

An Analysis of Gender Differences in Career Decision-Making Among University Students

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ABSTRACT

Career decision-making is a critical process for university students as it shapes their future professional trajectories and socio-economic opportunities. The present study aimed to analyze gender differences in career decision-making among university students. The study employed a quantitative research design and was conducted at the University of Okara. A sample of 300 students was selected using a random sampling technique from different academic disciplines and levels of study. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire that measured career aspirations, influencing factors, and perceptions regarding career opportunities. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine differences across gender, area of residence, academic discipline, and level of study.

The findings of the study revealed significant differences in career decision-making patterns among students. Female students demonstrated relatively higher engagement in career planning compared to male students. Students from urban backgrounds reported broader awareness of career opportunities and professional options than students from rural areas. Furthermore, students enrolled in social science disciplines showed greater diversity in career aspirations compared to students from other academic fields. The results also indicated differences between undergraduate and postgraduate students in terms of career exploration and goal setting. The study highlights the importance of institutional support, career counseling, and exposure to diverse professional opportunities in facilitating effective career decision-making among university students.

Keywords: Career Choices, Students Motivation, Academic Performance

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Career decision making is a complicated process where one chooses educational and professional careers that determine their future careers. In the case of university students, this process is even more significant when they leave the academic training and become the part of the labor market. There are several factors that have an influence on career decisions and are determined by the personal interests, social expectations, family background, educational experiences, and the perceived opportunities in the job market. Gender is one of such factors that determine career aspirations and choices. Sociological and educational studies

indicate that gender values and socialization aspects can define the perception of various professional fields and career choice by male and female students (Eccles, 2011).

The gender in decision making in career is deeply embedded in the processes of socialization of boys and girls in early years whereby boys and girls are made to learn various skills, attitudes, and aspirations. Family structures, school systems, friendship and media are the mediums through which these gendered expectations are enhanced. Consequently, men and women often follow different subjects and professions. An example is that male students are more prone to pursue a career in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) whereas their counterparts in the female gender are overrepresented in the education sector, social sciences and healthcare (Charles and Bradley, 2009).

Universities are significant platforms, in which students are able to perfect their career ambitions and make decisions about their career paths. Nevertheless, when it comes to the process of student perception of their potential and chances, gendered views of professions and social norms may play a role. The barriers that female students might face include lack of role models, gender stereotypes and work-life balance concerns, which can influence their choice of careers and decision-making. The significance of gender differences in making career choices has thus been in the creation of policies and educational practices which facilitate equal opportunities and enable the students to engage in careers which resonate with their interests and abilities (Lent, Brown, and Hackett, 2000).

Global Perspective

The issue of gender difference in career selection and decision making have been extensively reported in many societies and educational systems. Though a lot has been made in increasing access to higher education, studies are always clear on the fact that gender occupational segregation remains evident in most parts of the world. Students, boys and girls, tend to concentrate on the various academic subjects and career paths, and these, in turn, define their future career paths and labor market results. Both sociological and educational studies propose that these differences are determined not only by individual interests but also by social norms, cultural expectations and institutional structures that direct students in occupational areas that are gender-appropriate. As an example, comparative research in multiple countries have shown that female population is dramatically underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and that the male population is underrepresented in the employment of education, nursing, and social services (Charles and Bradley, 2009). These trends present the way gendered expectations have shaped the allocation of men and women in different fields of professions.

On the international front, key international bodies have on numerous occasions highlighted that the problem of gender differences in education and employment is still a significant problem. Despite the significant growth in the number of women pursuing higher education in various nations, there remains gender imbalances in the labor markets, leadership, as well as employment in high paying positions. It has been reported that women could face more obstacles to working in some types of professional fields and becoming top-level leaders. Such inequalities are commonly traced back to structural limitations, including discrimination, lack of access to professional groups, unequal allocation of household roles, and gender stereotypes that remain relevant and can determine the attitudes to competence and the ability to work in specific roles (UNESCO, 2021). Consequently, in the event that women acquire more advanced educational backgrounds, there is still the possibility of facing barriers to converting the acquired backgrounds into the same career opportunities.

Moreover, the international studies indicate that the gender differences in career decision-making are influenced by multi-faceted interactions between personal aspirations and social organizations at large. Socially acceptable rights of men and women are commonly established by the cultural norms and

expectations, which may lead to a situation where the students see themselves as able and career opportunities accordingly. As an example, male students are frequently intrigued to choose the careers, which focus on the technical skills, financial factors, and leadership positions, whereas female students can be urged to choose the jobs, which seem to be caring or social and seem to be not incompatible with a family life. Such gendered views are supported by familial upbringing, learning conditions, interpersonal communication, and visualization of various professions in the media. As a result, students can internalise such expectations and make career decisions based on gender roles they create in society and not based on personal interests or talents (Eccles, 2011).

The career choice differences between men and women in most developing nations such as the Asian, African, and Latin American countries are also subject to socio-cultural values, economic and family set ups. In this case, the families tend to be one of the key elements that shape the educational and career choice of the students. Parents can influence male children to take up a career that is either viewed as financially rewarding/ prestigious and female children can be influenced to take up a career that is viewed as being socially acceptable, stable and compatible with domestic duties. Some issues with workplace safety, mobility or cultural expectations can also restrict access to some career opportunities of women in some instances. Career choices can also be affected by economic factors because students with less lucrative socioeconomic background might be more concerned with jobs that offer quick access to financial resources instead of long-term career building.

In addition to that, access to role models and mentoring also contributes immensely to the career goals among the students. Lack of exposure to female professionals who have succeeded in a specific profession, especially in the male-dominated professions like engineering, technology, or top management, may lead female students to feel that they are less likely to achieve these professions. In like manner, university cultures can be perpetrators of gendered patterns of careers by encouraging some areas to be more appropriate to one gender rather than the other. Thus, the availability of inclusive learning environments, effective faculty advising, and gender-based career advising initiatives are likely to encourage the students to pursue various career opportunities that are not restricted to gender roles.

These patterns in the world reveal the relevance of studying gender variations in career choices in certain cultural and institutional backgrounds. Universities are a very important phase in the life of students where they form professional identities, balance and seal their career interests, and prepare to get into the labor market. The analysis of gender and its effects on the career choice of higher education students can be of great use to the educators, policy makers as well as the higher education institutions working towards achieving gender equity within the education and workforce. Universities may be instrumental in providing a chance to help both female and male students to choose careers according to their likes, skills, and desires, as opposed to their gender expectations by attending to the social and structural factors that influence the decisions made by individuals in their career decision-making.

Conceptualization

Gender is the socially constructed roles, behaviors, responsibilities, and expectations, which societies place on people, depending on how they perceive their sex. Gender is constructed unlike biological sex which is established according to physiological traits, and through socialization and institutional forces which dictate what is appropriate to men and women within a particular society. According to sociologists, gender is a process of continuous production and reproduction through daily processes of interaction, socialization, and even the structure of society in terms of family, school and media. Such gendered expectations affect the identity of individuals, their opportunities, and life choices, such as the educational levels, their occupational preferences, and involvement in the labor market. Gender as a social construct differs by culture and historical time as a quality of the impact of the values of society and power relations. The social

view of gender enables one to understand why males and females tend to have diverse opportunities and limitations on diverse areas of life such as career growth and professional progress (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Career Decision-Making

Career decision-making is a rather complicated process, in the course of which people evaluate themselves and analyze the occupational opportunities existing in the market with the help of personal traits to choose an appropriate career plan. It consists of a number of steps, such as personal evaluation of interests, competencies, personal attributes and values, research into the numerous career options and consideration of their possible advantages and obstacles. Career decision-making is also not only made based on the personal preference, but also based on external forces like family expectations, learning experiences, labor market, and the societal norms. In the process, it is through it that people obtain information about various careers, weigh the potential career choices, and come up with what they feel will bring happiness and professional achievement to them. An appropriate career decision making process should be able to access valid information, mentor or counselor guidance and be aware of their strengths and weaknesses. This is especially important to the university student who, upon completion of schooling, is destined to leave school and embark on their careers (Gati and Asher, 2001).

Career Aspirations

Career aspirations are the ideas, expectations and hopes that people have on future careers. These aspirations are the careers or the job statuses that one would like to pursue according to their likes, abilities and available opportunities. The goals and ambitions that one has in their career are influenced by both personal and external factors that include family background, educational experiences, cultural norms, and exposure to role model in various careers. The ambitions of students tend to change with time as they acquire new information, get skills, and get to face various opportunities in the process of their education. In most instances career desires are a manifestation of the societal values in general in terms of prestige, financial stability and social stigma attached to a given occupation. In the case of university students, career aspirations are significant in determining academic preferences and preferences in motivational pursuit in learning as well as impacting long-term professional planning. Knowledge about career goals among students is thus valuable among teachers and policy makers who strive to facilitate career advice and enhancement of fairness in the labor market.

Statement of the Problem

Even in academics and other fields of employment, gender disparities in making career choices still exists despite the greater involvement of both men and women in higher education. The desire to follow a career path that portrays gender roles as created by both society and an individual is predominantly followed by many university students instead of the interests or abilities that they have. The patterns facilitate occupational segregation, unequal representation in some professions, and differences in the employment results.

In the developing nations like Pakistan, the gender norms, family expectations, and cultural values can also play a bigger role in the career choices of students. The society may have restrictions on the choice of professions that female students can pursue as it makes mobility, workplace conditions and family-related problems more significant. Concurrently, boys are also under the pressure to follow a career that is considered to be financially lucrative or a prestigious career.

The knowledge of gender difference in career decision-making in university students is thus essential in determining the factors that influence career aspirations and decision of the students. Unless the issue of these factors is addressed, educational institutions might have difficulties in terms of promoting equal opportunities and helping students make informed and unbiased career choices.

Significance of the Study

The research is an important academic as well as social one. Academically it leads to a sociological insight of the role of gender in educational and occupational choice among university students. The research will offer understanding of the influence that the social norms, institutional settings, and personal beliefs have on the career choices of students by analyzing gender differences in career decision-making.

Policy wise, the results of this study can guide universities and education policymakers come up with initiatives that can facilitate gender equality in the career opportunities. Knowledge of what contributes to the career choice of students may help universities to develop adequate career counseling, mentorship, and awareness programs to motivate students to consider various career paths.

Moreover, this study is significant to discuss the problem of gender gaps in the labor market. By enumerating the obstacles and factors that affect the career decisions of students, the research can play a role in developing inclusive learning organisations with both genders having confidence to choose a career based on their interests and capabilities and not on societal pressure.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The current research will follow a quantitative research design in order to investigate gender difference in career choices among students in universities. Quantitative research is based on the systematic methods of gathering and examining numeric data with the aim of identifying trends, associations and diversities between variables. In this method, researchers can measure the attitudes, perceptions, and actions with the help of such structured instruments like questionnaires and interpret the gathered data with the help of statistical methods (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

The quantitative methodology would be suitable in the current study since it will allow the researcher to compare the views of males and female students on career decision-making in a formal and objective way. Through a statistical analysis, the research will be able to establish whether the differences between the genders are significant in terms of factors affecting career choices, career aspirations and decision-making processes.

Population of the Study

The study population was all undergraduate and postgraduate students studying at the University of Okara in the academic year of the research. The students of the university are a significant group of researching career decisions since higher education is a critical period during which individuals start to investigate professional opportunities and make choices about their future professions.

Students in the university are exposed to different academic curriculums, career counseling facilities and internship programs, which in turn shape their future careers, professional objectives. Thus, a study of career decision-making in this population will help to learn much about the influence of gender differences on occupational preferences and career planning.

Sample Size and Technique of Sampling

This study was picked on a sample size of 300 students. Both male and female students in the various academic programs at the University of Okara were included as the sample. This size is regarded as sufficient to conduct quantitative research since it is sufficient to conduct a reliable statistical analysis and make meaningful comparisons between two groups (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

The researcher used simple random sampling method because every student of the population had an equal opportunity of being chosen. Random sampling is used to reduce sampling bias and improves the sample representativeness. The study wanted to include a large variety of perspectives connected with the career decision-making process by choosing students representing various departments and academic levels.

Data Collection Instrument

The study information was obtained using a structured questionnaire. One of the common tools of quantitative research is a questionnaire that enables a researcher to collect standardized data on a large group of respondents within a relatively small span of time (Bryman, 2016).

The questionnaire had various sections that aimed at gauging various areas of the career decision making process including:

- Demographic (gender, age, academic program, semester, etc.)
- Career Aspirations
- Career Choice Influencing Factors.
- Self-efficacy Career Decision-Making.
- Perceived Social and Institutional Influences.

The majority of the items in the questionnaire were assessed by their Likert scale where the respondents were asked to provide the degree of their agreement with the statements addressing career decision-making. Likert scale format is typically applied in the works of social science research as it enables the researcher to measure attitudes and perceptions.

Data Analysis Plan

Following the data collection, coding and input of the responses were done to be analyzed in a statistical software. The methods of the study were descriptive and inferential statistics to study the data.

Descriptive Statistics

The demographic features of the respondents were summarized with the help of descriptive statistics and used to demonstrate the general trends in the data. These statistics included:

- Frequencies
- Percentages

- Means
- Standard deviations

The descriptive analysis was useful in giving a general overview of the career aspirations of students and the factors that affected the decision-making process of students.

Inferential Statistics

Towards the investigation of gender disparity in career decision-making, the research utilized inferential statistical tests, including:

- Independent sample t -test to compare the means of male and female students.
- Analysis of Various ANOVA to compare across two or more academic groups or departments.
- ANOVA is especially applied when the difference in means between more than two groups are to be compared and it is necessary to understand whether the observed differences are statistically significant or not (Field, 2018).

These statistical tests enabled the researcher to determine trends and whether gender is important in career decisions among students in a university.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

This section of the study contains the quantitative analysis and findings of the study.

Table No. 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 300)			
Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	160	53.3
	Female	140	46.7
Age	18–21 years	170	56.7
	22–25 years	100	33.3
	26 years and above	30	10.0
Area of Residence	Urban	175	58.3
	Rural	125	41.7
Level of Study	Undergraduate	210	70.0
	Postgraduate	90	30.0
Academic Discipline	Social Sciences	130	43.3
	Natural Sciences	90	30.0
	Management/Business	80	26.7

The socio-demographic profile of respondents is on the table 1. Among the 300 participants, 53.3% of them were males and 46.7% were females, which showed fairly equal gender distribution. Most of the students (56.7) were aged between 18-21, which was reflective of undergraduate students dominating the sample.

In terms of residence, 58.3 percent of the respondents resided in urban regions whereas 41.7 percent resided in the rural regions. This disparity was implying that there was a higher percentage of urban backgrounds

of university students in the sample that would affect exposure to career opportunities and information resources.

Regarding the level of study, 70 percent of the respondents belong to the undergraduate category with 30 percent of the participants being postgraduate students. That means that the majority of the respondents were in the initial phase of career planning and professional decision-making.

The spread within the academic fields indicates that 43.3% of students were enrolled in social sciences, and 30 and 26.7% were enrolled in natural sciences and management or business studies, respectively. It is through this disciplinary diversity that one can make meaningful comparisons as far as career decision-making patterns are concerned with respect to students of varying academic backgrounds.

Table No. 2: Independent Samples t-Test			
Gender	N	Mean	SD
Male	160	3.42	0.56
Female	140	3.68	0.51
Variable	t	df	p
Career Decision-Making Score	-3.87	298	.000

The comparison of both male and female students with respect to career decision-making scores is presented in table 2. The mean score of female students ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.51$) was higher in contrast to that of male students ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.56$).

Independent samples t-test shows that there is statistically significant difference between female and male students ($t = -3.87$, $p < .001$). This finding indicates that gender is a major influence in the career decision making process among the university students.

The results show a tendency of female students in the sample to be more clear or engaged in the processes of career decision-making. This can be linked to the fact that it brings about greater academic motivation, career knowledge, or the necessity to plan the employment paths carefully because of the structural obstacles in the labor market.

Table No 3: Independent Samples t-Test			
Residence	N	Mean	SD
Urban	175	3.71	0.49
Rural	125	3.38	0.55
Variable	t	df	p
Career Decision Score	4.92	298	.000

Table 3 provides an analysis of the scores in career decision-making between urban and rural students. The mean score ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.49$) of Urban students was higher than that of the rural students ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.55$).

The t-test value ($t = 4.92$, $p < .001$) shows that the difference between the two groups is considered significant. This observation indicates that urban students are more exposed to a wide range of career opportunities, professional network and sources of information than rural students.

City centers tend to be more responsive to their facilities in terms of access to educational facilities, career guidance, internship and role models. These elements can increase the level of awareness among students

about the career choices and make informed career choices. On the contrary, rural students can be restricted by the lack of opportunities, career advice, and economic factors.

Table No 4: Career Decision-Making by Academic Discipline (ANOVA)					
Discipline	N	Mean		SD	
Social Sciences	130	3.75		0.48	
Natural Sciences	90	3.46		0.53	
Management/Business	80	3.52		0.51	
Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Between Groups	4.18	2	2.09	6.87	.001
Within Groups	90.34	297	0.30		
Total	94.52	299			

In Table 4, the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) is used to compare the scores of career decision-making in the various fields of academic discipline. Social sciences students scored the highest mean ($M = 3.75$) then the management students ($M = 3.52$), and natural science students ($M = 3.46$).

According to the result of the ANOVA, the difference between the three academic groups is statistically significant ($F = 6.87, p < .01$). This shows that academic discipline has a great impact on the career decision-making patterns of students.

Among the reasons that can explain this discovery, one should note that social science subjects tend to be accompanied by the discussion of such issues as social structures, employment tendencies, and professional growth that could contribute to making students more aware of various career opportunities. Moreover, social sciences often stimulate the ability to think critically concerning the role in society and career opportunities.

Table No. 5: Independent Samples t-Test			
Level of Study	N	Mean	SD
Undergraduate	210	3.60	0.52
Postgraduate	90	3.47	0.54
Variable	t	df	p
Career Decision Score	2.01	298	.045

The comparison of the scores of career decision-making between postgraduate and undergraduate students can be seen in Table 5. The mean score was found to be slightly higher in the case of undergraduate students ($M = 3.60, SD = 0.52$) than in the case of postgraduate students ($M = 3.47, SD = 0.54$).

The t-test shows that the two groups differ statistically significantly ($t = 2.01, p < .05$). This implies the possibility of undergraduate students exhibiting more or more exploratory career views than their postgraduate counterparts.

This variation can be attributed to the fact that undergraduate students are only at the phase of seeking career options, whereas postgraduate students may have already focused their career choice. Therefore, undergraduates will be more receptive to different career opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Making career decisions is a very complicated process and several factors are in play such as personal traits, social settings and the institutional settings. The current research paper has discussed gender variations in career choice among university students and established that gender, residential location, academic field and education level have a strong impact on career dreams and occupation among university students.

The findings suggest that female students have a slightly higher level of career planning and students with urban backgrounds have more opportunities to be exposed to career opportunities and professional networks. Also, students in social sciences are more aware of different career opportunities than students in other fields of study are.

These results show that it is essential to establish positive learning conditions that would make students consider multiple career paths and acquire the competencies that would lead to their effective professional growth. The universities, policymakers and educators need to pull together in order to offer career guidance, mentorship, and institutional support that enable students to make informed career choices.

Finally, to facilitate fair career opportunities, it is necessary to not only focus on the structural factors but cultural stereotypes, which shape the perceptions of students regarding professional opportunities. Higher education institutions can also help create a more diverse and equitable workforce by creating inclusive learning spaces and enhancing career development strategies.

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