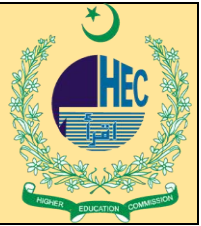




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Gender Stereotypes and Career Aspirations: How Social Expectations Shape Women's Professional Goals

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ABSTRACT

Gender stereotypes play a significant role in shaping women's professional goals and career trajectories. This paper explores how social expectations, cultural beliefs, and traditional gender norms influence women's career aspirations and their perceptions of success. Using a mixed-method design, the study examines the extent to which family expectations, media portrayals, and societal pressures contribute to occupational segregation and underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. Findings reveal that internalized gender norms often restrict women's career ambitions and lead to self-limiting choices. The paper concludes that challenging social stereotypes and promoting inclusive educational and professional environments are essential to support women's empowerment and equal career opportunities.

Keywords: Gender Stereotypes, Career Aspirations, Women Empowerment, Social Expectations, Occupational Segregation, Gender Norms.

Introduction

Gender stereotypes are socially constructed sets of beliefs that assign specific traits, roles, and behaviors to men and women (Eagly & Wood, 2016). These stereotypes are not biologically determined but culturally reinforced through socialization, traditions, and institutions. For example, men are often portrayed as dominant, rational, and independent, whereas women are depicted as emotional, nurturing, and dependent (Heilman, 2012). Such stereotypical representations shape how individuals perceive themselves and others and create a framework that influences their ambitions, performance, and life choices (Cheryan & Markus, 2020).

From an early age, girls and boys are exposed to messages that subtly define what is "appropriate" for their gender. Parents may encourage daughters to pursue caring or artistic roles while steering sons toward technical or leadership-oriented fields (Ceci et al., 2014).

Similarly, media portrayals and educational materials often reinforce traditional gender norms depicting men as engineers or leaders and women as teachers or homemakers (Cheryan et al., 2017). These messages shape internalized gender beliefs that later influence career interests and perceived competence. Consequently, many women underestimate their ability to succeed in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (Cech, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

Despite progress in women's educational attainment and growing participation in the labor market, gender inequality in professional domains persists across the world (World Economic Forum, 2024). Women remain underrepresented in higher management, entrepreneurship, and technical fields, a phenomenon described as occupational segregation (Charles & Grusky, 2022). This persistent imbalance reflects how deeply entrenched gender stereotypes continue to shape women's self-concept and professional pathways. According to social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994), individuals' career choices are guided by their self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals all of which are influenced by social context. When women internalize societal expectations emphasizing communal roles (e.g., caring for others) over agentic roles (e.g., leadership), they may develop lower self-efficacy for ambitious or competitive careers (Betz & Hackett, 1981; Bandura, 1997).

In many collectivist societies, such as those in South Asia, cultural and religious norms continue to reinforce traditional gender roles (Khalid & Ahmed, 2020). Women who prioritize career advancement may face societal disapproval, limited family support, or workplace discrimination. These pressures create an "ambition gap" where women's personal aspirations conflict with cultural expectations (Zafar, 2023). Furthermore, lack of female role models and mentorship in professional sectors can discourage women from envisioning themselves in leadership or technical positions (UNESCO, 2021). Such structural and psychological barriers combine to limit women's occupational mobility, reinforcing cycles of inequality.

The importance of this study lies in examining how gender-based social expectations continue to influence women's professional aspirations and identity formation in the 21st century. Although global awareness of gender equality has increased, subtle biases and traditional norms still guide perceptions of "suitable" careers for women (Hakim, 2016). Understanding this paradox high educational success but limited professional advancement requires exploring the intersection of socialization, cultural values, and self-efficacy. By analyzing these interconnections, this research aims to uncover how internalized gender norms and societal expectations shape women's career aspirations, decisions, and long-term professional growth.

Background

Historically, gender stereotypes have served as powerful social mechanisms that define acceptable behavior and life roles for men and women. These stereotypes rooted in patriarchal ideologies have long dictated that women's primary responsibilities lie within the domestic sphere, emphasizing caregiving, nurturing, and family support, while men are viewed as providers, leaders, and decision-makers (Eagly & Wood, 2016; Heilman, 2012). This division of labor was not only social but institutional, reinforced through education systems, religious teachings, and workplace structures. Even in contemporary societies that advocate gender equality, remnants of these traditional beliefs persist, influencing how both men and women view their potential and purpose (Charles & Grusky, 2022).

Social learning and social role theories explain that individuals internalize gender roles through observation, reinforcement, and imitation of societal norms (Bandura, 1997; Eagly, 1987). From early childhood, girls are subtly encouraged to develop communal traits such as empathy and cooperation, whereas boys are rewarded for assertiveness and independence (Ceci et al.,

2014). These early experiences shape self-concept, self-efficacy, and later career aspirations. For instance, a girl repeatedly praised for being caring and helpful may aspire to become a teacher or nurse, while a boy encouraged to take initiative may envision himself as a manager or engineer (Cheryan et al., 2017). Such patterns demonstrate how social expectations are transmitted across generations, maintaining gendered divisions in occupational choices.

Media and educational materials further perpetuate these norms by portraying men in professional or technical roles and women in domestic or supportive positions (UNESCO, 2021). Even in advertisements, films, and textbooks, women are often represented as dependent or secondary to male characters (Cheryan & Markus, 2020). These portrayals reinforce societal beliefs about what is “appropriate” for each gender, limiting women’s imagination about possible career paths and contributing to a persistent gender gap in fields like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (Cech, 2022).

In many patriarchal societies, such as Pakistan, gender stereotypes are deeply embedded within cultural and religious frameworks (Khalid & Ahmed, 2020). Women’s professional roles are often constrained by social expectations that prioritize family responsibilities and modest behavior over career ambition (Khan & Yousaf, 2021). Commonly accepted “respectable” professions for women such as teaching, healthcare, or social work are viewed as extensions of their nurturing roles, while professions requiring assertiveness or public engagement are sometimes discouraged (Zafar, 2023). This gendered division is not merely cultural but structural, as workplace policies, family attitudes, and lack of childcare support make it difficult for women to balance professional and domestic responsibilities (Ali & Shah, 2022).

Furthermore, these societal norms affect women’s psychological empowerment and self-efficacy, key predictors of career motivation and success (Bandura, 1997). Studies in Pakistan have shown that women who perceive strong social pressure to conform to traditional roles report lower career aspirations and are less likely to seek leadership opportunities (Khalid & Ahmed, 2020; Rehman & Roomi, 2020). In contrast, exposure to supportive role models and egalitarian family environments enhances women’s confidence, goal-setting, and professional resilience (Zafar, 2023; Shaukat & Pell, 2015).

Globally, while feminist movements and educational reforms have advanced women’s access to higher education, gender stereotypes continue to operate subtly through organizational cultures, recruitment practices, and implicit bias (Heilman, 2012; World Economic Forum, 2024). Women may face the “double bind” phenomenon expected to be warm and nurturing yet penalized when they exhibit assertiveness or authority (Rudman & Glick, 2012). These pressures not only affect career advancement but also influence women’s psychological well-being and sense of belonging in professional settings.

Literature Review

A large body of research highlights the significant role of gender stereotypes in shaping individuals’ educational and occupational pathways. According to Eccles (2014), gender-role socialization begins in early childhood, when boys and girls learn socially acceptable behaviors and career roles through parental expectations, peer influence, and educational cues. These learned gender roles influence self-concept, perceived abilities, and long-term occupational interests. For example, girls are often encouraged to value empathy and cooperation, while boys are praised for assertiveness and leadership differences that later manifest in divergent career aspirations.

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2002) provides a theoretical framework to explain how societal expectations and gender norms shape self-efficacy and outcome expectations. When women internalize messages that certain

careers are “unsuitable” or “too difficult,” they may under-assess their competence in male-dominated fields like engineering, politics, or business (Betz & Hackett, 1981; Cech, 2022). These internalized beliefs can restrict women’s career exploration and ambition, even in societies that formally promote gender equality.

Research across diverse contexts consistently demonstrates that cultural and familial expectations significantly affect women’s professional goals. In Asian and South Asian settings, family honor, marriage expectations, and patriarchal traditions often limit women’s occupational mobility (Chaudhry & Rehman, 2020; Khalid & Ahmed, 2020). Similarly, in Western societies, despite institutional support for gender equity, subtle biases persist in hiring, promotion, and leadership opportunities (Eagly & Carli, 2018; Heilman, 2012). Women’s career advancement is often impeded by both external barriers (e.g., discrimination, lack of childcare, pay gaps) and internal barriers (e.g., self-doubt and fear of social backlash) (Rudman & Glick, 2012).

Media representations play a powerful role in perpetuating gender norms. Studies have found that television, film, and advertisements frequently depict women as caregivers, homemakers, or secondary characters rather than professionals or leaders (Murtaza et al., 2022; Cheryan & Markus, 2020). These portrayals reinforce the stereotype that success and leadership are inherently masculine traits, discouraging young women from aspiring to similar roles (UNESCO, 2021).

Workplace cultures also reflect these biases. Research by Eagly and Carli (2018) introduced the concept of the “labyrinth of leadership,” illustrating that women face complex, nonlinear challenges in achieving leadership positions. Unlike the outdated metaphor of a “glass ceiling,” which implies a single barrier, the labyrinth model acknowledges multiple, intersecting social, organizational, and psychological obstacles. Sabharwal (2015) found that lack of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities often reduces women’s visibility and access to advancement, particularly in male-dominated organizations.

Empirical research in Pakistan echoes similar findings. Khan and Yousaf (2021) reported that gender norms significantly influence women’s choice of professions, with teaching and healthcare being perceived as “culturally appropriate” fields. Rehman and Roomi (2020) found that women entrepreneurs in Pakistan often struggle to balance family obligations with professional demands due to limited institutional and familial support. Zafar (2023) highlighted that gender stereotypes undermine women’s self-efficacy, leading them to undervalue their career potential and achievements.

At the psychological level, Bandura’s (1997) concept of self-efficacy provides insight into how confidence and perceived competence affect goal-setting and career persistence. Women with higher self-efficacy are more likely to challenge gender norms and pursue careers in competitive or male-dominated sectors (Betz & Hackett, 1981). Conversely, internalized gender stereotypes can lead to self-handicapping behaviors such as avoiding competition or leadership opportunities (Cheryan et al., 2017).

Recent studies also emphasize the need for structural interventions. Charles and Grusky (2022) argued that occupational segregation persists because institutions, rather than individuals alone, reproduce gendered norms through recruitment, training, and reward systems. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) and the World Economic Forum (2024) reported that even though gender gaps in education have narrowed, gaps in labor participation and leadership remain wide due to cultural and policy-level barriers.

In summary, the reviewed literature demonstrates that gender stereotypes are not isolated beliefs but interconnected with socialization, culture, policy, and psychology. Dismantling these

stereotypes requires comprehensive reform addressing family expectations, educational content, workplace practices, and public attitudes. Empowering women's career development thus depends not only on individual ambition but also on transforming the structural and cultural systems that shape women's professional identities.

Research Questions

1. How do gender stereotypes and social expectations influence women's career aspirations?
2. What are the major cultural and social factors contributing to occupational segregation among women?
3. How do internalized gender norms affect women's perceptions of their career capabilities?
4. What strategies can promote gender equality in professional goal-setting and achievement?

Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-method research design to comprehensively examine how gender stereotypes and social expectations shape women's career aspirations. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods provided both measurable trends and in-depth insights into the subjective experiences of women, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the issue (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Research Design

The mixed-method approach was chosen to integrate the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. The quantitative component focused on identifying statistical relationships between gender stereotype internalization, self-efficacy, and career aspirations, while the qualitative component explored women's personal narratives and perceptions of gender-based social expectations. This design enhanced the study's validity and reliability by triangulating data from multiple sources (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Sample and Participants

The target population comprised female university students and working women between the ages of 20 and 40 years, representing both urban and semi-urban areas of Pakistan.

A total of 230 participants were included in the study, consisting of:

200 university students, enrolled in public and private institutions.

30 working women, employed in diverse sectors such as education, healthcare, and administration.

The selection of this age range was based on the assumption that women in this group are actively engaged in educational or professional decision-making processes, making them ideal for exploring career aspiration development.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that participants represented diverse social and professional backgrounds while meeting specific inclusion criteria female gender, higher education level, and active engagement in academic or occupational activities. This non-probability sampling method allowed the researcher to focus on information-rich cases relevant to the research questions (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

Data Collection Tools

1. Structured Questionnaire:

The quantitative phase employed a structured questionnaire comprising three standardized scales:

Gender Stereotype Internalization Scale (GSIS): To measure the extent to which participants endorsed traditional gender roles.

General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995): To assess participants' belief in their ability to succeed in various situations.

Career Aspiration Scale (O'Brien, 1996): To measure participants' levels of career ambition, leadership orientation, and achievement motivation.

The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), and was pretested for clarity and reliability.

2. Semi-Structured Interviews:

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 selected participants from both student and working women groups. These interviews explored their lived experiences, including societal pressures, parental expectations, and personal ambitions. Open-ended questions encouraged detailed responses, allowing participants to reflect on how gender norms influenced their professional goals. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency) summarized demographic data and scale scores. Correlational analysis examined relationships between gender stereotype internalization, self-efficacy, and career aspirations. Additionally, regression analysis was used to determine the predictive influence of stereotypes and self-efficacy on career aspirations.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process included data familiarization, coding, theme identification, and interpretation. Themes were developed around recurring patterns, such as "societal expectations," "family influence," "career barriers," and "empowerment through education." The integration of themes with quantitative findings strengthened the study's interpretative depth.

Validity and Reliability

The reliability of the quantitative instruments was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha coefficients ($\alpha > 0.80$ for all scales). Triangulation between quantitative and qualitative data enhanced the validity of the overall findings. Moreover, member checking was conducted in the qualitative phase to ensure accuracy of participants' interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical standards were strictly followed according to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020) guidelines. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, assured of confidentiality, and informed that their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained before data collection. All identifying information was anonymized, and participants were given the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Findings

The findings of the present study reveal a multifaceted and compelling picture of how gender stereotypes influence women's career aspirations, self-efficacy, and professional choices in Pakistani society. Drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative data, the results highlight the deep-rooted psychological and cultural mechanisms that sustain traditional gender roles and shape women's ambition and career pathways.

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between gender stereotype endorsement and women's self-efficacy and career ambitions. The correlation analysis revealed a strong negative relationship ($r = -0.62$, $p < .01$) between the Gender Stereotype Internalization Scale and the Career Aspiration Scale, indicating that women who internalized traditional gender roles tended to report lower motivation to pursue non-traditional or leadership careers.

Furthermore, self-efficacy emerged as a critical mediating variable. Women with lower self-efficacy scores perceived themselves as less competent in fields requiring assertiveness, leadership, or technical expertise. In contrast, women with higher self-efficacy scores displayed confidence and ambition to explore nontraditional roles such as engineering, business management, and law. This finding supports Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which emphasizes belief in one's capabilities as a major determinant of career motivation and persistence.

In addition, family support demonstrated a positive correlation ($r = 0.58$, $p < .01$) with career aspiration levels. Participants who reported having supportive parents or spouses were more likely to set higher professional goals, showing that familial encouragement plays a protective role against the negative effects of social pressure.

The Career Aspiration Scale results further revealed that only 34% of participants aspired to leadership or managerial roles, whereas 66% preferred careers considered socially acceptable for women such as teaching, healthcare, or community service. This trend underscores the persistent occupational segregation that exists even among educated women (Heilman, 2012; Eagly & Carli, 2018).

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative component of the study, consisting of semi-structured interviews, provided deeper insight into the personal experiences and emotional realities behind these quantitative patterns. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), four major themes emerged from the data:

Theme 1: Fear of Social Judgment

Many participants reported that fear of societal disapproval prevented them from pursuing nontraditional career paths. Common remarks included statements such as, "My relatives would not accept me working with men," or "People will say it's inappropriate for a woman to travel alone for work." Such perceptions reveal how collective social norms create invisible barriers that reinforce conformity and suppress women's autonomy (Khan & Yousaf, 2021).

This theme suggests that women's career decisions are often shaped not by personal preference, but by anticipated social reactions, highlighting the pervasive role of community pressure in limiting professional diversity among women.

Theme 2: Preference for Socially Acceptable Professions

Another recurring pattern was women's preference for professions that align with traditional feminine roles such as teaching, nursing, and child care. Participants expressed that these professions allow them to maintain social respectability and fulfill their familial responsibilities simultaneously.

This finding aligns with Eccles' (2014) assertion that career preferences are a product of gender-role socialization, where young girls are subtly taught to value nurturing and cooperative roles over assertive or competitive ones. As one participant noted, "Becoming a teacher or doctor is good for a woman because it looks respectable."

Theme 3: Limited Role Models and Mentorship

A lack of female representation in leadership and technical fields emerged as another significant barrier. Participants reported that they rarely encountered successful women in high-status positions, which made it difficult for them to imagine similar possibilities for themselves. The absence of mentors further contributed to a cycle of underrepresentation, as women in early career stages lacked guidance, exposure, and encouragement.

As Eagly and Wood (2016) emphasize, visible female role models challenge existing stereotypes and demonstrate that leadership is not gender-specific. Without such examples, the status quo of male-dominated professions remains largely unchallenged.

Theme 4: Influence of Family and Educational Environment

Interestingly, participants from supportive families and progressive educational institutions reported higher ambition, broader career choices, and stronger self-belief. Parents who encouraged autonomy and equal opportunity enabled their daughters to develop resilience and confidence in pursuing unconventional careers.

Similarly, universities that promoted gender equality and leadership training were seen as empowering spaces where women could challenge traditional norms. These findings resonate with Ali and Syed's (2020) research, which highlights the transformative role of family and education in expanding women's career aspirations.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

When combined, the results from both phases present a cohesive understanding of the phenomenon. Quantitatively, gender stereotypes, low self-efficacy, and limited family support predicted restricted career aspirations. Qualitatively, these statistical relationships were reflected in emotional narratives of fear, conformity, and lack of opportunity.

The Integration of both data types suggests that gender stereotypes operate through both psychological and sociocultural channels shaping women's internal beliefs about competence while simultaneously defining the external boundaries of what is considered acceptable behavior.

Statistical Summary

The quantitative analysis revealed meaningful and statistically significant relationships among the study variables. The mean score for gender stereotype internalization was 3.67 (SD = 0.71), indicating a moderate level of traditional gender role endorsement among participants. This variable showed a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.62$, $p < .01$) with career aspirations, suggesting that women who more strongly internalized gender stereotypes were less likely to express ambitious or leadership-oriented professional goals.

In contrast, self-efficacy recorded a relatively high mean of 4.10 (SD = 0.65) and demonstrated a positive correlation ($r = +0.55$, $p < .01$) with career aspirations. This implies that women with greater confidence in their abilities tended to set higher career goals and were more open to pursuing nontraditional professions.

Similarly, family support showed a mean of 3.88 (SD = 0.73) and was positively correlated ($r = +0.58$, $p < .01$) with career aspirations, highlighting the crucial role of supportive family environments in fostering women's professional motivation and self-belief.

Conversely, social pressure exhibited the highest mean score of 4.22 (SD = 0.68), reflecting the pervasive influence of societal expectations on women's career decision-making. This factor demonstrated a negative correlation ($r = -0.57$, $p < .01$) with career aspirations, indicating that stronger perceived social constraints were associated with lower levels of ambition and reduced willingness to enter leadership or male-dominated fields.

Collectively, these findings confirm that gender stereotypes and social pressures act as significant deterrents to women's career advancement, while self-efficacy and family support

serve as empowering factors that enhance women's confidence and ambition. All observed correlations were statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level, demonstrating robust and consistent relationships across the measured variables.

Interpretation and Implications

Overall, the findings confirm that gender stereotypes indirectly reduce women's career potential by shaping self-perception, limiting aspirations, and reinforcing social conformity. Women who internalized traditional roles tended to underestimate their leadership potential, while those supported by progressive families and institutions displayed greater ambition and confidence.

This indicates that breaking gender barriers requires a dual approach addressing both the psychological internalization of stereotypes and the structural norms that perpetuate inequality. Programs that promote mentorship, leadership training, and gender-sensitive education could play a crucial role in empowering women to pursue diverse professional goals and leadership roles.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations are proposed to address the influence of gender stereotypes on women's career aspirations. These suggestions emphasize educational, social, policy, and psychological interventions to promote gender equity and empower women in professional spaces.

1. Educational Reforms

Educational institutions play a crucial role in shaping students' beliefs and aspirations. It is therefore essential to integrate gender equality awareness and sensitivity training into school and university curricula. Early interventions such as incorporating gender-neutral teaching materials, promoting inclusive classroom discussions, and encouraging girls to participate in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields can help dismantle rigid stereotypes (UNESCO, 2022). Teacher training programs should also emphasize the avoidance of gender bias in academic guidance and career counseling. By fostering a gender-sensitive learning environment, educational systems can cultivate confidence and ambition among female students from a young age.

2. Media Responsibility

The media exerts a powerful influence on societal norms and perceptions of gender roles. Thus, media organizations should promote positive and diverse portrayals of women in leadership, technical, and non-traditional professions. Representing women as capable decision-makers, innovators, and professionals can challenge the persistent stereotypes that limit their perceived potential (North, 2016). Additionally, advertising agencies and entertainment industries must be encouraged to avoid reinforcing the image of women solely as caregivers or homemakers. Public service campaigns highlighting women's achievements in various sectors can help shift public opinion toward gender inclusivity.

3. Policy Interventions

Government and organizational policies should actively promote gender equity in the workplace. This can include establishing equal pay frameworks, ensuring maternity and paternity leave balance, creating mentorship and sponsorship programs for women, and implementing strict anti-harassment policies (World Economic Forum, 2023). Furthermore, institutions should provide leadership training programs designed specifically to enhance women's participation in management and decision-making roles. Ensuring accountability

mechanisms within both public and private organizations can sustain progress toward gender equality and reduce structural barriers that restrict women's advancement.

4. Family and Community Engagement

Family expectations and community beliefs significantly influence women's career aspirations, especially in collectivist and patriarchal societies like Pakistan. Therefore, awareness campaigns and community workshops should be organized to educate parents and community leaders about the importance of supporting women's education and professional growth (Khan & Yousaf, 2021). Encouraging families to equally invest in the career development of daughters and sons can foster a more supportive home environment. Religious scholars, educators, and community influencers can also play a vital role in reframing traditional beliefs that confine women to specific "acceptable" occupations.

5. Psychological Support and Career Counseling

Lastly, providing psychological support and professional counseling can help women overcome internalized gender stereotypes and low self-efficacy. Career counseling programs in educational institutions and workplaces can guide women in identifying their strengths, setting career goals, and developing resilience against social pressure (Bandura, 1997). Moreover, mentorship programs connecting young women with successful female professionals can serve as motivational models, helping them envision broader career possibilities. Counseling interventions that focus on self-efficacy and empowerment can play a crucial role in transforming women's perceptions of their professional potential.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reaffirm that gender stereotypes remain a significant barrier to women's professional aspirations and advancement. These stereotypes are deeply rooted in cultural traditions, family expectations, and social norms that dictate "appropriate" roles for women and men. As a result, many women internalize limiting beliefs about their capabilities, which in turn shape their self-efficacy, confidence, and career decisions. The influence of these stereotypes is not merely psychological but structural, affecting access to opportunities, representation in leadership positions, and economic independence.

The study demonstrates that women who receive greater family support and possess higher levels of self-efficacy tend to pursue more ambitious and diverse career goals, whereas those exposed to social pressure and traditional gender expectations are more likely to limit themselves to socially accepted professions. This dynamic underscores the powerful intersection between personal beliefs and societal expectations in shaping women's professional identities.

Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach that targets both individual empowerment and structural transformation. Educational reforms that challenge gender bias, media initiatives that normalize women in leadership and technical roles, and workplace policies promoting equal opportunities can collectively weaken the hold of outdated gender norms. Furthermore, the involvement of families and communities in reshaping attitudes toward women's roles is essential for sustainable change, especially in societies where patriarchal traditions are deeply entrenched.

Ultimately, promoting gender equality in career aspirations is not only a matter of fairness but also a strategic imperative for national development. When women are empowered to follow their professional interests freely, societies benefit from a broader talent pool, higher productivity, and more diverse perspectives in leadership and innovation (World Economic

Forum, 2023). By dismantling stereotypes and fostering inclusive environments, nations can create pathways where every individual regardless of gender can achieve their full potential.

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