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**Socio-Economic Factors Contributing to Female Students' Dropout
in Community Technical Colleges in Thyolo and Phalombe
Districts: A Case of Milonga and Naminjiwa Technical Colleges**



Socio-Economic Factors Contributing to Female Students' Dropout in Community Technical Colleges in Thyolo and Phalombe Districts: A Case of Milonga and Naminjiwa Technical Colleges

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Abstract

Most students in community technical colleges dropout before completion of their training course, particularly female students, which is counterproductive with regard to women empowerment. This paper therefore, reports on a study that was conducted at Milonga and Naminjiwa community technical colleges in Thyolo and Phalombe districts respectively. Thus, the study sought to establish probable socio-economic factors that influence dropout of female students from the two colleges, with a view of finding solutions to the problem. The two colleges were earmarked for the study because of their proximity to tea estates where manpower is the main source of labour for the tea industry. In addition, people in the two districts have similar cultural beliefs and economic status. Population of the study covered both female and male students including principals and instructors of the two technical colleges. In addition, identified parents of female students who dropped out of school were also part of the study. Thus, the study was conducted through qualitative research method so as to have an in-depth understanding of people views. Data was collected with reference to objectives of the study and then thematically analyzed. The study revealed several socio-economic factors that contribute to dropout of female students from the two colleges such as: cost of training and poverty, domestic chores and parents' characteristics, cultural factors, early marriages and gender difference including training environment. However, the relationship among students and instructors showed that it had no effect on dropout as it was cordial and amicable. Recommendations to policy makers and other stakeholders were proposed as follows: Government and Ministry of Labour Skills and Innovation should have a national policy to provide bursaries and loans to needy students. The government should construct hostels at the two colleges to have conducive training environment. Ministry of Labour Skills and Innovation should organize awareness campaign programmes to sensitize the community surrounding the two colleges on the importance of TVET. Ministry of Labour Skills and Innovation should recruit more female instructors to act as role models to other female students.

Keywords: *Dropout, socio-economic factors, household issues, cultural influence, training environment, religious beliefs and policy makers*

INTRODUCTION

Provision of Technical and Vocational Education and training skills to females has been improving in the last decade. This is evidenced through international initiatives, which motivated the Government of Malawi to engage in the training of the girl-child, woman and vulnerable groups. In support of the initiative, several provisions have been made by the government to provide conducive learning environment for the students in technical and vocational education training institutions. Developmental initiatives include provision of adequate infrastructure, tools and machinery for practicals and social amenities (Shears, 2019).

Globally, the plight of women in technical and vocational education and training is a general concern (ILO, 2020; Maclean & Fien, 2017). In fact, the report asserts that regardless of background, women continue to bear most child-rearing and domestic duties. This has been observed to be a general trend for developing countries, as well as, in Europe and North America. According to UNESCO (2012), home and childcare duties strongly restrict the time-management opportunities, mobility and flexibility necessary for women's full participation in the education and training sector. Furthermore, low female enrollment coupled with dropping out from TVET programmes is also a big challenge for governments in Asia (Bhatta, 2016; Maclean & Fien, 2017; World Bank, 2013). South Asia in particular, which comprises countries like India, Bangladesh and Nepal, have contended that there are very few TVET opportunities available in rural areas (Ayub, Parental influence and attitude of students towards technical and vocational education and training., 2017; World Bank, 2017).

In the case of sub-Saharan region, studies have indicated that technical and vocational education and training subsector experience low female participation and enrolment (Ngugi & Muthima, 2017; Tamrat, 2019; Amedorme & Fiagbe, 2013). Furthermore, South Africa is also experiencing higher dropout rates mostly among black South Africans (Bengesai & Paideya, Analysis of academic and institutional factors affecting graduation among engineering students at a South African University., 2018).

With regard to Malawi, dropout is also an issue of concern in vocational training institutions. This was confirmed through the study that was conducted in 23 districts in Malawi (Cho, Kalomba, Mobarak, & Oronzo, 2013). The study focused on dropout of general youths without considering gender differences. Nevertheless, separate studies conducted by Naunje (2004) and Gondwe (2016) at primary school level established that girl-child dropout is a real issue that needed thorough investigation. Identifying the root cause of female-student dropout in vocational training institutions would be the only solution to finding ways of mitigating the situation in Malawi. Though the dropout covers all vocational training institutions in Malawi, this research confined itself to female students in community technical colleges in Thyolo and Phalombe districts. In particular, the study focused on Milonga and Naminjiwa community technical colleges because of their proximity to tea estates and sharing similar cultural beliefs.

Research shows that Malawi continues to register high school dropouts, particularly in Phalombe district (Chinele, 2018). Thus, there is still minimal movement with regard to provision of technical and vocational education and training skills to women and the girl child, despite Government's

effort to provide conducive learning environment. As such, efforts must be made to establish the root cause of such dropouts for women empowerment to be real.

Statement of the problem

This study was conducted to establish factors that contribute to female students' dropout in community technical colleges. Particularly, the study's focus was to identify probable factors that lead to withdrawal of female students from Milonga and Naminjiwa community technical colleges before completion of the programme. The outcome of the study would enable the two technical colleges, as well as, policy makers to understand why female students drop out from these community technical colleges. Such information would be significant for identifying means of addressing the challenge. In fact, the colleges referred to in this study are located in rural areas where female population is high (Malawi Demographic Profile, 2019). Thus, mitigating dropout of female students would therefore, contribute to women empowerment, self-employment, self-reliance and reduction in vulnerability to risky sexual behaviour (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2013). In addition, findings of this study would trigger further research to address other challenges that female students face in other community technical colleges. MDP (2018) indicates that 83 percent of Malawi's population live in rural areas. Furthermore, NSO (2018) indicates that 85% of those living in poverty live in rural areas and that more are women. According to World Bank (2018) report, it was asserted that poverty and inequality remain stubbornly high in Malawi. This may have been an indication of low level human capital development in rural areas. In this regard, this research would play a pivotal role in addressing some of the challenges that women face in the TVET sector with the intention of improving human capital development.

More importantly, mainstreaming dropout of female students would consequently translate to gender equity (ILO, 2012; Shears, 2019). Accordingly, it has been asserted that technical and vocational skills are a prime mover of economic and social development (Williams, Becky, & Theophilus, 2018). Therefore, equipping women with technical and vocational skills would be a spring board to gender equality and would deter domestic violence (Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare, 2015). All this effort would be in pursuit of women empowerment in rural areas. This study was therefore significant because it is beneficial to both female and male students, vulnerable persons, community technical colleges and policy makers. Finally, the research was also intended to make necessary recommendations to mitigate female students' dropout from the two community technical colleges.

Limitations of the study

This research had limitations in the following areas: under representation of female instructors in the population of the study. Participants were not very free to interact in prevalence of COVID-19 pandemic. Findings of this research study are not to be generalized to other colleges other than Milonga and Naminjiwa Community Technical colleges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student dropout from schools and colleges is an issue of concern to parents, politicians, religious leaders and the community at large. As such, many studies have been conducted to explore causes of dropout and its impact on the society. These studies revealed that dropout does not occur through a single factor but that it is a composition of several factors (Amedorme & Fiagbe, 2013; Shahidul & Karim, 2015). A similar study, suggested a range of interrelated factors that interact to influence how and why children drop out from school (Ansary, Socio-economic factors of dropout situation in rural primary education: A study of two villages in Rajshahi district, 2017). To have a deeper understanding of this problem, books, articles, journals and publications were reviewed. This, revealed that there are several factors that contribute to female students' dropout from schools and colleges. For ease of carrying out the study, these factors were categorized into four groups: (1) economic factors, (2) household factors, (3) training environment and (4) cultural factors.

Economic Factors

According to Ansary (2017), household income is an important factor in determining access to education as schooling demands a range of costs including fees and other hidden costs such as uniforms, travel and up-keep. A related study done by Shahidul and Karim (2015) indicated that parents may not be able to support their children at school till completion of the programme due to socio-economic status such as poverty. Again, it is indicated that financial constraints also greatly contribute to low female student participation in TVET (Williams, Becky, & Theophilus, 2016). In addition, similar studies have revealed a relationship between family's financial strength and the likelihood of the daughter's dropout (Monga, Monga, & Monga, 2016). Furthermore, it has been established that family poverty is associated with a number of adverse conditions such as homelessness; hunger and food insecurity; domestic violence; drug abuse and other problems (Rumberger, 2013). Such conditions would lead to poor performance in school hence culminating to student's withdrawal. According to a report by UNESCO (2010) on Education For All (EFA) global monitoring as cited by Amadi et al. (2013), it is indicated that economic down turn, as well as, drought in some areas result into high food prices forcing many poor households to cut on school expenses. This as observed, leads to an increased number of children, particularly girls, being made to leave school before completion. In a related study conducted by Mandima (2013), it was found that low socio-economic family background was one of the major causes of dropping out from school. The study established that students' dropout was due to poverty and family financial constraints. In yet another study, Hunt (2008), alluded that the costs of schooling, including fees, is a central reason for dropping out.

Household Factors

According to one of the studies, the root cause of dropout of female students is parental pressure on children to help them in household chores and other activities (Monga, Monga, & Monga, 2016). Most children take care of their younger siblings and other household matters as their parents engage in daily labour or agricultural activities. With HIV/AIDS pandemic, parents have left their children behind with the girl-child taking care of other children. This has placed a big burden mostly on the girl-child to take charge of the family by caring for young ones. In agreement

with Shahidul and Karim (2015), Shamim (2016), in his study also identified various factors leading to girls' dropout from school. According to his study, main factors contributing to dropping out of girls were found to be among others: girls getting involved in household chores due to demise of the father or illness of the mother. Poverty was also identified as another factor that leads to girls sticking around homes hence getting involved in domestic chores (Shamim, 2016).

Cultural Factors

It has been established that women are hindered from participating in TVET related courses due to factors ranging from social, cultural, institutional to curricula related factors (Ngugi & Muthima, 2017). According to their study, in the Sub-Saharan region, TVET subsector is experiencing low female enrolment and retention of students. In a related study, it was also established that women in technical and vocational education face enormous challenges such as financial constraints, sexual harassment, childbirth during course of study, and inadequate educational facilities including unqualified lecturers (Williams et al., 2016). In a similar study, Manacorda (2012), as cited by Shahidul and Karim (2015), also argued that girls are at a greater risk of dropout due to factors such as teenage pregnancy and sickness. Teenage pregnancy may result into humiliation and poor performance in class consequently resulting into the girl dropping out from school.

Still more, a similar study has identified various causes why girls drop out from school. Among the causes, main factors were found to include early marriages (Ansary, Socio-economic factors of dropout situation in rural primary education: A study of two villages in Rajshahi district, 2017). Similar studies have asserted that this is due to parents thinking that there is no benefit in girls' education. Their belief is that once their girls get married, they will contribute to their husbands' income rather than to their parents' (Derdar, 2014). This assumption among families perpetrates a cycle of discrimination against girls in terms of schooling. In related studies, factors such as forced marriages, early pregnancy, and parents' negative attitudes towards girl children are some of the factors that have been established to contribute to female students' dropout in Malawian schools (Gondwe, 2016; Naunje, 2004).

Training Environment

World Bank (2017) report outlined several factors that affect female participation in TVET which lead to their withdrawal. For instance, the report highlighted factors such as non-conducive facility and faculty environment; non-availability of female-friendly courses and relatively high TVET costs for poor households. Furthermore, reputation of TVET sector of being associated with the image of male-domination and low-performers is another factor of great concern to female students. In addition, ILO Resource Guide has outlined key factors that affect female participation in TVET such as attitudinal or social mindset, financial constraints, lack of safe accommodation, information knowledge gaps, low prospects for decent work, and low self-confidence (Shears, 2019).

In yet another study, it was revealed that learning environment in certain schools tend to lead to premature school dropout (Mandima, 2013). This was established to be influenced by organization of the school, its structures, school climate and policies. In addition, the same study

identified other pertinent causes such as distance to school, and inadequate resources and facilities, which appeared to be among the main causes of dropout among students in rural areas.

The other issue that has been revealed to be one of the factors influencing dropout was under representation of female teachers in technical colleges (Shahidul & Karim, 2015). It is a well-known fact that female students do not feel comfortable in places where there are in minority as compared to male students. This is from social and cultural background of most societies. According to World Bank (2017) report, it is indicated that one of the challenges of female participation in TVET is under-representation of female teachers and staff in technical colleges. Likewise, in other studies it has been established as well, that lack of female teachers, parental education, cultural beliefs and health are other factors that influence female students' dropout (Amadi, Role, & Makwewa, 2013; Kilagat, Ferej, & Kafu, 2018). A related study that was conducted on some technical colleges in Malawi identified several barriers that affected women to successfully complete TEVET programmes such as lack of pertinent information on training programmes, career guidance, poor attitudes of instructors, poor physical infrastructure, and a lack of knowledge about bursaries and scholarships (Oddie, 2018).

In terms of feminine hygiene facilities, studies have established that dropout of female students from schools and colleges is attributed to unavailability of female toilets and other hygiene facilities. According to Shahidul and Karim (2015), inadequate sanitation facilities for females massively affect girls' dropout because institutions with no such facilities appear not to be safe for them. In fact, it has been asserted that availability of functional school toilets and water can positively impact health and learning outcomes, particularly for females. Globally, in 2016, 23% of schools worldwide had no such services consequently relied on unimproved facilities, such as pit latrines without a slab or platform, bucket latrines, or no sanitation facility at all (UNICEF, 2018).

In terms of accommodation and teachers' attitude, it has been established that lack of safe accommodation in TVET institutions, such as hostel facilities, greatly contribute to female students' dropout (World Bank, 2017). In the same vein, the issue of safe accommodation has been observed to be of paramount importance because girls need security in areas where sexual harassment is prevalent (ILO, 2012). In yet another study, it was established that cause of girls' dropout of school is linked to teacher/student relationship, including corporal punishment by teachers (Derdar, 2014). With regard to teachers' attitude, it has been alluded that the way teachers perform their duties greatly affects students' decision to stay in school or dropout. One of such studies established that certain teachers' attitudes influence students' dropout in schools. For instance, too much work and managerial responsibilities assigned to teachers, limited attention given to slow learners by teachers and failure of teachers to check students work are some of the factors that were found to influence students drop out in schools (Mutwol & Keilany, 2015).

It is undeniable fact that when one stays far from school, there is need for transport to and from school. Likewise, due to long distance to colleges, it has been reported that female students are normally not able to attend courses for fear security issues (Ansary, Socio-economic factors of dropout situation in rural primary education: A study of two villages in Rajshahi district, 2017;

ILO, 2012). In a similar study, it was also established that long distance was a major contributor to female students' dropout (Derdar, 2014).

Conceptual framework

This study was guided by two theories: Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1975) and Alexanders Astin's Theory of Involvement (1985). Tinto's theory explains what contributes to student withdrawal process (Atif, Richards, & Bilgin, 2013). The theory claims that student decision to drop out arises from a combination of student characteristics and the extent of their academic, environmental and social integration in an institution. These characteristics include family background, skills, abilities, student's intentions, external commitments, and institutional experiences (Connolly, 2016). Alexander Astin's Theory of Involvement emphasizes the significance of student involvement in the learning process in order to achieve student retention. According to the theory, factors that determine student retention include student demographics, background and previous experience, institutional characteristics, students' peer group characteristics, faculty characteristics, curriculum, financial aid, place of residence and student involvement (Atif et al., 2013).

This research study based its findings on the four broad factors that influence human behavior and learning as postulated by Tinto (1975) and Astin (1985). The four influencing factors were investigated based on perceived factors such as economic, household, cultural, and environmental influences as outlined in the conceptual framework.

In this study, conceptual structure was used to examine probable factors that lead to female students' dropout at Milonga and Naminjiwa Community Technical Colleges. The framework depicts probable factors that influence female students' dropout such as economic, household, cultural, and environmental issues. In the context of this study, economic factors included among others cost of training and poverty. Household factors encompassed domestic chores and parents' characteristics such as educational level, occupation, attitude and monthly income. Cultural factors focused on early marriages and pregnancies, and gender difference was looked at from the angle of Astin's Theory of Involvement. Finally, training environment included under representation of female trainers, feminine hygiene facilities, teachers' attitudes and distance to college. Figure 1. depicts conceptual framework of student dropout in community technical colleges.

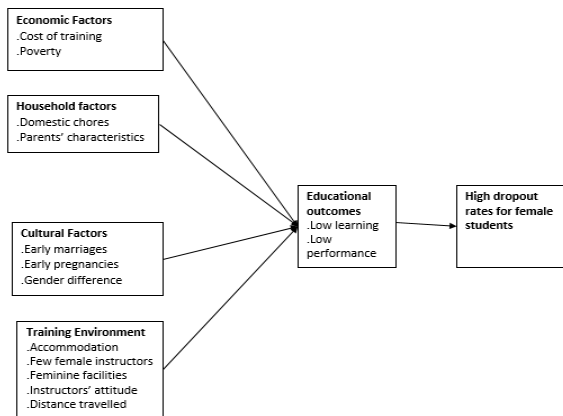


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

METHODOLOGY

The philosophical paradigm behind this research was constructivism. With this paradigm, it is believed that there is no single reality and that reality has to be interpreted (Kamal, 2019). Since the research is interpretive, it was approached through qualitative research method in particular phenomenological design (Saldana, 2013).

Population of the study covered both female and male students including principals and instructors of Milonga and Naminjiwa technical colleges. This was the group from which data was collected for generalizing the research study (Omollo, 2013). In addition, identified parents of female student dropouts were also part of the informants to the study. Participants were chosen based on their experience and knowledge about issues of Milonga and Naminjiwa community technical colleges (Adu, 2014).

This was a qualitative research study, as such the sampling method used was non-probability sampling. In this type of sampling, members of the study population do not have an equal chance of being selected (Whitehead & Whitehead, 2016). Number of participants depended on adequacy of the potential data and attainability of saturation (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015). For a phenomenology, study like this one, it is recommended that sample size should be between 5-25 participants (Creswell, 1998). Purposeful and snowballing sampling procedures were used to identify respondents. Participants for snowballing were recruited based on recommendations from initial participants (Adu, 2014). There are several methods for data collection procedure employed in qualitative research such as questionnaires, surveys, interviews, focus group discussions and observations (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008; Kabir, 2018). For this study data collection method adopted was in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposely identified participants and using semi-structured interview guides as data collection instrument.

Data was then thematically analyzed (Flick, 2009; Saldana, 2013). This was with reflection to the theoretical framework, which provided the lenses through which data was viewed in the analysis process. In addition, data was also interpreted with reference to the main research question and research objectives.

RESULTS

This study established factors that lead to female student dropout at Milonga and Naminjiwa community technical colleges as follows: under economic factors, cost of training and poverty were revealed as major contributor to dropout. Under household factors, domestic chores and parents' characteristics were the most mentioned contributors. Under cultural factors, early pregnancies and marriages were the leading causes. Under training environment, the issue of accommodation, presence of few female instructors, feminine hygienic facilities and distance travelled to the college were established as among the main causes of female students' dropout. Finally, the study also unearthed religious beliefs and proximity to tea estates as among the factors that contribute to female students' dropout. Findings of the study confirm Hunt (2008)'s suggestion that a range of interrelated factors interact to influence dropout of students from school as such, they will be relevant to address the problem of female students' dropout at the two technical colleges.

CONCLUSION

Generally, the study found out that female students' dropout at Milonga and Naminjiwa community colleges was attributed to several factors surrounding family background of students and general training environment at the two colleges. Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Departure and Alexander Astin's theory of Involvement provided lenses through which to study dropout phenomenon on students of the two technical colleges. The conceptual framework developed from the two theories provided a roadmap for the study to focus on research objectives and establish factors that contribute to female students' dropout at Milonga and Naminjiwa community technical colleges in Thyolo and Phalombe respectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on findings of this study, recommendations were made as follows: On the issue of cost of training and poverty, the government should have a national policy to provide bursaries and loans to needy students. With regard to household factors, the government should construct hostels at the two colleges to address the issue of dropout due to domestic chores and walking long distance. Pertaining to effect of cultural factors, Ministry of Labour Skills and Innovation (MLSI) should organize awareness campaigns to sensitize the public on the importance of TVET to both males and females for their economic development. Regarding few female instructors, it is recommended that MLSI should recruit more female instructors to act as role models.

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