed minimal at this stage, they sowed a seed for an even bigger transformation overtime in this sector.

This was further asserted during the key informant interviews— referring to school administration and instructors — who also shared their views on empowerment as related to females in TVET sector. One comment from a key informant summarized it perfectly:

[For me, empowerment] is enabling the girl[s] to have the opportunity that the boy[s] will have in terms of education, employment, leadership. That is how I get it. (Deputy Principal-KI02 at Nakawa Vocational Institute)

When asked if a girl with an education will get automatically empowered, a current student from the electronic department responded saying:

Not I do not really think so. I think that they should teach those people who say girls cannot do this or that. Those are the first people they should change, because when you are in a place it is the attitude that changes your mind. So, when people say you know what girls cannot, that is what the girls take in their head. That is what most girls grow up with in society. They tell you girls cannot do that and that is what we end up taking up in our minds and end up not doing it. They should teach those people and tell them that girls are on the same level with them, girls can do anything that a human [male] can do (C002, Current student in Electronics from Nakawa).

In this excerpt, the student highlights an essential point that girls/women achievement of empowerment is not simply the presence or entry of women into the vocational institutes. She affirms that the mindsets of school administration, fellow students and employers have to change to better integrate females into this male dominant sector. Thereby asserting to a change in power within the structures that be.

From these excerpts empowerment is consequently not merely control over resources, but empowerment involves a shift in attitudes and values that preclude girls/women (Rowlands, 1995). When the attitudes of society change, the female students will have a better opportunity to realize their full potential. Because these female students and graduates were not necessarily forced but chose this pathway; they were not passive in the process but active contributors to their own destinies and continue to be so. They work hard to excel at every level in and out of Nakawa vocational institute.

To Stand on Their Own and Act

A central part of the empowerment process is power as posited by Rowland (1995). She refers to empowerment as going beyond just access to decision making, but also for women to perceive themselves as able and entitled to have such power. This aligns closely with power within, which Rowlands (cited in Afshar, 1998) refers to as “generative and productive power (pg. 14).” This enables females to persist in these oppressive and male dominated contexts, especially in the school and the workplace.

Female participants linked their ideas of empowerment to the ability to stand and take their own actions. They shared examples of what they were able to achieve: for instance, when they passed a coursework assignment, completed a complex practicum, started their own

business, developing confidence and assertiveness, or even when they received recognition amongst peers and community—they associated these achievements with empowerment. This intuitively refers to a sense of ‘power within,’ entailing the ability to choose and make efforts to achieve desired goals (Rowlands cited in Afshar, 1998). They are active agents in their own lives, developing a sense of self-worth, growth, and progress. The female students and graduates shared experiences that affirm this:

Previously in my community, I was treated poorly before joining the institute, now I am called the Engineer. I am given things to fix, like phones. This makes me feel good about myself (Female current student in FGD 2)

I am happy with myself; I know what is needed to repair many things. I can do the job by myself (Female current student in FGD 2).

A Change in Self-Consciousness

This confidence and desire to succeed in the TVET sector represents a challenge to the gender stereotypical image of women as lacking confidence, weak and unable to excel as men would in TVET because they are not capable or strong enough. Nevertheless, the workplace environment produced several challenges for female workers, from sexual harassment to the use of derogatory language, to limited trust in the capabilities of female workers. Clients were also reluctant to accept the presence of females in the industry. One graduate shared how clients would reject her services simply because she was a female:

At the garage where I was, some customers would say this girl will not work on my car, they would refuse. (G004, female graduate student in motor vehicle mechanics from Nakawa)

As they gained more insight into the work cultures and more experience on the job, the young women noted some changes. Female participants touched on the fact that their skills have brought about the respect of their male peers, community, and society. They state workmates and clients gradually moved past their initial hesitations of having females in this industry and began to slowly embrace them. The girls felt that with this change people began to respect them and trust them. That shift resulted in a positive change in their self-worth. This new sense of self produced opportunities to become more self-reliant and integrate easier into their workplaces. A female graduate from mechanics department recalls her experience on her first job as a female mechanic:

I would also get clients because many clients wanted to really see the female mechanic, I made new friends at work (G004, female graduate student in motor vehicle mechanics from Nakawa)

I am currently self-employed, I do repairs. T.V Radio, Decoder, is where I specialized... I was working in a certain company, but I found it more profitable to [be self-employed] (G003, Female Graduate from Electronics department from Nakawa)

This sense of self-worth and a stronger self-image resonates with the notion of power within that posits a need to transform one's understanding of their own identity (Rowlands, 1998).

Shifting Identities

Female respondents experienced identity changes that included the need for outward modifications and mental shifts. Female graduates alluded to a desire to ‘fit in’ the masculine domain, which necessitated certain professional attire—that is, overalls and boots for occupational safety. This was widely accepted by graduates since it offered much-needed protection in dangerous situations. The industry, however, promoted the notion that girls should be free of all traditionally feminine appearances. The graduates stated that they needed to be more like the men/boys, which eventually meant accepting a new identity to advance in their careers. Some girls would use make-up or nail paint to seem more feminine, which would result in mockery from male colleagues. To survive or be accepted in this masculine culture, one must clearly be or act like a man. The graduates shared this in our interviews:

In a society meant for boys you have to act like a boy to fit in
(G001- female graduate from electronics department at Nakawa).

Furthermore, this was reinforced in the workplace; female graduates felt that to be successful, they needed to adjust their femininity and dial it down to avoid any disruption to the norm. One excerpt from a graduate clearly shows what was expected:

I was told to be more masculine; such be stronger so as to lift
heavy loads or wear less makeup (G006- female graduate in
electrical installation department at Nakawa).

Finally, the women had to be more like the men who were seen as the standard in TVET. This was a concern for women had since they did not want to appear more masculine. This acceptable masculine image simply serves to reinforce the industry's patriarchal orientation, demonstrating that females have yet to be fully acknowledged or embraced. Those already working in the industry would have to work harder to prove that females can undertake these jobs and do not need to be masculine to be successful. Their femininity should not be denied.

Looking at the perspectives and many ways in which these participants perceive empowerment, it appears that despite their diverse backgrounds, tribes, or regions, they revealed similar conceptions of empowerment. These young women (both students and graduates) understood empowerment in terms of having the ability to overcome obstacles by breaking stereotypes and norms and doing what boys can do. Furthermore, they see empowerment as power within themselves, where they believe in their own inner strength. This is quite different from how mainstream development views empowerment, where it is a buzzword implemented through top-down measures that use women as tools to aid development. It focuses on numerical representations of women in schools, with empowerment as an outcome. However, for the young women empowerment is a process of change.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

As Uganda's growth accelerates, a greater emphasis is placed on developing a crop of job creators, rather than job seekers, who will promote the goals of economic expansion and sustainability. Considering this, vocational education was stated as a potential platform for educating the next generation and for the next development agenda to help the Ugandan economy. This research focused on this area and scope as a sector to which more women are gaining access. With an increasing number of women entering the sector, it is important to analyse their experiences.

The research was carried out specifically at the Nakawa Vocational Training Institute, which is located in the heart of Kampala's peri-urban area. It included 33 participants, 22 of whom were female students (both current and graduates). The study sought to answer the research question: "How do female students and graduates of vocational institutions in Uganda construct and understand empowerment in relation to their education?" It also sought to address the following two objectives: to assess the factors that influence young women's decision to enrol in TVET institutions, particularly technical and science courses, and to investigate the positive and negative aspects of being a female vocational student and a female graduate in the workforce.

The study had some limitations that created some challenges in the process of field work but did not deter the research entirely. However, this did limit how many respondents and exploring different institutions. There was a time constraint as most students & graduates had a busy time schedule with exams due at that time, thus making it difficult to take time to gather more people to participate as would have been expected. On top of this in the

beginning the participants were apprehensive due to research exhaustion, but the assistance from administration helped to ease any initial fears and reluctance.

The conceptual framework also brought limitations on this study. Empowerment is a complex and nuanced term and which not everyone understood. I did not provide a definition of empowerment but encouraged participants to offer their own meaning/understanding. This was, at times, a challenging process. Nevertheless, the participants were able to create their own meaning based on their own experiences. Despite their initial reservations, with further probing I did not need to provide any definitions to aid the process. After sorting the data into themes, it became clearer that the participants' responses were focused on the concepts of power, choice, and agency, which are central to the construction of empowerment.

The research is significant as it addresses the experiences of young women in TVET. Unfortunately, education initiatives have focused more on access and entry—creating ways to increase girls' enrolment into schools—with little or limited emphasis and focus on their lives in or out of school. Women have been encouraged to take up STEMs courses within TVET in Uganda, however, their unique experiences and voices are limited when implementing or even creating policies meant to advance women's empowerment. Their experiences are not well researched, which relays that there is much more that needs to be done.

It was necessary to first set the stage and investigate why females chose TVET in the first place. According to the study, their choices were influenced by existing social networks that included family members, close friends, and mentors who work in the same vocational

trade. Surprisingly, even though the sector was considered a male domain, fathers were major influencers in females' decision to pursue TVET. There is also the influence of their own personal desires, as well as the alluring prospects that a career in TVET would provide. For example, there is hope of becoming job creators and owning one's own businesses. Female participants agreed that education was a great way to a good stable future, and that having a practical skill as a mechanic or engineer would allow one to live comfortably.

In this study, empowerment was defined as a process centred on the transformation of the respondents' individual experiences. The analysis of their perspectives revealed two major themes. Firstly, it examined the influence of the societal and cultural attitudes, including the institutional social practices and policies. Nakawa emphasised a welcoming culture to female students. Even though female students were a small proportion of the student body, measures were put in place to accommodate them, such as new housing and sanitary facilities that promoted a better learning environment.

Females, on the other hand, believed that their entry into the TVET sector would broaden society's perception of what women can do. They believed that their presence would demonstrate how important women are in this sector and that they can succeed despite the challenges of working in a male-dominated environment. This acceptance and support were a deciding factor for most young women to continue on this path.

Secondly, as society is slowly in the process of change towards embracing females in TVET sector, so did their individual sense of self; females also experienced a shift in mindset. They began to believe in their own abilities as they realised, they could do what

boys can do. It became a right for women to have access to the same power that men had, dispelling the myth that women were not meant for labour-intensive fields of work.

This change in the system and status quo would also affect how women were valued and attitudes toward women in TVET. This change process encompassed in their experiences demonstrated the depth of the empowerment process, steering away from just control over resources and toward an ingrained change in society. Therefore, the shift in mindsets underlined the importance of power and requires a more balanced power dynamic and relative autonomy for women in this sector, allowing them to operate as agents who undergo a variety of changes. These changes influence how they view the idea of empowerment. Empowerment does not occur immediately; rather, it entails changes in power relations, changes in individual agency, and a diversification of choices available to females in this TVET sector.

The dialogues demonstrated how power dynamics play out as females recounted examples of when they were able to question the existing norms. Furthermore, young women overcame some ingrained beliefs that they were incompetent or weak, since this was a common misconception when referring to females in TVET. This resulted in a new sense of power from within the female respondents, which changed their attitudes and self-consciousness as a result. This increased knowledge has contributed to a renewed understanding of who they are; female respondents are able to question preconceptions and have excelled in the TVET industry because of this new awareness.

The other part is for society to address their entrenched repressive attitudes that contribute to disempowering women. The condition in the environment must be conducive to foster

a crop of empowered young women. How a society and individuals in society value women contributes to how they thrive in an environment. These young women shared that support from others provided them with a sense of confidence and trust to push forward in their chosen course/trade. With the breaking down of dogmatic societal beliefs and values, females can openly express themselves in this male dominated sector. It presents equal opportunities for them as those afforded to men.

Empowerment as a concept is inextricably linked to power relations, which play out in the lives of the participants in this research. According to the respondents, female empowerment in the TVET industry is about the young women feeling confident enough to attempt to change the established masculine culture and for society to change discriminatory attitudes. They advocate for a shift in attitudes that would lead to an acceptance of females being able to excel in this masculine course of study and occupation.

Female current students shared mostly positive experiences, but not without their challenges. Within the institution, the young ladies felt accepted and embraced, administrative measures were taken to make Nakawa more inclusive from accommodation facilities to teaching practices. However, as the female participants soon came to learn, the journey in TVET was not all golden, they experienced some hardships and challenges that were disempowering. Female current students shared experiences of frustration with the nature of extra supervision by male students imposed by some tutors during classroom assignments. On top of that, they were discriminated against during apprenticeship placements; where employers would assign them female typical roles like secretaries versus what they had trained for.

Graduates in the workforce reported more negative than positive experiences. Graduates had developed a sense of pride from going against the norm and proving wrong all naysayers by completing their chosen courses. Though most were settled into good jobs and earning a good living wage, and one even had a growing business providing a sense of independence; life was far from perfect. For instance, graduates shared terrible stories of sexual harassment with no repercussions to accused, other than transferring the female victim to an isolated workspace to avoid contact with their attacker.

Additionally, they were subject to constant double standards and questioning of their abilities; females were given double the work and had to prove themselves compared to male colleagues. The tip of the iceberg was when female students were ignored and passed over for work due to a prejudice on their lack of physical strength. Employers and clients were apprehensive of their ability to do the job merely because they were females, and they had never thought a woman could do such work as a mechanic or electrical engineer. This further enforced the gender divide evident in this sector, which deterred women's full uninhibited success within this sector.

Looking closely at the experiences of these young women from Nakawa, it gave the impressions of a more favourable environment in the institution due to ability to control different variables and make more timely changes and interventions; however, in the workforce the young women encountered much higher rates of discrimination challenging their newfound sense of power within. This goes to show that there is more work to be done. There are a few recommendations that would be fitting to aid in this process of empowerment for young women in TVET. These suggestions are to help provide

recommendations of changes to foster equal opportunities and make TVET more inclusive for women.

The TVET education pathway has been overlooked in many ways as it is still considered a second option for those less likely to go to University. With good career guidance at secondary school level, this mindset could be changed and encourage TVET as a pathway to all regardless of physical prowess or acumen. Situating women within TVET workforce can be achieved by improved language changes that foster a more inclusive spaces at work. Policies should also be enforced without re-stigmatizing the victims and protecting company images. Lastly, these measures and policies should not pay lip service but implemented based on recipients' realities and in ways that will be reliable and relatable to them.

In conclusion, it is more important to concentrate on developing a meaningful empowerment process than on primarily measuring empowerment goals (Parpart, 2002). It is paramount to look deeply at the perspectives of the group being examined, rather than just the outcomes. This thesis looked at how Nakawa female students and graduates created their own meaning for this concept rather than relying solely on the mainstream understanding. The female participants provided their own realities and interpretations of empowerment; this study highlighted what they knew and understood this concept to be.

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