

# Female Gender Stereotypes, Parental Influence and the Challenges Confronting Female Students' Engagement in Vocational Training: A Qualitative Study of Nakivale Vocational Training Centre, Isingiro District, Uganda

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**Abstract:** *Female participation in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Uganda remains persistently low, and nowhere more so than in refugee settlement contexts, where displacement, poverty and cultural heterogeneity intersect with entrenched gender norms. At Nakivale Vocational Training Centre, female enrolment has historically hovered between 12 and 14 per cent, with dropout reaching 55 per cent in 2018. While the statistical contours of this disparity are documented, comparatively little is known about how female trainees themselves experience, interpret and negotiate the barriers that constrain their engagement. This study therefore set out to establish, qualitatively, the challenges faced by female students in engaging in vocational training at Nakivale Vocational Training Centre as a result of female gender stereotypes and parental influence. The study formed the qualitative strand of a larger convergent parallel mixed-methods inquiry grounded in the pragmatic paradigm. Four focus group discussions were conducted with purposively selected female student leaders, each comprising five to seven participants drawn from diverse nationalities, courses of study and socio-economic backgrounds. Discussions lasted between forty and sixty minutes, were held in private instructional rooms within the Centre, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, verified against the audio and field notes, managed in NVivo 14, and analysed thematically following Creswell's six-step procedure using a hybrid coding frame that combined deductive codes derived from Gender Role Theory with inductive codes capturing context-specific meanings. Data saturation guided the final number of discussions. Content validity of the discussion guide was established through expert review by specialists from Finn Church Aid, the Office of the Prime Minister and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, yielding a Content Validity Index above 0.70. Three analytically aligned themes were generated. First, female gender stereotypes constructed vocational training, and technical courses in particular, as male-dominated domains; participants reported self-doubt, heightened scrutiny of their competence, a felt obligation to work harder to prove legitimacy, and subtle exclusion from practical group work that eroded their sense of belonging. Second, parental influence emerged as a decisive shaping force: many parents held limited understanding of vocational education and its employment potential, and some regarded it as inferior to academic schooling or unsuitable for girls, producing scepticism, withdrawal of emotional support and, occasionally, outright opposition. Third, female students' engagement was shaped simultaneously by constraint and enablement; domestic and caregiving responsibilities produced fatigue, absenteeism and withdrawal, yet peer networks, female instructors, successful graduates and equitable trainers sustained resilience and motivation, such that strongly perceived stereotypes did not translate uniformly into disengagement. The study concludes that the challenges confronting female students at Nakivale are neither purely attitudinal nor purely material, but arise from the interaction of socio-cultural stereotyping, family-level support systems and individual and institutional coping mechanisms. It recommends structured gender-sensitization reaching students, instructors and the wider settlement community; sustained parental engagement through career guidance and awareness activity; and family-inclusive institutional support systems that consolidate the protective factors participants themselves identified.*

**Keywords:** female gender stereotypes; parental influence; student engagement; technical and vocational education and training; refugee settlement; focus group discussion; thematic analysis; Nakivale; Uganda

## Introduction

Vocational training is widely regarded as a dependable route to women's economic empowerment, offering skills development, employability and financial independence that academic pathways do not always deliver. The sector nonetheless carries a gendered inheritance. Vocational education emerged during the industrial era to satisfy labour demand, and from its inception access was differentiated by sex: men were prepared for technical and industrial occupations while women were channelled towards domestic, caregiving and service-oriented skills. Those arrangements hardened into durable norms associating technical competence with masculinity and domesticity with femininity, and female participation has remained consistently below that of males in consequence (Adams & Baddianaah, 2023).

The global picture continues to reflect that inheritance. Only 41.6 per cent of female students participate in upper secondary vocational programmes compared with 54.9 per cent of males (European Commission, 2020), and in the United States, of more than 15.1 million students enrolled in Career and Technical Education, only 34.8 per cent of female enrollees completed their training cycles — a figure indicating weak sustained engagement rather than weak initial interest (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2010). Austria, France and Spain report similarly low female participation in STEM-related TVET, attributable to the enduring coding of technical fields as male terrain (Hill & Taylor, 2017).

In Sub-Saharan Africa the pattern is compounded by colonial and post-colonial educational design. Colonial systems trained African men for construction, mechanics and agriculture while confining women to domestic science, tailoring and informal economic

activity, and post-colonial reform widened access without dislodging the inherited division, so that Rwanda, Ghana, Cameroon and Ethiopia continue to record low female participation attributable to socio-cultural norms, cost barriers and the perception that technical trades are unsuitable for women (Nthuku & Muthima, 2023; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023). Regional investment has produced gains — the East Africa Skills Transformation and Regional Integration Project raised female enrolment from 741 to 5,230 students (World Bank, 2023) — yet Kenya reports 45.4 per cent female enrolment in TVET institutions and Rwanda only 33.99 per cent at upper secondary vocational level (TVET Authority, 2023; Ntirenganya, 2025).

Uganda mirrors the region. Colonial provision privileged men in agriculture, carpentry, mechanics and construction while restricting women to domestic science and home economics (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2021), and post-independence expansion left inherited curricula, patriarchal norms and weak gender-responsive policy largely intact (Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2020). Notwithstanding the Business, Technical, Vocational Education and Training framework of the 2000s, female students constitute 43.6 per cent of total BTSET enrolments while only 12 per cent are enrolled in STEM-related programmes (UNESCO, 2019; MoES, 2020), and female completion fell from 46.6 per cent in 2019 to 28.6 per cent in 2023 (The Observer, 2019; Watchdog Uganda, 2022). Nakivale Vocational Training Centre represents an acute instance: since 2012 female enrolment has averaged between 12 and 14 per cent, with dropout reaching 55 per cent in 2018 (Windle International Uganda, 2015; Institute Examination Data Bank, 2018). The Centre sits within a settlement hosting Ugandan nationals alongside refugees from eight countries, and its students navigate economic instability, frequent relocation and a plurality of cultural norms regarding what women may appropriately learn and do (Uganda Refugee Operation Impact Report, 2023). These conditions do not merely add to the ordinary difficulties of vocational study; they alter their character.

A conceptual distinction is central to this inquiry. Engagement is not enrolment. Enrolment, retention and completion are administrative indicators, whereas engagement denotes the behavioural, emotional and cognitive investment learners make in the learning process — sustained effort, attention, persistence and emotional connection rather than mere physical presence (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2019; Reeve, 2023). Behavioural engagement encompasses active participation and effort, emotional engagement reflects interest and belonging, and cognitive engagement captures strategic thinking, self-regulation and persistence through difficulty (Reeve & Shin, 2020). A student may therefore be enrolled, and may even complete, without being meaningfully engaged, which makes engagement the more informative indicator and the more appropriate object of qualitative inquiry.

Gender Role Theory supplies the interpretive frame. Societies assign normative expectations to males and females concerning appropriate roles and career paths; over time these consolidate into stereotypes — shared beliefs about what women can or should do — that bear directly on educational engagement and career decision-making (Eagly, 1987; Ümarik & Aavik, 2020). Within vocational education such stereotypes portray technical trades as masculine and are transmitted through families, communities and institutions (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2019). Parents occupy a pivotal position in that transmission, conveying differential beliefs about the value of schooling for daughters and sons that steer girls away from technical fields and towards traditional roles (Kundu & Basu, 2023; Eccles et al., 2024).

Existing scholarship leaves a discernible gap. Studies documenting low female participation concentrate on institutional outcomes such as enrolment and completion, paying limited attention to engagement as a behavioural, emotional and cognitive construct (Muhwezi et al., 2021; ILO, 2020; AFFCAD, 2023). The literature is also fragmented, with gender stereotypes and parental influence commonly treated independently (Hassan et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2021; Berridge et al., 2020), and most of this work is cross-sectional and situated in urban or formal educational settings (Nguyen et al., 2024; Mbabazi et al., 2023). Where refugee vocational centres are concerned the evidence base is thinner still. What is missing is a contextually grounded account, in participants' own terms, of the challenges that arise where stereotyping and parental influence act together. This paper addresses that gap, examining how these forces are experienced, how they interact with the material conditions of settlement life, and how female trainees resist, absorb or work around them. The value of the qualitative approach here is explanatory: statistical association can establish that a relationship exists, but only participants' accounts can explain how a barrier operates in practice, why an apparently powerful stereotype sometimes fails to produce disengagement, and which forms of support prove protective.

### **Main Objective of the Study**

To establish the challenges faced by female students in engaging in vocational training in Nakivale Vocational Training Centre as a result of female gender stereotypes and parental influence.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Theoretical Framework**

The review is anchored in Gender Role Theory as developed by Eagly (1987), which holds that societal norms shape behaviour according to gender, with culturally defined roles conditioning perceptions of competence, career preference and aspiration. A study conducted by Kamara et al. (2022), corroborated by evidence assembled by UNESCO (2021), found that gendered expectations demonstrably limit female participation in male-dominated fields including mechanics and construction. A study conducted by Hassan et al. (2022) qualified this position, arguing that individual agency and exposure can contest stereotypes, which suggests that

gender roles are not deterministic but interact with other social influences. The theory further identifies parents as principal socialisation agents: a study conducted by Eccles (2014) and a related study conducted by Berridge et al. (2020) both demonstrated that parents may either entrench traditional norms or contest them through encouragement and support. The framework nonetheless tends to generalise gendered behaviour without adequately accounting for poverty, displacement and cultural plurality — constraints salient at Nakivale, which this study addresses by situating parental influence within a specific socio-cultural context.

#### **Gender Stereotypes as Barriers to Female Engagement**

Female gender stereotypes are widely documented as determinants of engagement, principally through their effect on self-perception and aspiration. A study conducted by Kibwika et al. (2023), alongside a study conducted by Li et al. (2024), established that stereotypes rooted in early socialisation communicate implicit messages that technical and mechanical skills are more appropriate for males. A study conducted by Shrestha et al. (2022) and a further study conducted by Munyaneza et al. (2023) found that female students who internalise such beliefs exhibit lower self-efficacy, reduced interest in technical courses and diminished persistence, and in the Ugandan setting a study conducted by Kamara et al. (2022) alongside a study conducted by Byansi et al. (2024) reported that this translates into measurably lower participation in trades such as mechanics and electrical installation.

The strength of the relationship is uneven across the evidence. A study conducted by Liu et al. (2022) and a study conducted by Mutebi et al. (2023) both found stereotype effects to be mediated by institutional support, exposure to role models and career guidance, with female mentors in technical fields significantly improving confidence and participation — an indication that stereotypes, while influential, are not deterministic. The learning environment itself shapes how they operate: a study conducted by Ahmed et al. (2021) and a study conducted by Wangari et al. (2024) documented that female students in male-dominated settings receive fewer opportunities for hands-on activity and are subtly discouraged by instructors and male peers, undermining skill acquisition. Evidence on remedies is mixed, since a study conducted by Mutebi et al. (2023) reported improved participation following gender-responsive training whereas a study conducted by Tadesse et al. (2023) found such interventions to yield limited impact where broader cultural norms remain unchanged.

At community level, norms concerning femininity and appropriate work operate as structural constraint. A study conducted by Andargie and Tinuola (2025) and a study conducted by Shrestha et al. (2022) found that in many Ugandan and refugee communities technical occupations are culturally coded as masculine, influencing students' choices, parental expectations and institutional practice alike. A comparative study conducted by Mahmoud et al. (2022) established that female participation is significantly lower in communities with rigid gender norms, although a study conducted by Kassaye et al. (2022) cautioned that cultural norms are dynamic and reshapeable through targeted intervention.

#### **Parental Influence as Barrier and as Enabler**

Parental influence amplifies these challenges, though its role is not uniformly negative. A study conducted by Munyaneza et al. (2023) and a study conducted by Ochieng et al. (2024) found that parents who internalise traditional gender roles may discourage female participation or prioritise boys' education, restricting girls' access to resources. A study conducted by Kamara et al. (2022) and a study conducted by Ssenyonga et al. (2023) established that this is pronounced in low-resource households, where investment decisions follow perceived economic returns associated with male-dominated fields. Conversely, a study conducted by Teshome and Alemu (2022) demonstrated that encouragement and equitable resource allocation can counteract these barriers, underscoring the dual position of parents as both potential obstacle and potential enabler.

Communication within the family constitutes a related but less examined dimension. A study conducted by Okoro et al. (2021) and a study conducted by Mutebi et al. (2023) found that authoritarian communication styles limit female students' autonomy in educational decision-making, whereas a study conducted by Liu and Chen (2022) associated open and supportive communication with increased confidence and willingness to explore non-traditional paths. Parental decisions are themselves shaped by wider networks: a study conducted by Njoroge et al. (2023) and a study conducted by Wang et al. (2024) found that parents embedded in traditional East African social networks are more likely to discourage female participation in technical fields, while a study conducted by Kamara et al. (2022) linked exposure to progressive networks with increased support. Little of this work has examined refugee settings, where social structures may be fragmented and reconstituted. The absence of parental role modelling operates similarly: a study conducted by Kassaye et al. (2022) and a study conducted by Wangari et al. (2024) found that parents lacking exposure to technical skills are less able to guide daughters towards such pathways, though a study conducted by Okafor and Adewale (2023) established that instructors and community mentors can substitute for absent parental models.

#### **Economic and Cultural Constraints**

Economic constraint interacts with stereotype rather than operating independently of it. A study conducted by Fekadu et al. (2022) and a study conducted by Wang et al. (2022) found that in financially constrained households limited resources are allocated in ways that reflect gendered expectations, with girls receiving less support for vocational training. A study conducted by Hassan et al. (2023) qualified this, contending that economic constraint alone does not fully explain disparity, since cultural beliefs continue to limit participation even in relatively stable households — an indication that addressing financial barriers without confronting gender norms will yield limited returns. Cultural expectation constitutes a further barrier where traditional values are strongly preserved: a

study conducted by Kibwika et al. (2023) and a study conducted by Andargie and Tinuola (2025) found that female students are routinely expected to undertake domestic work or support household livelihoods, reducing the time and energy available for training, and a study conducted by Kamara et al. (2022) suggested these pressures are heightened in displacement settings owing to economic insecurity.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Three gaps follow. Most studies are conducted in general education or urban contexts, with limited attention to refugee vocational training centres where gender norms, parental roles and economic conditions differ materially. Existing research commonly examines gender stereotypes and parental influence separately rather than as interacting forces. And the predominance of cross-sectional and survey-based designs has produced evidence rich in association but poor in explanation, with few studies adopting qualitative approaches capable of capturing lived experience (Nguyen et al., 2024; Mbabazi et al., 2023). The present study addresses these gaps through a context-specific qualitative analysis of the challenges female students encounter at Nakivale Vocational Training Centre, with attention to how the two forces operate jointly.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Approach and Design**

This paper reports the qualitative strand of a study that adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design within a parallel, concurrent research approach. The approach was selected because understanding how female gender stereotypes and parental influence shape engagement requires both the pattern validation quantitative work supplies and the depth of insight only qualitative inquiry can furnish; integrating the two permitted triangulation, which strengthens validity and reliability (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2023; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2020). Unlike explanatory or exploratory sequential designs, which privilege one strand over the other, the convergent design permits real-time triangulation of quantitative relationships and qualitative meanings, allowing the two constructs to be examined as they operate concurrently rather than sequentially. This was appropriate at Nakivale, where parental attitudes, socio-cultural norms and institutional constraints interact dynamically and are unlikely to be captured through phased inquiry. The qualitative strand carried equal weight to the quantitative strand and was directed specifically at the research question concerning challenges. Integration occurred at the interpretation stage through side-by-side comparison and joint inference, with analytical separation maintained until that point to reduce the risk of overgeneralisation where the strands diverged (Fetters & Freshwater, 2021; O'Cathain et al., 2020). Reflexive attention to researcher positionality was built into collection and interpretation, in acknowledgement that knowledge production is shaped by the researcher's perspective and the socio-historical context of refugees (Berger, 2021; Liamputtong, 2020).

#### **Philosophical Paradigm**

The study is anchored ontologically in pragmatism, which treats reality as both socially constructed and contextually contingent. Gender stereotypes are accordingly understood as socially constructed yet consequential, influencing parental attitudes and shaping vocational choices, while parental influence is conceptualised as a construct that can reinforce or contest gendered norms depending on cultural, economic and educational factors. Epistemologically, the study prioritises actionable knowledge derived from the integration of multiple perspectives, treating knowledge as situational and emergent and validating it through triangulation, participant confirmation and practical relevance. Axiologically, it foregrounds the influence of researcher values on question formulation, design and interpretation, particularly regarding gender equity, and applies reflexivity systematically in acknowledgement of the researcher's positionality within a refugee research context.

#### **Study Area, Population and Participants**

The study was conducted at Nakivale Vocational Training Centre in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Isingiro District, southwestern Uganda. The Centre is a private, mixed institution offering day and boarding options across programmes including tailoring, hairdressing, carpentry, mechanics, agriculture and hospitality, several historically dominated by one sex, and hosts students from Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. Facilities comprise classrooms, workshops and dormitories, with limited gender-sensitive provision such as sanitary facilities and mentoring. The study population comprised 665 female students aged 13 to 25 years enrolled across Modular Non-Formal Skills Training, Uganda Community Polytechnic Certificate and National Certificate programmes, the age range reflecting standard vocational training ages while accommodating the delayed education common in refugee settings (WIU/UNHCR, 2022). For the qualitative strand, participants were female student leaders, selected for their dual position as trainees and peer representatives, which placed them well to provide reflective, information-rich accounts of shared challenges extending beyond their own individual experience.

#### **Sampling Technique and Sample Size**

Purposive sampling was employed, in deliberate contrast to the stratified random sampling used for the survey component. Selection sought diversity across age, nationality and programme of study so that the range of experience within the student body would be represented. Four focus group discussions were conducted, each comprising five to seven participants — a size judged optimal for sustaining interaction while permitting in-depth exploration. Data saturation guided the final number of discussions, saturation being determined when no substantively new themes emerged in successive groups. Inclusion criteria required enrolled female students aged 13 to 25 years with at least six months of training experience, so that accounts would reflect meaningful exposure, and voluntary consent, or assent alongside parental or guardian consent for minors. Male students, students from outside the Centre, and students unable to provide informed consent or judged vulnerable in ways that might compromise their safety were excluded.

### **Data Collection Instrument, Validity and Trustworthiness**

Data were collected using a semi-structured focus group discussion guide designed to elicit in-depth information on female students' experiences, perceptions and challenges relating to gender stereotypes and parental influence, with item formulation guided by the study objectives (Dörnyei, 2007). Open-ended questions allowed participants to express views in their own terms rather than within categories imposed by the researcher. Content validity was established through expert review by specialists from Finn Church Aid, the Office of the Prime Minister and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, who assessed each item for relevance, clarity and adequacy; a Content Validity Index computed as the proportion of items rated relevant exceeded 0.70, the conventional threshold for social science research.

Trustworthiness was pursued across the four established criteria. Credibility was supported through triangulation across focus groups and with the quantitative strand, verbatim transcription checked repeatedly against the recordings, and incorporation of participants' non-verbal communication into the record. Dependability rested on a consistent semi-structured guide, uniform procedures across all four groups, audio recording of every discussion and systematic coding. Confirmability was supported by an audit trail of coding decisions and reflexive documentation of the researcher's assumptions. Transferability was addressed by describing setting, participants and procedures in sufficient detail for readers to judge applicability, while qualifying generalisation to populations under comparable socio-cultural and settlement conditions rather than to the wider population.

### **Procedure**

Permission and ethical approval were obtained from the Mbarara University of Science and Technology Research Ethics Committee and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, followed by authorisation from the Office of the Prime Minister and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. An introductory letter was secured from the Dean, Faculty of Science, and the principal of the Centre granted access to classrooms and facilities. Three research assistants were recruited and trained over two days on the research objectives, ethical procedures, cultural sensitivity, confidentiality and bias minimisation. Participants were selected against the inclusion criteria, briefed on the objectives, and provided written consent or assent as appropriate; they were assured of confidentiality and informed of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. The four discussions were scheduled separately, held in private instructional rooms, moderated using the prepared guide, and lasted between forty and sixty minutes. All were audio-recorded with informed consent, with supplementary short video clips taken to assist interpretation. Collection ran concurrently with the quantitative component over two months.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

Shortly after recording, audio files were loaded into Express Scribe transcription software and transcribed verbatim in Microsoft Word. Transcripts were compared against the recordings and verified multiple times using field notes, and each respondent's body language was incorporated into their quotations so that the full sense of what was communicated would be preserved. Transcripts were anonymised, pseudonymised and managed in NVivo 14.

Analysis followed the six steps of thematic analysis set out by Creswell (2014). Transcripts were read repeatedly for familiarisation; initial codes were generated using a hybrid frame combining deductive codes derived from Gender Role Theory — covering gendered role expectation, stereotype transmission and parental socialisation — with inductive codes capturing context-specific meanings arising from participants' accounts. Codes were collated into candidate themes, reviewed against the coded extracts and the full dataset, defined and named, and reported with supporting verbatim evidence. Coding proceeded iteratively with constant comparison across transcripts to ensure consistency and credibility of themes, and narrative analysis was used alongside thematic coding to interpret experiences in a structured manner complementing the quantitative findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Respect for persons was ensured through informed consent and assent procedures emphasising voluntary participation and the right to withdraw without penalty, with safeguards for a population vulnerable on two counts, as female students and as refugees; for minors, institutional assent was obtained through school authorities alongside the minor's own assent. Beneficence and non-maleficence were upheld by minimising psychological, social and reputational risk during collection, analysis and reporting, and by establishing referral pathways to trained counsellors where discussion elicited distress. Justice was observed through fair recruitment across courses. Confidentiality was protected through anonymisation, pseudonyms in all reporting, exclusion of identifying detail from quotations, password-protected storage, restricted access and a defined data destruction plan. Cultural sensitivity was maintained through contextually appropriate language, translation where required and awareness of social hierarchies and gender norms, and participants were assured explicitly that participation would not affect their grades, access to services or institutional benefits.

### **Results**

To complement and explain the quantitative results, qualitative data were analysed thematically. Female students were asked to state the challenges faced by female students in engaging in vocational training at Nakivale Vocational Training Centre as a result of female gender stereotypes and parental influence during the focus group discussion sessions. The content can be systematically organised into three analytically aligned themes based on the study variables: female gender stereotypes, parental influence, and female students' engagement in vocational training.

### **Theme 1: Female Gender Stereotypes in Vocational Training**

Participant's consistently perceived vocational training, particularly technical courses, as male-dominated domains. This perception was reinforced by societal norms associating physical strength, mechanical skills and leadership with masculinity. As a result, female students experienced self-doubt and heightened scrutiny regarding their competence and commitment, leading to a perceived need to work harder to prove legitimacy.

These stereotypes were further reflected in peer interactions, where subtle forms of exclusion were reported. Female students were often side-lined during practical group work, while male peers assumed leadership roles and assigned women less technical tasks. Although overt harassment was rare, such micro-level discrimination undermined confidence, limited opportunities for skill development, and contributed to feelings of isolation and marginalization. Over time, these experiences weakened students' sense of belonging within vocational training environments.

Participants' accounts illustrated how the questioning of competence was enacted in the workshop itself. As one respondent put it: *"Sometimes I feel my ideas are ignored in practical sessions because they assume I cannot handle technical tasks."*

Such narratives highlight that stereotypes affect not only the choice of vocational programme but also the quality of participation, peer interaction and motivation.

### **Theme 2: Parental Influence on Female Students' Participation**

Parental influence emerged as a significant factor shaping students' experiences and engagement. Many participants reported that their parents had limited understanding of vocational education and its employment potential. This lack of awareness often resulted in fear, scepticism and discouragement toward vocational training pathways.

Some parents perceived vocational education as inferior to academic education or unsuitable for girls, leading to reduced emotional support and, in some cases, direct opposition to students' participation. This limited parental support negatively affected students' confidence and persistence in training programmes. The findings clearly illustrate how parental perceptions and attitudes contribute to the strong statistical relationship between parental influence and student engagement.

Where parental attitudes ran in the opposite direction, participants described them as directly protective against societal stereotyping: *"My parents tell me I can succeed in welding even though it is considered a male field, and that encourages me to keep attending workshops."*

*"Even though people say girls cannot do welding, my parents tell me I can, so I try harder and attend all classes."*

*"My parents always remind me I am capable, so I feel confident to attend welding classes even if others say girls cannot do it."*

These accounts suggest that parents provide not only emotional support but also shape the cognitive appraisal of social pressure, reinforcing active engagement in vocational training.

### **Theme 3: Female Students' Engagement in Vocational Training**

Female students' engagement was shaped by both constraints and enabling factors. Domestic responsibilities including household chores, caregiving duties and cultural expectations disproportionately affected female students, limiting time and energy for study and practical training. First-year students were particularly vulnerable as they struggled to balance academic demands with family obligations. These pressures contributed to fatigue, absenteeism and, in some cases, withdrawal from training programmes. Despite these challenges, many students demonstrated resilience and sustained motivation. Gender stereotypes, although strongly perceived, did not directly result in disengagement, as many participants remained committed to their training. Support systems played a critical role in sustaining engagement. Peer networks provided emotional support and solidarity, while female instructors and successful graduates served as role models. Additionally, supportive trainers who treated students equitably enhanced motivation and confidence.

Although these supportive factors were not captured quantitatively, they were instrumental in maintaining students' engagement and persistence in vocational training.

### **Integration of the Themes**

The three themes collectively demonstrated that female students' engagement in vocational training is influenced by the interaction between socio-cultural stereotypes, family-level support systems, and individual as well as institutional coping mechanisms.

The mixed-methods integration reveals that while gender stereotypes are pervasive, they do not independently predict disengagement. Instead, parental influence and contextual support systems play a more decisive role. Qualitative narratives explain why the statistical effects of stereotypes are weak: students actively resist stereotypes through resilience, aspiration and institutional support.

### **Discussion of Results**

#### **Stereotyping as an Experienced Rather Than Merely Attributed Barrier**

The first theme establishes that stereotyping at Nakivale is not an abstract cultural background condition but a set of concrete interactional events located in the workshop. Participants did not principally report being told they could not train; they reported being quietly reassigned to less technical tasks, having their contributions passed over, and carrying a burden of proof their male peers did not carry. This distinction matters analytically, because it locates the mechanism of harm in opportunity structure rather than in explicit prohibition. A student excluded from the hands-on portion of practical work loses skill acquisition, and skill deficits subsequently confirm the very assumption that produced the exclusion. The finding corroborates Ahmed et al. (2021) and Wangari et al. (2024), who documented reduced hands-on opportunity and subtle discouragement in male-dominated vocational settings, and

it substantiates in experiential terms what Kibwika et al. (2023) and Li et al. (2024) described as the effect of early socialisation on self-perception.

The theme also clarifies the mechanism by which stereotypes erode engagement in the cognitive and emotional sense rather than the behavioural one. Participants continued to attend; what deteriorated was the sense of belonging. This is consistent with the conceptual distinction drawn at the outset between enrolment and engagement (Fredricks et al., 2019; Reeve, 2023), and it explains why institutional data recording attendance and completion may substantially understate the difficulty female trainees experience.

#### **The Dual Position of Parents**

The second theme confirms the position advanced by Teshome and Alemu (2022) that parents function as both barrier and enabler, but it specifies the content of the barrier more precisely than the prior literature has done. The dominant obstacle reported at Nakivale was not ideological hostility to female education so much as informational deficit: parents did not know what vocational training was for, what employment it led to, or what returns it offered. Scepticism followed from unfamiliarity, and only then acquired a gendered edge, as the unfamiliar investment came to seem less warranted for a daughter than for a son. This aligns with Kassaye et al. (2022) and Wangari et al. (2024) on the consequences of absent parental role modelling, and it carries a practical implication that ideological reframing alone would miss: information may be as consequential as attitude.

The countervailing accounts are equally instructive. Where parents actively endorsed non-traditional trades, students described that endorsement as altering how they interpreted external discouragement rather than removing it. The stereotype was still encountered; it simply carried less authority. This supports the mediating pathway proposed by Li et al. (2024) and Ahmed et al. (2021), whereby egalitarian parental beliefs weaken stereotype effects by promoting confidence and autonomy, and it accords with Bandura's (1997) position that self-efficacy is shaped by social expectation but can be moderated by supportive environments.

#### **Why Strong Stereotypes Did Not Produce Uniform Disengagement**

The third theme addresses what is, from a mixed-methods standpoint, the most consequential result: stereotypes were pervasively perceived yet did not translate into uniform disengagement. Three mechanisms account for this. First, peer solidarity among female trainees supplied an alternative reference group in which competence was not in question. Second, female instructors and successful graduates furnished proof of possibility, consistent with the findings of Liu et al. (2022) and Mutebi et al. (2023) that exposure to role models improves confidence and participation. Third, equitable treatment by trainers materially altered the distribution of practical opportunity, which is the currency in which stereotype harm is denominated.

The constraint that operated most reliably was not attitudinal at all. Domestic and caregiving obligation reduced time and energy directly, and produced the fatigue, absenteeism and withdrawal participants described. This finding corroborates Kibwika et al. (2023) and Andargie and Tinuola (2025), and it supports the argument advanced by Hassan et al. (2023) that material and cultural constraints must be addressed together, since neither is reducible to the other. It also suggests that first-year students warrant particular attention, as they were the group least practised at negotiating the competing claims of household and workshop.

#### **Implications for the Refugee Vocational Context**

Taken together, the results support the extension of Gender Role Theory that this study proposed. Eagly's (1987) framework accounts well for the content of the stereotypes participants reported and for the parental transmission of those stereotypes, but it does not by itself account for the resilience observed. The Nakivale data suggest that where a settlement context generates plural rather than uniform cultural norms — with students drawn from eight national backgrounds — the authority of any single set of gender expectations is diluted, and the family becomes correspondingly more decisive as the site at which norms are either activated or neutralised. This is consistent with Hassan et al. (2022) on the capacity of individual agency and exposure to contest stereotypes, and it lends weight to the argument that interventions targeting the household will outperform those targeting general community attitudes alone.

#### **Conclusions**

The study concludes that female students at Nakivale Vocational Training Centre encounter a coherent set of stereotype-related challenges that operate principally through the distribution of practical opportunity rather than through explicit exclusion. Vocational training, and technical trades in particular, are widely construed as male domains on the strength of associations between masculinity and physical strength, mechanical aptitude and leadership. The consequence for female trainees is self-doubt, heightened scrutiny of their competence and commitment, and an obligation to work harder than male peers simply to establish legitimacy. Where these perceptions are enacted through side-lining during group work and the allocation of less technical tasks, they translate into diminished skill acquisition, isolation and an attenuated sense of belonging, even where attendance itself is maintained.

It further concludes that parental influence is the most consequential single factor shaping female students' experience, and that its principal negative expression at Nakivale is informational rather than ideological. Many parents possess limited understanding of what vocational education involves and what employment it leads to, and this unfamiliarity generates fear, scepticism and discouragement that subsequently acquires a gendered character, with vocational study regarded as inferior to academic schooling or as unsuitable for daughters. Reduced emotional support and, in some instances, outright opposition follow, with measurable consequences for confidence and persistence. Conversely, where parents actively endorse their daughters' participation in non-traditional trades, that endorsement functions less by removing external discouragement than by depriving it of authority, enabling students to reinterpret societal messages and sustain their commitment.

The study also concludes that the most reliable constraint on engagement is material rather than attitudinal. Domestic responsibilities, caregiving duties and cultural expectations regarding household labour fall disproportionately on female students, reducing the time and energy available for study and practical work, and generating fatigue, absenteeism and in some cases withdrawal. First-year students are particularly exposed, being least practised at reconciling the competing demands of household and training centre. Any account of the challenges facing female trainees that attends to belief while neglecting time allocation will therefore be incomplete. Finally, the study concludes that pervasively perceived stereotypes do not produce uniform disengagement, and that this apparent paradox is explained by the operation of identifiable protective factors. Peer networks supply solidarity and an alternative reference group in which female competence is not contested; female instructors and successful graduates furnish demonstrations of possibility; and trainers who distribute practical opportunity equitably alter the very medium through which stereotype harm is transmitted. Female students' engagement at Nakivale is thus determined not by stereotypes alone but by the interaction between socio-cultural stereotyping, family-level support and the individual and institutional coping mechanisms available to students, which means that interventions confined to any single level of that system are unlikely to succeed on their own.

### **Recommendations**

The study recommends that Nakivale Vocational Training Centre and relevant education stakeholders implement structured gender-sensitisation programmes designed to address negative female gender stereotypes at their point of enactment. Because participants reported harm arising principally from the distribution of practical opportunity rather than from explicit prohibition, such programmes should target instructors and male peers as directly as they target female trainees, and should extend into the wider settlement community. Workshops, interactive discussion and role-playing exercises that surface and challenge assumptions about female capability are likely to be more effective than declarative statements of policy. Female role models drawn from traditionally male-dominated fields such as welding and mechanics should be invited to mentor trainees, demonstrate competence and build confidence, given the weight participants themselves placed on the presence of women who had succeeded in those trades.

It is further recommended that parental engagement initiatives be strengthened and reoriented towards the informational deficit the study identified. Since parental discouragement at Nakivale arose more often from unfamiliarity with vocational education than from opposition to female education as such, the Centre should organise regular parent–teacher meetings, career guidance sessions and workshops that set out concretely what each programme teaches, what qualifications it confers and what employment it has actually led to for previous graduates. Parents should be encouraged to share success stories and practical advice with their daughters, and training sessions should equip them with strategies for providing emotional, motivational and educational support, including goal-setting discussions, monitoring of progress and advocacy for equitable treatment in workshops. Family-inclusive support systems such as joint student–parent orientation sessions and mentorship programmes would consolidate this work.

The study recommends that institutions address the material constraint of domestic and caregiving obligation directly rather than treating it as a private matter beyond institutional reach. Flexible scheduling, timetabling that accommodates household responsibilities, catch-up provision for students who miss practical sessions, and targeted orientation and support for first-year students would address the group the findings identified as most vulnerable to attrition. Where possible, childcare arrangements and transport support should be considered, since the evidence indicates that time and energy, rather than motivation, are the binding constraints for a substantial proportion of female trainees.

An integrated approach is recommended that addresses stereotyping, parental attitudes and material constraint simultaneously, on the reasoning that supportive parental involvement can buffer stereotype effects but cannot by itself neutralise institutional bias or household labour demands. Vocational institutions should collaborate with local community leaders, parents and implementing organisations to create inclusive learning environments, and policy measures should explicitly promote gender inclusivity by guaranteeing female trainees full participation in all practical activities and equal access to equipment and mentorship. Institutions should also deliberately strengthen the protective factors participants identified, by formalising peer support networks, recruiting and retaining female instructors, maintaining structured contact with successful female graduates, and building equitable treatment of trainees into instructor training and appraisal.

Finally, the study recommends that future research examine the specific forms of stereotype that most strongly affect engagement across different regions of Uganda, and that comparative work between urban and rural, and between refugee and non-refugee, vocational institutions be undertaken to establish how far the Nakivale findings extend. Longitudinal designs would clarify how stereotype perceptions and parental attitudes change over the course of a training cycle, and studies incorporating parents' own perspectives would substantially enrich understanding of the family dynamics this study could observe only through students' accounts.

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