

Occupational segregation in Namibia: Women's experience doing "men's" work in the
construction and manufacturing industries

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Abstract

Vocational education and training (VET) is one of the key interventions targeting youth unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Previous research on occupational sex segregation (OSS) has suggested that men and women exhibit different education attainment and confront discrete work opportunities due to social expectations governing women's roles within the home and outside of it. This qualitative study used in-depth interviews with twelve women working in the male-dominated technical trades for which they were formally trained to interrogate the barriers to Namibian women's participation in non-traditional occupations. Specific foci of inquiry were: the influence of gender norms on enrollment decisions and obtaining jobs; and the extent to which motherhood inhibited one's labor market mobility. The data confirms that norms governing ideas of what is masculine and feminine contribute to the channeling of women into professions perceived broadly to be socially appropriate for them in Namibia. Childbearing and rearing were not significant barriers to study participants' mobility because extended family members afforded the women the flexibility to work by helping care for their children. A number of the interviewees expressed a preference for working with men, challenging the oft-cited development narrative that women ally themselves with other women and tend to view themselves in opposition to men. By providing context-specific information on some of the factors contributing to occupational segregation in Namibia, this study adds to the existing development and feminist literature related to the interplay between the productive and reproductive spheres of women's lives as well as their options and choices concerning each.

Public abstract

Vocational education and training (VET) is one of the key interventions targeting youth unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Its success in promoting better livelihoods and a more robust economy depends on both the availability and affordability of quality curricula and programs and the pathways leading to the labor market thereafter. Previous research on occupational sex segregation (OSS) has suggested that men and women exhibit different education attainment and confront discrete work opportunities due to social expectations governing women's roles within the home and outside of it. Around the world women continue to be economically disadvantaged and limited in their agency to choose decent work, specifically in male-dominated domains, such as construction and certain manufacturing jobs. This study sought to understand to what extent this was true for women who were trained and working in construction and manufacturing in Namibia. My findings confirm that norms governing ideas of what is masculine and feminine contribute to the channeling of men and women into different occupations. Discriminatory hiring practices and workplace treatment also shed further light on why Namibian women may be underrepresented in these domains. Childbearing and rearing did not excessively burden this study's participants as family members afforded many of those I interviewed the flexibility to work by helping care for their children. A number of the interviewees expressed a preference for working with men, challenging the oft-cited development narrative that women ally themselves with other women and tend to view themselves in opposition to men. By providing context-specific information on some of the factors contributing to occupational segregation in Namibia, this study adds to the existing development and feminist literature related to the interplay between the productive and reproductive spheres of women's lives as well as their options and choices concerning each.

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Key Terms and Abbreviations

GAD-Gender and Development

GDP-Gross Domestic Product

IGO-International Governmental Organization

ILO-International Labor Organization

LFPR-Labor Force Participation Rate

NTA-Namibia Training Authority

OSS-Occupational sex segregation

SSA-Sub-Saharan Africa

SWAPO-Southwest Africa People's Organization

VET-Vocational Education and Training

WB-World Bank

WID-Women in Development

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The youth bulge in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), coupled with some of the highest rates of unemployment in the world, have many leaders and policy makers in the region as well as international governmental organization (IGO) officials scrambling to connect people with jobs and decent work. One intervention receiving renewed attention and funding is vocational education and training (VET). Throughout the 1980s, for example, VET was a preferential focus for the World Bank (WB), with 40% of its education loans in SSA targeting such efforts (UNESCO, 2008). While the 1990s saw funding shift away from VET and towards basic education for all, the WB acknowledged in 2011 that for many students, "more schooling [had] not resulted in more knowledge and skills" and it placed skills training back on the table as a primary focus for education development (King, 2011: 17).

VET's promise, in theory, is that equipping citizens with vocational skills, a form of human capital, will increase their employability in the labor market and lead to higher living standards, lower unemployment levels, and a more stable, competitive local (and ultimately) national economy. The reality is more complex and dependent on macro-economic structures and policies, social expectations, family formation and domestic obligations. Women around the world face particular barriers in acquiring the necessary training to qualify for decent non-domestic work. Gendered norms governing the type of work society deems appropriate, ongoing responsibility for unpaid reproductive work and restrictive policies all channel women away from specific trades' training and suitable employment thereafter.

As one of the key drivers of women's disadvantage in the world of work and society, occupational sex segregation (OSS) is a crucial concern for development practitioners and gender equality advocates. Arising from cultural values and ideas about what constitutes

“masculine” and “feminine” work, OSS influences the education pathways boys and girls choose and contributes to persistent wage gaps and the concentration of many women in low-paying sectors and vulnerable employment arrangements. Constraints on female’s work choices impede economic development, reduce the potential for and effectiveness of human development and prevent vocational training from being as successful an intervention to address unemployment as it could be.

This inquiry sought to understand better the pathways for women to train and obtain formal wage labor in the male-dominated construction and manufacturing fields in Namibia. As a young country with high rates of income inequality and youth unemployment, Namibia is investing considerable national resources in expanding VET offerings and forging stronger connections between training and relevant industries in the public and private sector. While the Namibian government is promoting female enrollment in non-traditional trades, its policies are not necessarily accounting for the barriers to women’s participation in their chosen fields once they graduate.

Currently, there is a relative dearth of literature on gender in VET; what little does exist focuses on Western, industrial or post-industrial countries and therefore does not speak to the global South context or SSA in particular. Additionally, OSS literature tends to analyze statistical data aggregated at the national level, thereby obscuring important nuance in specific employment sectors. This study reports the life stories of Namibian women who are making their way in the world of construction and manufacturing, two of the industries in which females are most underrepresented in Namibia and indeed, worldwide.

While SSA has the smallest labor force participation gap between men and women in the world, possibly a function of persistent poverty and women’s inability to afford not working, it is

not clear how the factors driving women to work in SSA interact with existing gender norms to expand or contract women's *choices* of employment. Namibia is a newly independent, sparsely populated country with a post-apartheid legacy and economic growth concentrated in certain industries and geographic locations. Much of the population resides in rural areas and still depends on subsistence agriculture for survival. The tribe from which the interview sample was drawn traditionally embraces extended family units which allow, for example, women working in town to send their children to be raised by a family member in the family's traditional village, potentially freeing them from various burdens imposed by child rearing. These contextual specificities framed this investigation into how Namibia's political economy and cultural practices influence the way existing theories of OSS apply or do not. This inquiry's analytical findings have implications for future VET policy and development program efforts in Namibia and perhaps, by implication, beyond.

Background on Namibia

Located in southern Africa, Namibia is one of the newest countries in the world. Formerly a German colony, the nation came under the rule of South Africa following Germany's defeat in World War I. After gaining independence in 1990, Namibia transitioned from the white-minority apartheid rule of its then colonizers to a multi-party democracy and has since remained a peaceful and stable country. While there are a number of major political parties, the ruling party, South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), continues to dominate the political arena: all three of the country's presidents to date have been affiliated with the party and in 2014 the SWAPO candidate, Dr. Hage Geingob, was elected president with a resounding 87% of the vote (BBC 2014).

With just shy of two-and-a-half million people, Namibia has a relatively small population, but large land area—Mongolia is the only country in the world with a lower population density. Home to the “Skeleton Coast,” the nickname for its deadly Atlantic shoreline, and the oldest desert in the world, the Namib, the country’s arid climate makes large swaths of its landscape uninhabitable and untenable for agriculture. In the past five years the country has experienced stable economic growth, with its gross domestic product (GDP) rising at an annual rate of 5.6%. This rise has largely concentrated in extractive industries, namely mining and fishing. The Skeleton Coast, for example, is host to one of the largest marine diamond deposits in the world and Namibia is one of the top global producers of uranium. The tourism industry is another key industry, comprising almost 15% of the nation’s GDP in 2015 (Turner 2015). While this economic growth, in tandem with political stability, has led the WB to classify Namibia as an upper middle-income country, this designation belies the fact that the nation still has the seventh highest level of income inequality in the world (CIA 2016).

Unemployment constitutes a major economic challenge facing Namibia. In 2014, the jobless rates for men and women were 24.3% and 31.7% respectively; 39.2% of all youth were unemployed (Namibia Statistics Agency 2015). Part of the challenge is that most formal, productive economic activity occurs in urban areas while more than half of the population (52.56%) lives in rural areas. Taking steps to enhance and formalize the informal sector, which produces three quarters of Namibia’s economic activity, is one of the International Labor Organization (ILO)’s key recommendations for the country. While such steps are undoubtedly important and likely would assist in the nation’s continued development, this study focused on the formal sector in order to explore the effectiveness of Namibia’s current VET programs and the constraints and opportunities facing women in traditionally male-dominated occupations.

Vocational Training and Women in Construction

Namibian strategic planning documents highlight VET (e.g., Vision 2030, National Development Plan 4, President Geingob's Harambee Prosperity Plan) as a key component for achieving the goal of becoming an industrialized knowledge-based economy. The VET Act of 2008 charged the Namibian Training Authority (NTA) with oversight for all planning and implementation of the nation's vocational training programs. Tasked by law to create and maintain an efficient and sustainable VET system that is well-aligned with the current and future skill needs of the labor market, the NTA has assigned high priority to expansion of training opportunities and improving their accessibility. While NTA publications discuss achieving gender parity in enrollment across the trades, less attention is paid to how gender influences the labor market outcomes of VET graduates in Namibia.

Construction and manufacturing are two of the occupational sectors for which this concern is an important consideration. In Namibia, only 1.3% of working females are active in those sectors versus 14.2% of the male working population. Yet, these domains include a number of the trades offered by the nation's vocational training centers, including bricklaying and plastering, joinery and cabinet making (i.e. carpentry), plumbing and welding and metal fabrication. This study, through qualitative, in-depth interviews with twelve women who obtained a formal skills qualification and were working in the industries for which they trained, analyzed the pathways through which Namibian women were able to cross over to traditionally male dominated employ and the benefits they obtained from doing so.

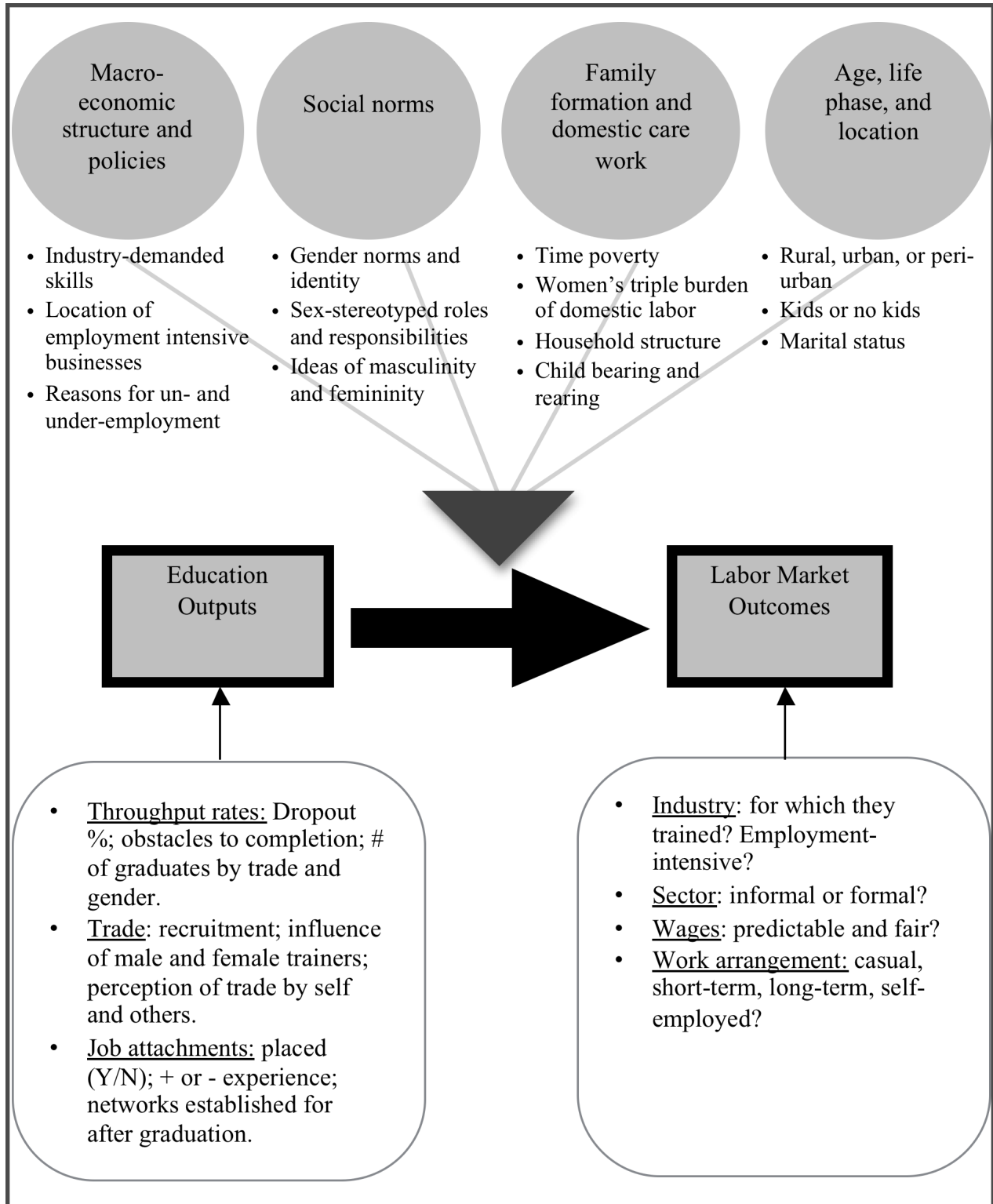
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Some analysts have criticized vocational education and training (VET) in the past as costly and not always able to deliver the outcomes policy makers hope, including reduced unemployment and increased economic development (Campbell 2016). There are a number of reasons why the successful acquisition of knowledge and skills might not result in positive outcomes in the labor market. Figure A depicts some of the factors mediating education outputs, labor market outcomes and the pathway between these. The important point is that one's mobility in the world of work is not a given, and the choices available to individuals can be constrained for different reasons and at different times.

Occupational sex segregation is one such phenomenon affecting labor force participation rates (LFPR) and behaviors of men and women. Comprised of a horizontal dimension (i.e., the concentration of men and women in different employment sectors) and vertical component (commonly known as the "glass ceiling," social mores that inhibit women's upward occupational mobility), OSS is present in varying degrees in countries around the world. In a given society there will be female, male and mixed occupations based on the percentage of men and women participating in each. The extent of horizontal segregation is based on concentration rates within a given occupation and how closely they mirror the nation's overall LFPR for men and women (Browne 2006). Women around the world are overrepresented in the service industry, communal professions (e.g., public administration, education and health) and businesses that align with traditional gender role expectations, such as beauty salons, catering and clothing production (World Bank 2012). Men dominate industries such as agriculture, mining, transport and communications. Despite differences in culture and levels of economic development, the horizontal segregation of men and women into specific occupations has remained remarkably

Figure A: School to work pathways



Source: Author

stable over time (Eberhard et al 2015), regardless of a nation's gender equality index. Browne (2006) has cautioned against conflating observation with evaluation and has suggested that sectoral inequalities do not necessarily indicate injustice. They do, however, warrant investigation, especially since OSS is believed by many analysts to be responsible for channeling women into jobs with poor pay, long hours and work environments that can be unhealthy and unsafe (ILO 2010; Branch 2011).

Explaining the existence and persistence of OSS

Supply-side theories of OSS focus on the individual traits, behaviors and choices that contribute to differential employment outcomes for men and women. Some scholars argue that there are distinctions between males and females that account for their participation in different sectors, claiming, for example, that men are naturally more dominant than women (Goldberg 1979); male and female brains are hardwired differently, with the former geared towards building systems and the latter more toward empathy (Baron-Cohen 2003); and that men and women possess different moral orientations that guide their choices (Gilligan 1982). The difference between men and women traditionally employed to explain women's absence in construction is their relative physical strength. Supply-side labor theorists also tend to view OSS as the product of divergent aptitudes, interests and human capital. Chang, for example, has argued that, "individuals make rational decisions to invest in their human capital based on their expectations of future payoffs to their investment" (2004, 117). This argument explains women's absence in the construction sector by citing their lack of technical skills, as compared to males.

In contrast to supply-side OSS theories that focus on personal traits and decisions, demand-side theories highlight the social norms and structural barriers affecting personal

mobility within labor markets (Jacobs 1989; Kaufman 2010). Analysts who subscribe to this view have argued that,

well-documented patterns of wage discrimination or occupational segregation by gender, race and ethnicity [should not be] viewed as the result of an individual freely choosing jobs or occupations, but as a product of social norms and unequal power dynamics across the intersection of gender, race and ethnicity (Budd 2011, 136).

This line of thought suggests that men and women are homogenized based on social constructs of what is male and female, and these norms influence an individual's vocational choices more than his or her characteristics and talents (Bem and Bem 1973). Thus, for a woman to cross-over into a male-dominated occupation and find work, she must overcome obstacles at various points in the school to work pathway. Some of those impediments are depicted in Figure B.

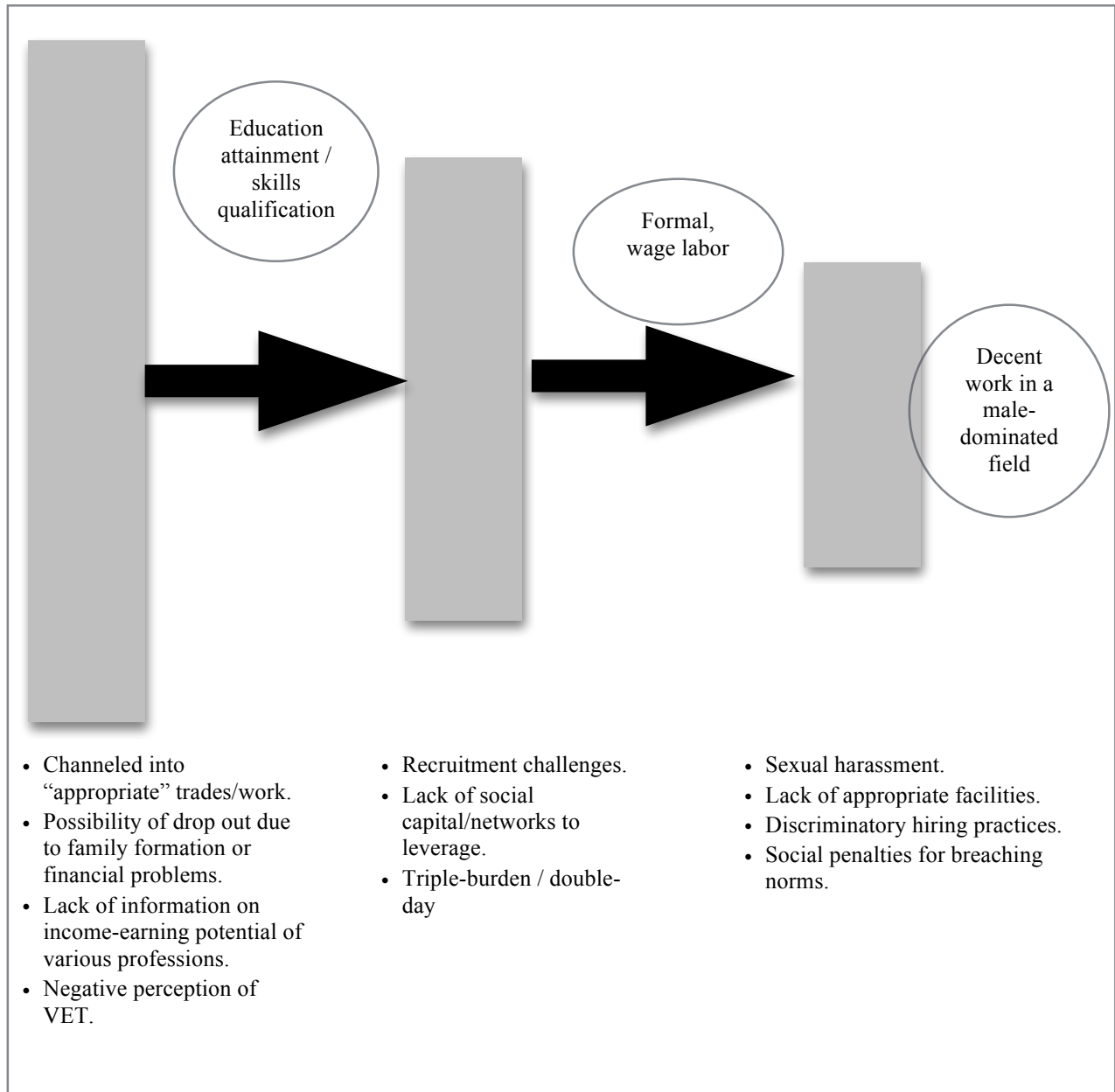
Barriers to education and skills attainment

Boys and girls are socialized from a young age to view certain occupations as more gender appropriate than others. One study found that children as young as two-and-a-half years old were able to identify culturally traditional male and female vocations (Gettys and Cann 1981). Plainly, the limitation of girls' vocational career aspirations begins early in their lives:

Culturally based sex-role socialization operates from early childhood to prepare young girls for the roles of wife and mother and to encourage in them the development of personality characteristics and behavioral competencies that will facilitate the performance of those roles. Young girls are usually not socialized to prepare for career pursuits or to develop the characteristics and competencies necessary to such pursuits (Walsh & Osipow 1983, 96).

A society's traditional expectations for the sexes influence what people view as male-and female-jobs: women tend to teach to nurture the country's youth, they nurse to heal its sick, they provide hospitality in the service industry and they sometimes manufacture certain

Figure B: Structural constraints on women’s ability to “cross over”



Source: Author

goods because of their purported dexterity. Indeed, “globally women represent more than fifty per cent of employment in communal services (public administration, education, health, and other social services) and among professionals (including teachers and nurses), clerical workers,

and sales and service employees” (World Bank 2012, 207). Women are most dominant in the hospitality, education and retail employment sectors in Namibia (Namibia Statistics Agency 2014). “Men’s work” is defined in opposition to what is considered feminine and maternal (Moccio 2009) and tends to involve heavy lifting, strategic thinking and the assumption of risk (physical or otherwise). Ironically, the norms and values governing what is feminine and masculine are not uniformly applied within societies or across them. As Cohn has noted:

Although women are associated with fine motor skills, few of them are surgeons or diamond-cutters. Although women do most of the food preparation in households, a majority of commercial cooks and bakers are men. It is hard to find a standard cultural pattern that provides a clear differentiation between male and female jobs (1996, 87).

This example suggests that the sexual division of labor is a social construct, with few tasks being uniformly male or female in nations around the world (Jacobs 1989). A study conducted in one hundred and eighty-three societies that compared the allocation of fifty activities to men and women found that most span the spectrum from male-exclusive, through gender-neutral to female-exclusive (Murdock and Provost 1973). Despite empirical evidence contradicting notions of different aptitudes between men and women, gender expectations, though varied across cultures, continue to play a role in governing occupations perceived as men or women’s work.

Women are underrepresented in technical training worldwide (Atchoaerna and Deluc 2002). VET enrollment data in Namibia evidences a channeling of men and women into socially “appropriate” work, with female trainees more commonly found in the clothing production, office administration and hospitality and tourism trades. Conversely, there are more male trainees in auto-mechanics, welding, plumbing and bricklaying. In addition to social norms steering women away from non-traditional trades, women often lack information on the income-earning potential of various occupations (Campos et al 2013). As a group, too, they tend to

incorporate their expected family role(s) into their enrollment decisions (Estévez-Abe 2012). Even if they were aware that a non-traditional trade might result in higher income, the potential social consequences and chance of the disapproval of others might dissuade them from pursuing it (Eberhard et al 2015). Lastly, in addition to being less likely than boys and men to reach the tertiary education level and enroll in VET, girls and women in some countries are more likely to drop out due to family formation, financial pressures or domestic obligations (Cho et al 2013).

Barriers to formal waged labor

Just because a woman receives training and formally qualifies for work in a specific occupation does not guarantee that she will be able to find or hold a position that matches her skills. Women's unpaid care and domestic work remains one of the biggest barriers to their participation in the formal labor market (UN Women 2015). Indeed, the focal point of much of the first wave of feminist criticism was the unequal division of housework between men and women, and the consequences of that reality for women's mobility. According to Beneria:

The significance of this argument is that women's role and location in the development process is conditioned by their role in the reproductive sphere. Therefore, any attempt to answer questions related to women's subordination at any level must deal with this conditioning factor. Women perform the great bulk of reproductive tasks; to the extent that they are also engaged in production outside the household, they are burdened with the "double day," for domestic work requires long hours of work and physically demanding chores. A decisive effort is required not only to put an end to the ideological and statistical underestimation of women's work, but also to deal with all the implications that the double day has for women - be it their inability to engage in full-time, paid production, or their need to accept positions in the labor market (1982, 167).

Women's responsibility for reproductive labor in addition to productive labor is referred to by some as the "double day (as above);" those who include duties related to community care work dub it as the "triple-burden" faced by women. Beneria and Sen have argued that women's labor is instrumentalized at a macro level, as they are pulled from and pushed back into the home as

needed by the labor market (1982). Third World women's problems are therefore not caused by a lack of integration into development, but instead result from the fact that they are intentionally placed at the bottom of a hierarchical production and accumulation process (ibid). Others have also claimed that women's unpaid labor undergirds the process of capital accumulation, and thereby subsidizes capitalism (Dunaway 2008; Clelland 2011). The dual exploitation of women's labor in both the productive and reproductive realms is a fundamental feature of a gendered social structure (Branch 2011) and is the reason counting and valuing unpaid labor has been a policy concern among women and their advocates for decades, as have family-friendly work policies, such as paid maternity leave. This is relevant to OSS because maternity and maternal duties are often cited as justifications for women's exclusion from specific employment sectors. In addition to domestic care work and the opportunity cost of being away from home (Mammen and Paxson 2000), the following structural factors can disadvantage women and limit their labor market participation and mobility: macro-economic policy shifts (Baah-Boateng 2014); economic crisis and persistent poverty (UN Women 2015); and gendered time use patterns, access to productive inputs and the impacts of market and institutional failures (World Development Report 2011).

Barriers to crossing-over into male-dominated occupations

Finally, women face specific barriers to working in vocations traditionally dominated by men. Labor market segmentation theory posits that one's access to various types of work depends on personal characteristics that influence hiring, promotion, treatment and reward processes (Kaufman 2010). In the same vein, queuing theorists have suggested that labor markets evidence opportunity structures that mirror various hierarchies found in society at large. The underlying logic is that employers identify "preferred laborers" for certain posts and they are

the first choice for hire when the number of jobs available expands. These analysts argue that only when there is a shortage of preferred workers will employers begin to make their way down the ladder, or queue, of candidates who are ranked according to desirability (Branch 2011). The more an employer is involved in training (i.e., facilitating internships as a part of school-based curricula or providing on-the-job training), the more likely it is to discriminate based on gender when making hires. This is due to the perceived risk of investing money in female candidates who will potentially “drop out” of work due to pregnancy or child rearing later (Estévez-Abe 2012). One of the social practices that has worked to exclude women from the trades—consciously and subconsciously—in the workplace has been an emphasis in those occupations on rites of passage and kinship networks on the job. This happens with both paternal (father/son) and fraternal (father/friend) relationships. However, managers and employees, or members of the “brotherhood,” are sometimes hesitant to introduce a woman for fear of how her presence might affect the workplace dynamic (Oldenziel 1999).

Once hired, women may continue to face discriminatory treatment within organizations; institutional logic and management is not gender neutral. Scholars have found that “gender-based frames” influence how an employee’s work and competence are assessed. In a male-dominated trade such as bricklaying or welding, this might manifest itself in men’s successes being amplified and their mistakes minimized. The opposite is often true for women:

Women’s bodies, sexuality, pregnancy, child-care, menstruation and ‘emotionality’ are stigmatized, and used as grounds for exclusion (Acker 1990). Thus, this logic is at the basis of the structure leading to the evaluation of women’s work and women’s jobs as lower level, lower paid and less valued work (Kark 2007, 195).

This proclivity is also part of what underlies the sexual harassment of women who work in male domains. Some women choose to tolerate such boorish behavior in the hope of establishing rapport, assimilating into the work culture that supports such ugliness or reaping positive

consequences for not becoming adversarial (Baker 1996; Moccio 2009). Those that elect to defy harassment or to challenge inappropriate advances often take the perceived risk of resistance into account and are more likely to reject untoward overtures from a peer or manager several steps removed than they would those emanating from a direct supervisor (Baker 1996).

Traditional gender norms and the association of technical work with masculinity provide the foundation for women's exclusion from fields such as construction. The male-breadwinner mentality present in patriarchal societies assumes that men should be the main providers for their households. The husbands of women working in physically intensive occupations may thus be stigmatized for failing to provide (Mammen and Paxson 2000). This response suggests women will not want to undertake jobs such as building construction, unless forced to do so. It overlooks the reality that,

about one-third of households are headed by women who often have to support themselves and their children. Single women workers have often been found to contribute more than their brothers to the income of their family. The continuation of the myth that men are able to be the sole breadwinners perpetuates the secondary status of women in the labour market (Momsen 1991, 75)

This mindset encourages men's formal sector participation and upholds such jobs as not only the most appropriate and desirable types of work, but also part of their masculine identity (Agadjanian 2002). Gender politics also underpin how danger and occupational hazards are addressed in the workplace. Moccio has detailed the way male electrical workers in New York City embraced risk as part of their masculine self-image and macho brotherhood ethos rather than confronting their employers and demanding safer conditions (2009). The men required women to assimilate into that masculine culture on the job, but also made it still more difficult by pranking and joking with them to weed out the "weak links" as well (ibid).

These examples show that how work is conceptualized and related to gender identity matters. As Budd has observed:

Work is frequently equated to paid employment. Unpaid household work is relegated to a separate sphere of private reproduction distinct from the public realm of economic production. A host of conceptual dualities emerge from this approach to thinking about work, including production/reproduction, public/private, commodity/non-commodity, production/consumption, paid/unpaid, labor/leisure, labor/love, market/domestic, and work/family. These dualities are highly gendered, and women's social roles are traditionally associated with the second half (2011, 141).

If work is understood to compose part of an individual's identity and also to uphold societal norms concerning the sexual division of labor, it makes sense that having someone from the opposite sex cross over into "your" work might affect the way you think and feel about yourself (Baah-Boateng 2014). Oldenziel (1999) has recounted the way that technology became a natural domain for men in the United States and an exotic one for women. She has chronicled the linguistic and material struggle to classify technology as masculine and detailed the cultural construction that took place to entrench that conceptualization in the national mindset. Like Moccio (2009), she has also argued that men in technical work tend to mystify their activities and view any de-skilling of tasks within the field as an affront to their pride and identity. Work, then, is not gender-neutral, and men and men and women who cross into non-traditional domains must negotiate their identities within it, and often do so against substantial obstacles.

Gaps in Scholarship

OSS, although a topic recognized by many IGOs as an important factor in gender and economic inequality, is understudied in sub-Saharan contexts. While much is known about how women are channeled into "pink-collar ghettos," a phrase used to describe female-dominated occupations, less is known about women who have crossed-over into male-dominated trades in SSA. Additionally, the information that does exist tends to evaluate the phenomenon at a statistically aggregated level that 1) fails to account for occupational differences within employment sectors; and 2) obscures the individual experiences, motivations and realities of

people situated in different macro-economic and cultural contexts. This study aimed to add qualitative data to the body of OSS literature concerning SSA nations, paying particular attention to the pathways and motivations of women who have “crossed over” to labor in nontraditional occupations and what benefits (economic AND social/psychological), they have attained by doing so. The potential penalties that women participating in male-dominated domains might incur were a focal point as well.

This inquiry sought to analyze OSS in Namibia through a gender and global South-sensitive lens, questioning the extent to which existing Western feminist research applies to SSA. There are many ways in which developing countries differ from the West. Poorer nations tend to evidence a smaller gap between male and female LFPRs due to the necessity to work to survive. The majority of women in SSA are working, for example, though this does not necessarily mean they have a stable income and improved livelihood situations:

In [SSA], over 60 per cent of all working women remain in agriculture, oft unpaid or poorly remunerated...In some countries in [SSA], time-related underemployment for women is as high as 40 or 50 per cent in paid employment and they still perform the vast majority of unpaid household and care work (ILO 2016)

Despite recent urbanization, most residents of SSA are concentrated in rural areas, which tend to suffer educational disadvantages as a result of their dispersed and displaced populations, limited basic infrastructure, endemic malnutrition and high levels of child labor (Atchoarena and Delluc 2002, 288). Due to the substantial geographic distribution of viable employment options, many SSA countries are host to high populations of men migrating to obtain work, which results in women being left behind to head households in their absence. Many cultures in SSA, including in Namibia, do not function as the nuclear household units that are commonly found in the West. Rather, they embrace extended-family mutual-care relationships that are not geographically confined or limited to immediate relatives. Poverty in SSA therefore has

distributional, gendered and generational dimensions not evidenced in the West. Chant, for example, found that in The Gambia, despite the expectation that elderly women might be the most vulnerable members of a population she studied there, based on their lack of capabilities, employment and pension entitlements, “the culture of children supporting parents is so entrenched among The Gambia’s predominantly Muslim population that elderly women are rather better off than women in their middle years and even young women” (2007, 189).

In addition to differing geographies and political economies, countries in SSA evidence distinct gender norms and relationships from those that prevail in the West. Critical development theory is replete with voices from the global South critiquing misguided or inappropriate theories that have arisen from western feminism. One of that feminist scholarship’s abiding assumptions or myths is that women evidence solidarity and are constantly pursuing individual autonomy. Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead have used the idea of myths to delineate the notions that legitimate the need for development, whether those are factual or not (2008). The myth of female solidarity, for example, might be useful for various activist agendas, but also misrepresents the plurality of identities, situations, aspirations and relationships between women and with men found in other nations throughout the world. Another way in which third world women are essentialized and misrepresented by western feminists is their frequent portrayal as both heroine and victim:

heroic in their capacities for struggle, in the steadfastness with which they carry the burdens of gender disadvantage and in their exercise of autonomy; victims as those with curtailed choices, a triple work burden and on the receiving end of male oppression and violence (Cornwall et al. 2008, 2).

The natural outcome of this representation problem is that, by default, men are characterized in negative terms or deprived of their gender and its nuances altogether. Such “stereotypes present women as resourceful and caring mothers and men as relatively autonomous individualists,

putting their own desires for drink and cigarettes before the family's needs" (White 1997, 16).

Not only are these characterizations untrue, they are also unfair. They can even be dangerous when they influence or shape policy makers' program design decisions. The first wave feminist penchant for bashing 'patriarchy' and highlighting all the ways that men oppress women failed to account for the many ways in which women perpetuate their own inequality by accepting and positing binary gender notions that are often untrue. This study, in both design and data analysis, sought to avoid presenting Namibian realities through such inappropriate Western lenses.

Chapter 3 Research Design and Methods

As a Peace Corps volunteer, one is constantly making comparisons between the culture of their country of origin and that in which they are now living and working. Early on in my placement at a vocational training school in the town of Ongwediva, located in northern Namibia, I was struck by the number of female trainees enrolled in non-traditional trades such as welding, plumbing, bricklaying and carpentry. It was difficult for me to think of women I knew in the United States who worked in these trades and I immediately wanted to explore the phenomenon more. The first thought that came to my mind was that perhaps I suffered from a lack of exposure to conditions in my own country, that geography, race and class had intersected to define my “normal” as white, suburban and middle-class. I first concluded that I was just out of touch with female artisans and tradespeople. The second thought I had, however, was to wonder if certain circumstances in Namibia fostered higher participation by women in these trades, and that became the vein of inquiry that resulted in this research.

Sample

When investigating OSS, one can study two groups of people—those who are working in sectors seen as traditional and socially appropriate for their populations and those who have “crossed over” into non-traditional domains. Further, one can focus on men, women or both. While examining both males and females working in traditional and non-traditional sectors would provide the most robust view of OSS in Namibia, time and funding did not allow me to pursue such a broad scope. I chose instead to interview women who had obtained a formal vocational education and training (VET) qualification in a male-dominated construction or manufacturing trade and who were currently working in the industry for which they were trained. While I originally planned, due again to time and funding constraints, to identify participants

from the tri-town geographic area of Ongwediva-Oshakati-Ondangwa in which I lived, a Peace Corps conference in the capital city of Windhoek provided the opportunity to interview some women who met my sampling criteria and lived there. All of this study's participants resided in one of these two locations (Figure C).

Figure C: Map of Namibia with interview locations



Source: University of Texas Libraries

I selected the following four trades/vocations for examination due to low female participation rates in these labor markets globally and in Namibia specifically: bricklaying and plastering; plumbing and pipefitting; joinery and cabinet making; and welding and metal

fabrication. The Namibia Statistics Agency has identified the first two occupations as “construction” and the latter two as “manufacturing” jobs in its national labor reports. Namibia’s construction industry evidences extreme gender disparity. In 2014, for example, only 1.3% of women participated in the sector versus 14.2% of the nation’s male population. In manufacturing, the difference is less notable, with 2.6% and 5.3% participation in this domain for female and male workforce populations, respectively. However, it is important to stress that “manufacturing” in Namibia encompasses activities that are considered predominately female in the nation’s culture (e.g., clothing production) and primarily male (e.g., metal and wood product manufacturing). I selected 3 women from each trade listed above for a total of 12 as my sample. I chose only women between the ages of 15-34 for participation in order to capture each in the formative stages of their working careers. All except one interviewee met my original sample requirement of possessing a formal VET qualification. In order to talk with the one person who did not, I filed an amendment with Virginia Tech’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). I did so on the view that this individual could offer important insight into the effects of informal training and work opportunities for women interested in nontraditional occupations in my study region.

Recruitment

To identify women who fit the sample requirements, I started by asking my colleagues (who were VET trainers) for the contact information of people they knew in the tri-town area in which the school where I volunteered was located who might meet my eligibility criteria. As the main vocational institution in the region, my school’s administrators, faculty and staff members were well connected with various employers related to the trades for which our school offered training. Students enrolled at the school also provided the names and contact details of individuals with whom they worked as part of the job attachment portion of their second year of

training. In Namibia, a job attachment, like an internship, is the portion of one's vocational training, during which an individual works in the industry for which they are being trained to obtain experience before their final year of school-based training. On at least two occasions, I drove around to various construction sites with my colleague in efforts to locate possible study participants. While I was ultimately unable to recruit anyone in this way, those visits nonetheless provided me an opportunity to observe workplace dynamics and gather information to augment data collected in my interviews.

There were several Namibia-specific factors that made recruitment interesting and perhaps easier than it might have been elsewhere. First, the population of the country is small. Since female construction workers are atypical, when I asked people if they knew one they often referred me to the same person. This was true for one of my interviewees who owns her own business in a neighborhood of Oshakati called Uupindi. Three separate people, when I asked if they knew a female carpenter, told me to talk to the woman who "has her own shop by the taxi rank at Uupindi." Secondly, no matter where a person might be living and working, say the capital city of Windhoek, most still have a village home in their native tribal homeland. This meant that I was easily able to identify potential interviewees in Windhoek while living in the northern Wambo homeland and vice-versa when I traveled to Windhoek. Finally, and perhaps also due to the small population, Namibians tend to be very open and happy to help strangers. This allowed me randomly to call people or stop to talk to someone in the street without embarrassment or being concerned that I was overstepping my bounds. Figure D provides the demographic information for all twelve participants.

Five of the interviews took place in Windhoek and the remaining seven occurred in and around Ondangwa-Ongwediva-Oshakati. All but two of the women with whom I spoke had

children. Two of the twelve study participants were married. The majority of the interviewees were between the ages of twenty-six and thirty, with one falling below twenty-five years of age

Figure D: Interview participants' information

Unique identifier	Age range	Marital status	# of children	Tribe	Raised by	Trade/ Occupation	Current employment status
PPF_01	26-30	Single	2	Kwambi	Father	Plumbing and sheetmetal work	Employed in private sector
JCM_01	31-34	Single	4	Vambo	Parents	Carpenter	Employed in private sector
BP_01	31-34	Single	2	Oshiwambo	Aunt	Bricklayer	VET instructor
JCM_02	26-30	Single	1	Vambo	Grand-grand-mother	Joinery & cabinet making	On job attachment
BP_02	26-30	Single	1	Vambo	Dad	Bricklayer	Employed in private sector
WMF_01	26-30	Single	1	Oshiwambo	Mother	Self-employed welder	Self-employed
JCM_03	26-30	Single	1	Vambo	Parents	Carpentry and Joinery	Artisan/Self-employed
PPF_02	26-30	Single	0	Oshiwambo	Father	Plumbing	VET instructor
BP_03	26-30	Single	0	Wambo	Grand-mother	Builder	Employed in private sector
WMF_02	31-34	Married	2	Kwambi	Mom and Dad	Boilermaker / Welder	VET Trainer
PPF_03	31-34	Married	1	Okwanyama	Grand-mother	Artisan / Plumber	Employed in public sector
WMF_03	21-25	Single	1	Oshiwambo	Parents	Welder	Employed in private sector

and the remaining four clustered from ages thirty-one to thirty-four. As seen in Figure D, the women were employed in a variety of jobs related to their trade: two were self-employed, three were VET instructors, five worked in the private sector, one worked in the public sector, and one

was completing a job attachment during her third year of training. I provided each potential participant a description of the research project and its objectives and I did not interview anyone without first obtaining their written consent.

Limitations

Confining the sample to workers earning wages excluded analysis of informal market activities. This was significant because of the size and importance of the informal sector in Namibia. By only interviewing women currently working in the industry in which they trained, I was not able to capture the experiences of individuals who had changed their vocation or industry, or who were unable to find formal work in their chosen field. Likewise, capping the age range at 34 for my interviewees limited the investigation to women's early professional life experiences. Analysis of later phases of life and family formation are likely to reveal rich data related to, among other things, career longevity (i.e., labor market attachment); the relative upward mobility of women in these specific fields; the impact of aging on physical capacity for this type of work; possible drop out and shift in occupation or industry over time; and the availability of various financial and social security measures for women approaching retirement. Lastly, all of my respondents were members of the dominant Wambo tribe. Since Namibia is an ethnically diverse country, cultural differences—real and perceived—are contextually important. Wambos are known in the nation as the tribe that “can make money” and that “works hard.” In initial discussions with co-workers, and as data from some of the interviews confirmed, some Wambo women believe that females from other tribes do not want to do the hard work required for construction trades. Tribal affiliation and the influence of culture emerged as important themes in the interviews, and I sought to be sensitive to the relative homogeneity (by tribe) of the sample to avoid biased interpretations. I personally conducted all interviews in Windhoek or in

northern Namibia, the traditional homeland of the Wambo tribe and widely regarded as the major business hub outside of the capital.

Research questions

As discussed above, scholars have cited a number of reasons for the persistent occupational segregation of men and women: cultural beliefs that channel boys and girls into “socially acceptable” education tracks; social norms regarding masculinity/femininity; a lack of social safety nets and policies promoting women’s participation in specific underrepresented occupations; the influence of child rearing on women’s ability to work; and more. IGO representatives and some scholars have articulated the importance of addressing OSS in SSA, but, as the literature review suggested, there is a lack of culturally-situated analysis of the gendered barriers and opportunities in this region to women’s pursuit of atypical jobs. Since I was already personally invested in possible labor market outcomes for the trainees with whom I was working, I decided to study how existing OSS theory applied (or not) in the Namibian context in which I was living as a Peace Corps volunteer. I was prompted by that fact to craft interview questions that sought to identify the factors that motivate Wambo women to train and work in traditionally male-dominated fields. I was interested in learning what had inspired them to pursue a non-traditional trade and how they had come to identify with their chosen occupation and work environment. In particular, I wanted to explore four basic concerns. First, did they have passion and pride for their work or was their participation driven by economic necessity? Secondly, did they believe they were benefiting (economically and socially) from “crossing-over?” Third, did they view their jobs as rewarding? Finally, how did they believe community members perceived their work?

Namibia is vastly different than the industrial or post-industrial Western nations whose labor market dynamics have been studied extensively. The nation is host to stark contrasts, both geographically and economically. While some citizens have profited from the country's rich natural resources, namely diamonds and uranium, a large percentage of the population still lives in rural areas and practices subsistence agriculture. This is one of the factors contributing to Namibia having the seventh highest rate of income inequality in the world. Lastly, although country ranks fifth highest in SSA for the percentage of women in parliament (and eleventh in the world), many of the tribal cultures still view the lion's share of domestic tasks as female work. Since reproductive care work, such as cooking, cleaning, child rearing and household maintenance, is commonly seen as one of the major barriers to certain kinds of labor market participation, I was curious to learn the extent to which my interviewees perceived that to be true. These are just a few examples of the contextual factors I was interested in examining as they related to, or mediated, occupational segregation in Namibia. The following central and sub-questions guided my interviews and data analysis:

Central questions

1. What motivated this sample of women in Namibia to train in non-traditional, male-dominated construction and manufacturing trades?
2. How would this sample of women in Namibia describe their experiences working in male-dominated fields? Would they suggest that their gender plays a role in their wages, treatment by colleagues and superiors, their ability to perform certain tasks and their capacity to be upwardly mobile?

Sub-questions

1. How, in their view, have Namibian cultural norms regarding masculinity and femininity influenced my study's interviewees' willingness to train and work in male-dominated fields?
2. What role, if any, did reproductive care work for the house and children play in limiting women's agency, according to my interviewees?
3. How would this sample of women describe their identity as workers in male-dominated fields?
4. Would those women I had selected for interview perceive that they had incurred any social penalties for their participation in male-dominated fields?

Underlying each of these broader questions were specific veins of inquiry I anticipated might emerge in the data:

- Motivation for enrollment in one's trade—how did the participant obtain information about her occupation? Did she have a positive role model who influenced her choice? How did the interviewee perceive the trade and work *before* training and was that perception changed by formal preparation? Was her enrollment forced, that is; was she constrained in her occupational choice by secondary school performance or limited openings in specific trades?
- Differential treatment in the workplace—does the participant receive the same wages as her male counterparts? If she does not, how did she perceive that fact? Has she ever experienced sexual harassment as a consequence of her occupational choice? Does she perceive any infrastructure barriers at her workplace, such as the lack of a

- toilet facility designated for women? Does she believe she is respected by her male counterparts?
- Gender norms and identity—does the interviewee view her work as “manly”? Does her participation in this field influence the way she is perceived by others in her view? Is engagement in this field something that she perceives as empowering or is it just a job that pays the bills?
 - Constraints on agency—are there barriers (at the individual or institutional levels) inhibiting interviewees’ ability to make certain choices or advancements in their careers? As they view matters, does reproductive care work impede interviewee involvement in their chosen wage work?
 - Differences in trade—how do experiences differ by occupation? Are any of the specific trades sampled here perceived as more “female-friendly” than others? If so, why?

Data collection

This descriptive study used semi-structured interviews to explore how study participants decided to pursue their occupations and training and work experiences in predominately male environments. I investigated the possible influence of gender norms at all stages of the school to work pathway in the interviews. I conducted all of the conversations in English, the national language of Namibia, and recorded each on my laptop computer. I pilot-tested the questions I used with a Namibian co-worker to ensure that they were clear and would make sense to my interviewees. She expressed no qualms about the questions and a few times she smiled and chuckled at a query, an indication to me that it had resonated with her and her experiences. In retrospect, I realized I should have also tested my study questions with someone who was less

educated and living in a rural setting in order to capture levels of comprehension differences that might vary with education and geography. Since English has been the national language only since independence 25 years ago, some Namibians speak it better than others. The majority of participants with whom I spoke had no trouble interviewing in English, but two women in particular struggled to find their words several times during our conversations. In those situations, I was able to offer the questions in Oshiwambo as I obtained proficiency in the language while living in Namibia. If I was unsure of the exact translation of these passages during transcription, I asked a native-speaker co-worker to help to ensure their accuracy. Here is an excerpt from a transcript depicting an instance in which switching into Oshiwambo helped the participant better understand the question:

Interviewer: Tell me. Discrimination. That word is fine? Okatongotongo.

Interviewee: Oh, to choose whom I want to work with? Do I feel like to have discrimination? Because there are people, 'This one I want to work with, this one I don't.' No! I will just, either white and black. There I don't have. I don't feel.

Interviewer: Aye. Ove ou li nawa. Ohandi pule kombinga yoexperience yoye koilonga. Omu na ovanhu kutya ohava ku tongolo? (Translation: No. You are good. I am asking about your experience at work. Are there people that discriminate against you?)

Interviewee: Oh-hoo, there. Uh uh. Only that maybe some to feel jealous. Sometimes your workmate, he feel jealous but he know more. There you can see it sometimes.

In the first question I asked her about her experiences with discrimination, assuming she would understand the word's use as a noun. After recognizing that she did not interpret the question in the way I intended, I switched to Oshiwambo and employed the concept of discrimination as a verb, an action done against someone, and she was then able to understand the query.

Additionally, the way I phrased questions and the vocabulary I employed during the course of the 12 interviews evolved somewhat, based on what resonated with participants and

what did not. For example, I quickly learned to ask about experiences with harassment by using the Oshiwambo word for it exclusively —okatongotongo (seen above). Being a resident of the country helped me facilitate my interviews because I was conversant in what some refer to as “Namlish,” or the various alterations to words and phrases people use to communicate. One example of this is that many Wambos use past tense to convey an activity that is actually present habitual. My knowledge of these language nuances allowed me to understand better what was being said and also to ask more salient questions.

I conducted this study’s interviews between May 17 and June 30, 2016. Each conversation lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, with the average around 45 minutes in length. Two of the interviews took place at my house, four at the Peace Corps office in Windhoek, and the remainder at either the participant’s workplace or home. In each case, we identified a quiet place free of distractions to conduct the interview that would also ensure privacy. Although I was unable to provide monetary compensation to the participants, I made an effort to provide a meal or snacks during each interview. While it may sound trivial, shared food and cool drink (i.e., soda) is a fixture of socializing in Namibia.

I assigned all interviewees a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality and stored identifying information electronically under password encryption. Only the co-investigators of the study had access to this information. In addition to in-depth interviews, I kept detailed field notes to document my observations, connections among germane ideas and concepts and questions throughout the research process. These largely consisted of observations about the intersection of culture and work that I observed as I traveled. Once, when riding to my friend's village, I noticed that all the people working on a road under construction were women. When I told my friend about this, she said that the women were exclusively turning rocks on the surface

so they lay flat for the next phase of construction. A few months later, I spoke to a woman who was working with a team to pave parking spots at my school. Her only job was to sweep the site and she asked me to give her work washing and cleaning. One day I came home to another woman cutting and bundling grass from my yard to sell for a few dollars. These observations gave me insight into the menial labor some Namibian women sometimes undertake to make money and raised questions of how a skills qualification might expand their options for income generation. Many of my reflections regarded connections between things shared in my interviews and observations I made in daily life. One female plumbing instructor spoke with me about the concerted effort she made to let her women trainees do practical work on their own because of the tendency for their male peers to take the jobs for themselves otherwise. I kept this in mind when several of my third-year welding students received a tender (the term used in Namibia for contract) to install carports at the school and the lone female student was perpetually standing around. I knew she could do the work, but when I asked, she said the men involved with the project could do it faster. My field notes assisted me in connecting my ideas, data and daily observations.

Data Analysis

I transcribed my interviews and field notes and coded them using the qualitative research software, Atlas.ti. This program allowed me to group my transcripts according to shared interviewee characteristics (e.g., trade or marital status) and then make comparisons within and across these groups. The first round of coding highlighted themes related to the literature and research I had reviewed for this effort. After coding all the transcripts once, I created a separate Atlas.ti file for my literature review notes and articles. I went back through all the research and coded that in Atlas.ti as well so that my two files were conversant and evolved in tandem. As

my understanding of the literature and data changed, so too did my code groups. I divided themes such as the perception of a trade into an individual's personal perception and comments related to society's view of the same as the interviewees understood these. Throughout, I used the memo feature of Atlas.ti to keep track of my thoughts on both the data analysis and writing portions of this study.

Potential bias

As a Master's International degree candidate, I conducted this inquiry based on my experience and primary project work as a Peace Corps volunteer. In many respects, my position as a long-term resident of my community enhanced my research. I could speak the local language, was aware of and comfortable with cultural norms and had a good working knowledge of Namibia's history and political economy. At all times, however, I was still a white, American woman, participating in a culture foreign from my own, a fact that inevitably bent me towards certain biases. For example, I was never quite able to reconcile my Western idea of shared domestic responsibility with the reality that in Namibia, women do the lion's share of housework. I had men snap their fingers at me to collect their plates or serve them more food, even though the women who had prepared the meal had not yet eaten. I had a student approach me one morning and tell me, "Meme Sarah, yesterday my dad shot my mom and then burned her body," a tragic and personal connection to the passion killing trend that seems to be rampant in the country. I was asked each of the following questions at least once a week: "Give me your number;" and, "Find for me a white lady." Because of some of my experiences, it was easy for me to champion women and bemoan their circumstances, an orientation that had the potential to influence the way I conducted my research and of which I needed to be aware as I undertook my interviews. I sought to be as personally reflexive about these concerns as I could be. Focusing

on my positive relationships with Namibian men helped me to do this generally, in that it made me step back and question my bias every time it came up. Additionally, I believe that my role as a Peace Corps volunteer naturally inclined me towards reflexivity in my research as I was constantly questioning my position and motives in my daily work as a volunteer. Two of the three goals of Peace Corps relate to cultural exchange; I was tasked to promote a better understanding of Namibia on behalf of Americans and a better understanding of the United States on behalf of Namibians. The most minute details of my daily life thus became points of contemplation as I negotiated ideas my family and friends from home had about “Africa” and those my peers and colleagues in Namibia had about my home.

This disposition influenced me to adopt a constructivist view of my role as a researcher. It was evident daily that issues related to OSS played out differently in my Namibian community than they did in my American hometown. As an intimate participant and observer of my Namibian community, I was thus deeply interested in *understanding better* the interplay between culture, circumstance and women’s choices of work in Namibia and not finding “answers” to my questions. OSS inquiry is replete with quantitative analysis of macro-level data, such as labor force participation surveys and unemployment percentages. I wanted to delve into the *stories* of women who were defying tradition and better understand why and how they had reached the position they held in a male-dominated profession.

Chapter Four

Data Analysis and Findings

Occupation selection and training experiences

From a human-capital perspective, lack of skill and training is one of the major reasons cited for low female participation in construction and manufacturing. In large part this is due to the character of the socialization of boys and girls as they are channeled towards culturally expected professions from a young age. I designed this study to capture the experiences of women who *were* working in non-traditional trades in order to understand how and why they crossed-over into male-dominated fields. For this reason, as noted above, a formal skill qualification was a requirement for selection as an interviewee. The first part of the interview guide focused on participants' motivations for enrollment in their chosen trade and how each, as well as others, perceived their choice.

Existing research on female cross-overs in SSA, albeit a body of literature in its infancy, has found that the influence of male role models is an important factor in motivating women's occupation choice. Several respondents in this study were inspired to pursue their trades by men in their families who exposed them to the work at an early age. Whether it was their father, cousin, uncle or brother, these interviewees grew up observing and doing work with male role models. Sometimes this introduction came through helping with the family business on school holidays or after school to earn spending money:

Yeah, when I grew up with my dad you will never ask for, like, a N\$100 and he just give it to you like that. So for you to get that N\$100 you have to do something. So when you come back from school obviously you have to be in the workshop with him, you have to grind with him, you have to weld with him, whatever it was you just have to do it. So I just kind of got used to it (PPF_01).

I grew up in the family of people dealing with construction. It's my brother who was a builder. Then so, it was so interesting because even on the holidays when I was in secondary school I used to help my brother. So I got interested. Then I

decided to go and study for bricklaying at the vocational school just to upgrade my knowledge and skills (BP_01).

One respondent was a carpenter who began helping her uncle with his tenders (i.e., contracts) after seeing and being impressed with photographs he took of his finished products and projects. Together, they were able to finish work faster and she acquired experience and an interest in the trade from working with him. Another woman described the influence her father, an auto-mechanic, had on her vocational interests:

At first when I used to see my father fixing cars, it wasn't like it was a challenge of, 'Let me also do it even if I am a lady,' because at that time I was young. It was just an interest from inside that I want also to fix cars like my father. Because my mom made me, you know, at home you do the lady stuff and I never liked that. It's just something that I never liked. I don't know why but I just never liked it (WMF_03).

Female family members were also instrumental in motivating some interviewees to obtain their skills certificate. Sometimes these individuals encouraged their young relatives based on their own experience in vocational work. One example was the following respondent's older sister who was already trained and working as a welding instructor:

My sister [was] also involved in construction background. She was an instructor here at KAYEC so when I went there she advised me that since I did not do well in my mathematics course, whatever course I wanted to take at the university would require mathematics so I couldn't go through with it. She said, 'No just come to a vocational training centre. You will make something out of it' (PPF_02).

Two other interviewees were encouraged by a sister and aunt respectively to enroll in their trades because those individuals perceived there would be work and jobs available to their sibling and niece upon completion.

In addition to familial influence, experience in secondary school was another major factor in participants' enrollment decisions, particularly how they performed on their grade ten exams, a pivotal year in the Namibian education system that many students fail to pass. Passing grade

ten, or completing Junior Secondary School, is required to go on to grades eleven and twelve, or Senior Secondary School. The major tertiary institutions in Namibia, the University of Namibia (UNAM) and the Namibian University for Science and Technology (NUST), both require successful completion of grade 12 for admission. Students who do not pass grade ten, or continue to grade twelve, but do not have high enough marks to merit admission to UNAM or NUST, must find work. Girls, in particular, face the reality of getting “stuck” in the village if they do not have any plans or options. One of the interviewees explained the cultural norms undergirding this phenomenon:

You know, it's hard for a household not to have girls around. Yeah, but it's most likely that if, let me say if boys fail grade 10 they will go to town to look for some work, and you ladies are at home. So if you don't go to school, nothing else to do, what else can you do? You are going to Windhoek? To do what, nothing? Your parents won't allow you. So there are always ladies at home (WMF_02).

Two of the interviewees claimed they went to vocational school for this reason; that is, to “get out of the village.” Two others explicitly stated they wanted to go to university, but did not earn high enough grades to do so. One bricklayer said the cost of higher education was prohibitive so she went to a vocational school instead, which was less expensive. Implicit in many of these responses was the idea that if their marks were high enough or the money was available, they would attend UNAM or NUST. VET certainly suffers from an image problem in Namibia: it is viewed by many as a less-reputable option to university study and the domain of school dropouts. This seems to be partially rooted in a lack of information about the potential benefits trade work can confer. As seen later in this chapter, some of the same people who criticized interviewees for their choice of vocation came to admire them over time because of their ability to build and repair things.

The decision to enroll in vocational school necessitated a companion imperative to select a trade in which to participate. A third of this study's interviewees said that the occupation in which they completed their training was not their first choice. Sometimes this was because certain trades, such as electrical general, require higher Grade 10 results than others, such as bricklaying, demand. Several study participants stated that by the time they registered, their preferred trade was already full for that year. Consequently, not all interviewees really understood the work they were signing up for or what their chosen vocation entailed.

When asked what their first impressions were concerning their selected field, several interviewees cited their sense of uncertainty about their ability to succeed in both training and industry thereafter. Part of this concern seemed to be rooted in respondents' lack of exposure to other female construction and manufacturing workers:

First, I never thought a lady could build. I had never seen it before! ... I was truly disappointed [about not getting into Office Administration]. Because I was like, 'Will I manage to do [bricklaying]? Will I know?' Because we know it is a hard job (BP_03).

Welding is men's work because it's difficult. Because women, they just like light things. Sitting in the office is number one, hey? (WMF_03).

Negative parts were, 'Will I really get a job?' As a lady in the plumbing trade, will I really get a job? Because mostly you see only men are doing that kind of job. So it was a little bit, yes you are looking forward to finishing your trade but you are afraid when you're done will you be able to get a job. And how will they treat you different because you are a lady? (PP1_01)

Many of the interviewees also had to endure the criticism of family members and friends who were not keen on their trade choice. Although fathers occasionally expressed hesitation, mothers were more often referenced as being nonplussed with their daughters' choices to do work typically undertaken by men:

Ok, Africans, I would say even my own mom, to her she felt like plumbing is just not something that a lady should do. Even when my dad used to weld with me,

she said, 'Why can't she do maybe needle work or some kind of cooking trades or go do office administration or something?' So, it really does affect like when your family is so into just traditional things, they will tell you, 'No, you cannot do this.' Unless you go out against it and say, 'No, I am going to do it' (PPF_01).

Yeah, cause actually my father was like, 'No it's OK you can study up to any level you want.' But then my mother was like, 'Mmm, that's not a good job for you.' At the end of the day they just accept. There's no other option (BP_03)

Um, I'm not sure whether our parents really understand these things. Because you know, previously all they know was about teaching and, it's either you're a teacher or a nurse. Those are the two professions our parents know. For me, I didn't want to become a nurse or a teacher (PPF_02).

Ah my mother. My mother, she only wanted me to do those office things, but sometimes you have to start yourself. Like, what is your talent? Like, for me maybe my talent is to work with my own hands. That's my talent that I studied in myself. Even my mother, she used to sell meat. She used to go and buy, you know, that big cow? Ongobe? That big one, mos. Yeah, she used to go buy that one and sell it to people. So it's like an inheritance from my mother to work with my hands (WMF_01).

When asked why her mother wanted her to work in an office, WMF_01 said it was so that she could get the housing and car allowance that many companies in Namibia offer their employees. In some respects, it seems the mother wanted a different life for her daughter than one of manual labor. Nevertheless, her daughter selected her form of employment and even took pride in inheriting her disposition to do so from her mother.

In extreme situations, a parent might even regard their child differently because of their occupation. One of the welders shared that her interest and participation in welding caused her mother no longer to consider her a daughter:

Um, [my mom] just used to think, because I am the only daughter and we are just two, she used to say that, 'I don't have a lady on my side.' That I'm just a man. Because my brother cannot fix and he is a man. He cannot fix, but I can. I was even the first one to learn how to drive before my brother (WMF_03).

As this example demonstrates, gender norms heavily influence welding's perceived appropriateness as employment for women in Namibian society. These same values prompted

her to note that she learned to drive before her brother—men are seen as “better” drivers in Namibia and the transportation-for-hire industry is almost completely dominated by them.

Interview participants dealt with such judgments rooted in gender binaries and social norms on a regular basis. Often, these perceptions were related to physical strength and cleanliness and reflected the idea that men should do the jobs that required heavy lifting, machinery operation and getting dirty:

Cause you know, men they think like, ‘No, I don’t think she will carry a wheelbarrow full of sand.’ But then they never give you a wheelbarrow and say, ‘Meme, push.’ No, they only think no (BP_03).

So, it’s very, it’s for, let me say men’s work. Because it’s very heavy just to pick a cupboard like built-in cupboard for the bedroom. You have to be strong to pick it (JCM_02).

During training? It’s now the environment. You see, especially when you come from the workshop, ne? You see when you are learning something, you don’t know how to handle tools, you don’t know how to handle those things. You are coming from there, you are tired and sometimes you are what? The whole body is just full of dust and people will start laughing at you and, yeah, those things. And sometime you are ashamed of yourself but you just have to say, no, next time I know it will be fine (BP_01).

Once the women began their training, many of them realized that they were just as well-equipped for the work as their male counterparts. One respondent, when asked if she ever struggled with any practical tasks during training, exuberantly reported that she, “Never ever failed practical. Let me say the truth—if I’m not the first, I’m the second to finish practical tasks when we are given them in the workshop” (JCM_02). Another talked about the friendly competition that arose between her and her male peers during training:

It was fine at school. You know you’re a woman and you are working with men. There was big competition there. Us, we were given a wall that you have to finish in two days. And plaster it and tile it. So we are having our colleagues, the men, so we would be like, ‘Thomas, I’m on your case today. Let’s see if anyone can finish first before me.’ And I’m telling you the truth (laughing) they won’t come.

If I take a trowel and a straight level, they will forget that I'm a woman (laughing) (BP_02).

Requesting help in the workshop was not always a straightforward question. One woman related the following about needing assistance to lift heavy things:

So, there are things you are not maybe able to lift up. Heavier things. And you ask help from a colleague, let's say a man. And he'll say, 'No, gender equality!' And then you feel like, 'Oh my goodness how will I do this?' Because it will not feel good because you know already you can't, it's too heavy for you, but they'll say, 'No, why did you choose the trade.' You see, those things. And it was sometimes not good. Sometimes it's good but sometimes you also get disappointed (BP_01).

In Namibia, "gender equality" is often used as a quip in reference to the national government's formal commitment to fifty-fifty gender representation in its parliament. One example of this is the "zebra ballot" that was instated for the last presidential election; for each male candidate there also had to be a female aspirant. In casual conversation when a man or woman wants to make a gender-based point or joke, for example, "Come help me do the dishes," he or she might say, "Fifty-fifty," or, "gender equality," if met with protest.

Female camaraderie and support emerged as an important theme in enrollment and training processes. All but one of the interview participants for this research were one of a few female trainees in their classes. Two of them referenced times during their schooling that they were not sure whether they could complete their training. Especially when other women dropped out because they felt the work was too hard for them or decided that the dust and tribulation was too much to bear, it was important for those remaining to have the support of their peers. As one woman stated:

It's only that we don't understand. Sometimes you just need someone to give you some advice and encourage you. Especially to me that's what I needed. I was like, I wanted to give up, but then my friend just kept on encouraging me, 'No, let's go' (BP_03).

Having a female trainer also played a role in inspiring individuals to complete their programs. At the vocational training institution at which I worked, two of the three joinery and cabinet making instructors were women. Interestingly, this was also the building and manufacturing trade with the highest percentage of female students enrolled. While I cannot claim causality, the trend I observed begs the question of how female leadership and representation influences enrollment. Three of the interview participants were now VET instructors themselves in their trades and commented on the role they play in encouraging their female trainees:

At first whenever there was something heavy to pick up, [the female students] are stepping behind, 'No it's heavy I can't!' So I always talk to them, 'I was in the industry. When you are in the industry no one is going to help you, you are going to work on your own so you must get used to working on your own.' When you think something is heavy you must ask somebody to help you. Not just go pick it up, but don't say, 'Guys come pick it up, I can't pick it up.' You have to try. Yeah, mostly I try to treat them the same as the guys. 'Cause I tell them, this is the same training I have gone through. So if you want to get there, you better do whatever your colleagues are doing. There will be no special treatment that you are a lady or what. So you are all trainees, welders, and that's it (WMF_02).

Sometimes, you know, I don't treat [female trainees] differently because they will end up taking that advantage. So I just treat them the same, the way I was treated, so that they will get interested and they will get to know how to work. Because I know they are going to work in the environment which is only the men are surrounding them. So I have to treat them the way I was treated so that they will have that feeling and get used to staying among men. ... Then I tell them, 'Hey look at me, I'm just like you. I went through that. But now, I'm instructing you, so you will one day become an instructor so don't worry. As long as you are learning' (BP_01).

In addition to making sure they are prepared for work in the industry, the female trainers also paid attention to the gender dynamics unfolding in their classrooms and workshops. The following interview excerpt suggests how important it is to ensure that female trainees are intentionally given the time and space to learn, otherwise they may be overshadowed by their male peers:

Sometimes you find [the female trainees] are afraid to take the opportunity for themselves because they think that guys can do it better than them. But if you let them work alone you will find the job done. Because when the guys are there, sometimes the guys are, 'Ahh, let me do it. You are very slow. You are very slow.' And they don't get that opportunity to get a hand on. So, most of the time if you group them with guys, guys just do the work. ... And you know sometimes guys are impatient. You give them a project in the workshop and the women are soldering the pipe and they think they are taking too long: 'Let me just do it for you! You are taking ten minutes. It's a one-minute job.' At the end of the day this is practical work, if you don't do it yourself there's never a way where you can just watch someone and think you know it (PPF_02).

While other women were key allies, men also advocated for and supported the women through training. One respondent said that her male trainer was always happy to have female trainees in the class and another said that, even though at her school there were no women trainers, the male educators, "were very supportive. They always told me, 'You can do it.' They always advised, 'You can do it, don't give up'" (WMF_02). A female plumber who is currently working as a VET instructor claimed that as one of only three women in her class, she was treated as special and always given a helping hand and, as a result, felt very comfortable.

Formal wage labor, recruitment and the motherhood penalty

When it comes to finding a stable job and income, females often have less social-capital to leverage in the recruitment process. Part of the interview guide focused on how Namibian women in the vocational trades found work. In this study, the majority of respondents *did* leverage their social capital through family and/or friends. Another important factor in finding work was one's job attachment during training, which often led to a post after its completion. "Job attachments," like American internships, are an important component of vocational training and the school- to-work pathway in Namibia. These opportunities are the portion of training during which an individual is placed at a company in their industry to gain experience and be exposed to the theory and practical components of their trade. Each vocational training institute

employs someone responsible for facilitating job attachments for its students, but it is not uncommon for a trainee not to be placed and to spend the would-be experiential period at home.

One respondent stated that it is much more difficult for female trainees to be placed:

OK, let's just say the whole job attachment, because then you have to spend, for you to complete one year, 6 months you are at school and 6 months you have to go out in the industry. That's job attachment. So like most of the guys, guys will always get the job first. They will always get job attachment first and then the ladies have to struggle. Like Tate Matthew, the one that I ended up working with, it's only because he was my father's best friend and they grew up together, so my father actually referred me to him. ... So it was easy for me at least to get a job from him because my father referred me to him. ... But then, for all the other ladies, you guys will end up going back to school and this person never found job attachment. Just because they are a lady. But, all the guys will always get job attachment (PPF_01).

This negative scenario did not seem to be the case, however, for most respondents. They reported attachments facilitated by their schools at private companies and government ministries alike. Often, the firms and organizations at which they were attached offered them jobs after graduation. Who you know, and your reputation for hard work of quality, were two of the biggest factors facilitating recruitment:

I met one [man] who I was working for his company [during] the time I was doing attachment. And luckily enough, I met him somewhere, that time I was working with the other Tate doing the tables for UNAM. He knew me before that time as a hard worker. Then he told me, 'If you are not happy at the job you are doing now you can come to Benz.' Because I told him, no, I want another job (JCM_01).

[Q: How did you find your job?] A friend, he was a classmate to me, said 'Oh do you want a job?' and I was like 'Yeah,' and he said, 'I can get one for you' and I was like, 'OK!' (BP_03).

OK, there was a friend of mine that was working at a contractor company that was contracted by Rossing uranium mine. So the day I finished he called me and said, 'Now, at our company they are looking for boilermakers. Maybe you can come tomorrow and see if you get space.' So that day I went there and then they interviewed me. So the second day I was told to come start work already (WMF_02).

[Q: So let's come back to work. How did you find, after your two job attachments, how did you get connected with your current company?] With my current company? My uncle works as an architect and then while I was in my final year looking for work he had a project with the National Youth Council ... He talked to the owner of the company and said, 'Now, my relative is in her final year if you can help her with job.' That is how I got in that company (BP_02).

The importance of prior experience with a company or of personal connections was evident. Only three of the respondents reported attaining their jobs by applying to posts in the newspaper. The remaining women were recruited either by the firm with which they had been attached (5) or referred by a friend or family member (3). Because Namibia is such a small country and has high rates of unemployment, it is almost culturally expected that one is always looking out for his or her family and friends to connect them to positions in the first place, or to a better job than their current post. WhatsApp, the preferred application for mobile messaging, is a common forum for exchanging job postings and information. Indeed, some people get angry with friends or family members if they find out that they had information about a posting and did not pass it along.

The motherhood penalty

Western feminist theory has long emphasized the barrier women face in the productive work sphere because they are responsible for so much of the reproductive work that goes into maintaining a household. Third-world women are penalized even more than are Western nation females, these analysts have contended, because of the labor-intensiveness of housework in developing contexts. These responsibilities include fetching water, collecting firewood, cooking and for many around the world, attending to subsistence agriculture fields. Because child birth is assumed to then entail child rearing and concerns with daycare or other arrangements if one is working, third-world women are often perceived by Western scholars to suffer a very significant "motherhood penalty" that inhibits their mobility within their national labor markets.

All but two of the women participating in this study were mothers. Six were mothers of one child, three had two children, and one woman was a mother of four. Four of ten of the mothers were not living in the same place as their children at the time of the interview. The six that did reside in the same location varied with respect to their children being in school, daycare or at home with a nanny. Only three respondents explicitly stated that childcare was a possible barrier to finding and maintaining their jobs. The fact that the remaining mothers did not characterize childcare in similar terms was more indicative of a difference in perspective and mentality than it was of divergent realities. In Namibia, childcare continues to be the purview of women: mothers, relatives, nannies and daycare facility professionals. The following excerpt provides a glimpse into the gamut of problems a mother might encounter working in construction and managing nanny and/or daycare demands at the same time:

Yes, it's not easy. 'Cause I remember when I had the first [baby] I [had] to hire someone to come in. But she was just coming every morning to my place, then when I knock off, she went back to her place. Now the problem was, sometimes you see you wait in the morning but she is not coming. And now you have prepared yourself and you want to go to work, but she's not coming. So, you may call her and the phone is off. Or sometimes you ask if she's coming: 'No, my boyfriend locked me in the house so I'm not coming.' And at work they are calling and sometimes you are the one with the key. And they say, 'No, we are waiting!' And the boss has to drive from home and you say, 'I'm sorry I'm not turning up today,' so the boss has to drive again and say, 'But why are we using you and you are having problems!' So I decided to take the child to the kindergarten. But now the problems come again you see, your kids are sick sometimes and every time they are sick or are not feeling well you have to be absent again. And then you end up getting deducted those days because you did not attend work. They will say, 'No, we have to deduct this month because these days you were not here.' It's not good. And sometimes maybe, when you go at work, you see you take the baby every morning. You know every morning you have to wake up early morning to prepare the meal and the milk, everything. Then you prepare the baby again so we have to move again to take him to the kindergarten so you will again go to the site. And coming back from the site, you see you are very tired, and you have to make sure again you bathe at the site before you come to pick the baby because you see there it's very dusty and the cement, it's not good if you did not bathe after knocking off. The baby will have this allergic reaction. Then you bathe, and you can't be late because if you are

late again to the kindergarten they will call you, ‘Where are you? We want to go home and you are not coming to pick the baby!’ And they will end up saying you have to increase the payment because you are coming late. So every time you are just like, stressed up and you lose weight. Oh, it’s not easy (BP_01).

This narrative depicts the virtual chaos that one may face when coordinating dueling demands in the productive and reproductive spheres. It additionally shows that construction poses its own set of challenges: one must shower *before* going home so as potentially not to affect the health of one’s child. Presumably a woman doing hard physical labor could also be more tired after a day’s work than someone sitting in a desk chair. One of the female plumbers who works for town council said that without a nanny she would be unable to be called in for standby, a shift that all government-employed artisans rotate. When a woman fails to navigate her two worlds seamlessly and work and home intersect or compete with each other, she can sometimes incur penalties. The following interview excerpt depicts a woman who was reported by a man jealous of her promotion because she was late to work:

[Q: And when you were promoted did that cause any problems when you started supervising men?} Yeah, uh when was it? I think it was late last year, was it last of last year I even have to lose my job. Because the other guy was jealous I was promoted. I was having a small problem. I got my baby, and then the nanny couldn’t come to work and I called my boss, no, we got paid late so I had no money to pay the nanny. And then the nanny decided I’m not going to come to work. I called my boss to say this. And then the other guy who is also just a bricklayer without a qualification, and then I find him in the company, decided to go gossip the bosses. Saying no I’m getting a lot of money, but then I’m absent for a while. At the end of the day, when I went to work, I was told I must go sign a warning, whereby I reported myself before. Then after the warning, it’s a hearing, after the hearing, it’s dismissal. So they dismissed me for seven months. Then the lucky thing is the person who complained about me being promoted and being paid a lot of money made a mistake of stealing. And then he was called and also dismissed. When he was dismissed, there was nobody who was able to do the job so the bosses decided to call me (BP_02).

These sorts of situations are well documented in feminist research concerning the gendered dimensions of domestic care duties. What was surprising to me, however, was the

extent to which some women were completely uninhibited by the issue of care for their children. The remaining seven mothers seemed almost casual in their discussion of childcare arrangements. Overwhelmingly it seemed that the lack of stress stemmed from their ability to rely on family members in circumstances in which they were unable to attend to their children themselves. In the Wambo culture in Namibia, the impact of motherhood is mediated heavily by assistance from family members. This assumes various forms, but of particular interest for this study was the phenomenon of having one's children raised by someone else. One way that this happens is by sending children to the family's traditional village of origin to be raised by a relative living on a homestead there.

The historical Wambo homeland is located in northern Namibia, commonly referred to as "The North." As mentioned above, many families have residences in town as well as traditional homes in their rural village. Over time, Wambo homesteads have merged traditional and modern building construction and household elements, but most still embody a very rustic, subsistence lifestyle. If you live in a village you are likely not to have electricity. Traditionally, all meals will be cooked over an open fire, clothes are washed by hand and men, women, boys and girls have culturally prescribed household duties. Diets consist largely of the staple crop of pearl millet, called mahangu, and greens of some type with an occasional serving of meat. Due to the subsistence nature of rural living, it is cheaper to raise children there than in urban settings.

Additionally, some parents view being raised in the village as a formative opportunity in a person's life, an important phase during which youths may acquire skills, manners and an understanding of social traditions. The village, an optional alternative for some, can be a choice borne of necessity for others. One carpenter who is currently living with her four children said

that if she did not have good support from their father she would send them to stay with her mother,

Then give her a small portion of what I'm getting. They can just survive. Because nowadays we are no more paying school fees. Just education for free. If I didn't have the father supporting, they could stay with my mother as long as I'm providing the food for school (JCM_01).

This sort of extended-family care network is markedly different from the Western nuclear family model. Wambos do not distinguish between immediate family (father, mother and siblings) and extended family (aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.) in the same way that Americans do. One refers to an aunt as a mother and a cousin as a brother or sister. The following excerpt shows how children, even if shunned conceptually during an unwanted pregnancy, become (extended) family treasures once they are born:

I'm telling you! There will be a person, fine, she didn't mean to get pregnant and then they will probably do all these funny abortion things, they will just throw the baby in the bins and things. If you are pregnant these people will look at it in a bad way because you were not supposed to be. But as soon as you have the child they want it. It's just the whole pregnancy. But as soon as you have the child that's a different blessing. Everyone wants the child. It's a blessing. ... But, I don't know, people are just like... because my last one I had her in Walvis Bay so my aunt was saying, 'No, my daughter must come, my daughter must come with the others,' so, the way I see it now probably one will end up in Walvis Bay and the other will end up with my brother in Windhoek because he is just like, 'Bring my kids, bring my niece,' yeah. Even my mom doesn't want to give me my own kids! (PPF_01).

As noted, kinship networks serve an important role in socializing children and inculcating traditions, but they also act as a safety net in times of need. As this interviewee observed, having the option to send her child to the north allowed her to continue working where she was and not have to worry constantly about her child's well-being:

I decided to send her because when I got this job, I sometimes knock off late. You know the winters, time of Windhoek when it's cold, I once found her outside at the kindergarten whereby she's not covered. And sometimes she does not eat, so I decided to let her go. For her own safety, for her own health and for me to be working freely, I will let her go (BP_02).

Due to the broad acceptance of such arrangements, two of the four mothers living far from their children, and two more who had previously been apart, did not seem to mind that they did not interact with their children on a daily basis. Two of the women, however, provided insight into the consequences and emotional trade-offs of the arrangement:

My mom was staying at the north and I was staying at Swakop. Now sometimes when they were calling, the baby is not feeling well, again you have to travel a long distance. Because if the baby is not feeling well you just have that feeling of I just want to see her, I just want to see him. Now you have to travel again. And you have to travel for maybe, two days for you to reach there, and again you have to spend a week again, then later you have to go back. That's when you would be earning money and again those days you are not at the construction site so you are not getting paid. That's why I just decided they must just be nearby me and maybe it's a bit better for us (BP_01).

It really affects me in many cases. Sometimes, like my youngest son is turning four years next month. So whenever I talk to them and they say, 'No he is sick, maybe he has got flu or other things,' I really feel bad that my son is sick and I'm not around. Or maybe my husband doesn't feel well and I'm not around. I sometimes feel that I'm doing unfair to the family also (WMF_02).

Even though mutual care networks provide women flexibility to work, such arrangements also create tension and can leave them feeling as if success in one realm comes at the expense of failure in another. Interestingly enough, it was rare for fathers to be mentioned in the conversation about childcare. As previously stated, one woman said without a nanny she would be unable to fulfill her standby calls. This was despite the fact that she was married and lived in the same town as her husband. These care arrangements also create emotional distance between mothers and their children. As the following female carpenter's reflection suggests, children may even begin to think of another woman as his or her mother:

So I must say thanks to my auntie, that child doesn't give me tough times. When I go to work she takes care of him. Even people in our location they don't use to say the baby is for me. They use to say it's for my auntie. Because I only use to stay with that baby Saturday after 1 pm when I am off. And Sunday. For the whole week. And he's used to the auntie. Although you can come and say, 'Oh

it's my son!' Ah uh, he don't want to come to you. Doesn't mean he don't know you. Sometimes you are working overtime, coming 7 o'clock you find him sleeping already. He only used to saw you at night when he wakes up and is breastfeeding, changing nappies. For the day it's aunties work. (JCM_02).

Having a nanny is another way some families attend to childcare demands. Sometimes these individuals live in the home, but they may also come and go daily before and after work. The minimum wage for nannies in Namibia is very low and poorly enforced. Moreover, many families tend to have a family member serve in the role. This arrangement is viewed by all concerned as symbiotic. For instance, if a cousin has dropped out of school and has no job, she is invited to live in and provided food and accommodation in exchange for taking care of the house and children. For this reason, a family might not pay a relative as much for childcare support as they would someone unrelated to them. When asked if they would prefer to have a family member assist for this purpose, interview respondents said the following:

A family member is just a family member you know! I think she will help you much more. You trust her more. Maybe you will say, 'No, this month maybe I didn't earn that much,' you know because the money they pay us we are getting hours. Maybe that month you didn't get much, maybe you traveled a lot, you were absent. I think a family member can understand if you say, 'I think I can do much better next month' (BP_03).

Yeah it's a good relationship. Plus, in my case my cousin, I don't want her to be my nanny for good. Like now, I will take the baby to day care and she has to go to school. Up to twelve. Morning to twelve. She is now doing a course at Ndeshipanda Vocational Training. Office Administration. Yeah she has to go there from morning until 1 or 12, and then take the baby home. That's how it's arranged, it's just fine (PPF_03).

Yes. If she wasn't my sister I would pay more. But because she is your sister she can also see you are not getting much money so she can just accept the situation. ... Maybe she wasn't working? She needs food, accommodation? You give her some small money. ... Even she was renting before. No because she is my sister she understands the situation she knows I am not getting that much. I'm only getting N\$2,500. Then what if I give her N\$500? And I've got kids? (JCM_01).

Childcare thus remains the responsibility of women, regardless of whether they undertake it or not. Moreover, the mobility and agency that a woman might obtain by sharing or offloading childcare often comes at the expense of the family member who assists her.

Crossing-over: Learning to work for, with, and above men

As previous research cited in the literature review has suggested, females trying to break into certain male-dominated fields face discriminatory hiring practices that make it difficult for them to find jobs. The women in this study experienced this scenario to varying degrees. On one end of the spectrum were encounters interviewees described with firm representatives who informed them that their organizations did not hire women:

Yeah, OK, some of the companies will give you a reason where they say, ladies might end up pregnant and then they will have to leave their job and things like that. Some, like Advanced Plumbing in Windhoek, because I went there once looking for job attachment and they have this thing like, no, ladies some of them are just too lazy, their working ability is not the same as the guys. That's why they prefer no ladies at their company. Not even after you are done. Or on job attachment. They just don't employ ladies at all (PPF_01).

The potential for a woman to become pregnant and be out from work was one of the common reasons businesses cited for not wanting to hire females. PPF_01 also expressed the view that she did not think females are able to apply for and obtain jobs on their merits, due to frequent sexual harassment during the hiring process:

Uh, OK, not every woman would really end up working where they want cause most men do take advantage of, like if you want a job it's like, give me something so I can give you this job, or they will probably want to sleep with you for you to get a package like job. I've seen that happening a lot. So, it's really hard for a lady to just get a job (PPF_01).

While these practices are blatantly illegal, there are other subtler ways that Namibian companies discriminate against women during hiring processes. One of the interview respondents observed that firm representatives are afraid, "the government will question them,

‘Why are they looking for males when we are trying to work on this 50/50 gender balance thing?’ So sometimes you’ll find they use this word, ‘strong’” in the job posting (WMF_02).

This sort of coded language perpetuates the idea that women are physically unfit for construction and manufacturing posts. A number of interviewees, when pressed to explain why some companies do not want to hire women, said that employers often claimed that females are lazy and will not work as hard as men. Considering the above discussion concerning women’s triple-burden of productive, reproductive and community care work this seems prima facie absurd. Another unfair characterization that some employers apparently embrace is to insinuate that a woman in the workplace is a potential distraction:

There’s one company that actually said ladies have this thing, it’s a tendency to want favors from men...she wants to be treated in a special way from all the other people and then maybe they start hitting on the employees that have high posts and things. And also they believe that sometimes ladies are a distraction because then, she’s there, like the way we wear, yeah probably like the way you wear some funny things and then the guys are just not really concentrated on what they are supposed to be doing (PPF_01).

This is an example of women being sexualized and objectified in the workplace, judged for their anatomy rather than their skills and competence.

Sexual harassment and mistreatment by male colleagues

The interviewees reported varying degrees of sexual harassment. They also reported internalizing or reacting to it in different ways, too. Although six women reported receiving unwanted attention from their male peers, only two framed those interactions as negative experiences of harassment and discrimination. Namibians refer to men flirting with them as “being proposed,” not in the way Americans traditionally associate the term with engagement, but simply as a proposition. Culturally, these are so common that they seemed not to faze most

respondents, many of whom interpreted the advances light heartedly or used humor to diffuse the situation:

But then like to me I take them as jokes. ‘You guys speaking like seriously?!’ Then I’ll take it like jokes, yeah. ... Sometimes he will say ‘I love you!’ and then you say ‘OK, I will start loving you tomorrow!’ Then he will be like, ‘Oh I’m serious. She’s turning me down’ (BP_03).

The guys? I told them I’m married. Yes, the manager and maybe three men are already married. But the rest they proposed me. All of them (WMF_03).

Uh [proposals] happens (laughs), you are in the man’s industry so, you must have your way of discouraging them from doing it. ... That’s why I have this (points to the fake engagement ring on her left hand). It works. They won’t even bother. ... Like now in my company I am the only woman in the field. So new workers that come in the company will go like, ‘Wow, I want that chick, man!’ And the old ones will go, ‘Oh! Okana oka hombolwa nale (the girl is already married).’ (BP_02).

Women in many societies are skilled tacticians when it comes to navigating harassment.

It would be wrong to interpret the interviewees’ dismissal of this behavior as tacit approval or acceptance; they might just be engaging in the behaviors and mentalities required to diffuse the situations and minimize the potential for personal risk that such actions always entail.

The lack of appropriate job-site facilities for women might facilitate some of this harassment, as seen here:

And some other problems, like yeah in the construction industry you will find a company where it is only men and you are the only woman. So, but like now sharing those toilets, you know those facilities. You cannot be given your own, you will only share, use the same toilet they are using. And it’s also not good sometimes because you are one among many and maybe they will end up, you see this proposing. Now this one is coming with his issue, the other is coming with his problem every time. And sometimes you got irritated because you know you are not interested in any of them but you know it’s coming up and you took them as your brother and then they think of these other things (BP_01).

While the banter may be playful, the potential repercussions for rejecting them is not:

Some they get, they have revenge. Especially if it’s a supervisor or a foreman. Then they will misjudge you. And even the report that he is going to give to the

manager it will be a bad report especially because of the negative answer that you gave to him. But some they don't have a problem because they are having that hope that, 'No, today she is saying no but maybe by next year she will say yes.' So he wants to misbehave because he know maybe next time I will win (BP_01).

As this passage seems to indicate, sometimes pride can interfere with a fair work environment, a phenomenon to which several interviewees also pointed in their discussions of other forms of discrimination and mistreatment by male colleagues in the workplace.

One of the female carpenter interviewees talked about working with a man who seemed to have a vendetta against her. In the following excerpt she describes how this person singled her out to clean the workshop:

Everyone is allowed to clean the workshop. But sometimes when others are quiet there, he don't say to them, 'You come clean.' Then he sees me there and he calls me. And I'm the one who usually cleans, even if I'm not told to do so (JCM_01).

She shared additional stories of him locking her in the break room and turning her in to her boss for taking too frequent bathroom breaks during the day. Even though she has a formal skills qualification and he does not, sometimes he would tell her that she could not cut or assemble certain projects. She also suspected that he made more money than she did for doing the same work, even though less qualified. When asked why she thought he might be treating her this way she said the following:

Me, I used to think that maybe he wanted me. ... He used to call me before that time I start working there. Since I started at that place, he saw me from the start like I was having a problem. ... That's why sometimes I used to say, no, my problems will not end because since I've started I've had problems. I don't know. Maybe it will not end. I just take it easy. Cause he's having this thing of gossip. He can create for you a story that you didn't do in your life. Just to make you bad to the other peoples.... He's just jealous. You know in the work there are people who are selfish. He wants for others to say it's only him who knows the job. That man is complicated (JCM_01).

In her estimation, it seemed that he resented her for both rejecting his advances and also for being better qualified than he was. Other women experienced negative feedback from male peers when they were elevated into supervisory positions with authority over them:

Mmm. ... when I was overseeing projects and it was good, but you know Africans, we believe that a woman cannot supervise a man. So sometimes you can only prove them, sometimes you can tell the person, 'No, the work that you did it's not good. It's not accurate. So you need to redo it again or do the other way around.' But they will end up saying, 'No, unless you can do it yourself.' You will only get through when you prove to him that you are supposed to do it like this. Then it's when he can believe that, 'Ohh, she knows.' But if you are just talking without doing it then he will just say, 'Ahh, she is just talking. Even herself she cannot do it.' But if you try and show him that's when he can understand. And again, you have this thing of, you see, they know that you cannot punish them. And again to work with people it's not something that is very easy. You see sometimes, you will do something he will see that no, it's not allowed to do it. So he is waiting for you to go and report to the manager, then he will attack you maybe later at home, at the location, yeah. 'You, you were the people that are reporting us!' You see? It is not good. So sometimes even if the person is doing the wrong thing you can try to talk to him, but you just have that, that no, I will not let my manager know this because again, he will just become so aggressive. Sometimes you will be burning inside, but you cannot end up explaining to the supervisor that 'This person I tried to talk to him but he is not changing.' (PPF_01).

This woman was a female plumber and, as in the account just provided, she was usually more qualified than the men she was supervising. They, however, tended to equate her promotions to being favored for being a woman, rather than because she was more competent. Implicit in many of these men's reported reactions to their female colleagues is the idea that a woman should not be able to do something a man cannot or earn more money than him. One of the welding interviewees said that sometimes she thinks she is not given contracts because of this sort of jealousy:

Yeah they used to discriminate because they wish they are a welder. They will say, 'How can a woman weld but I cannot do it?' Sometimes they don't even want to give you the job because they think you are making more money than him and those kind of things (WMF_01).

Another woman said,

But sometimes you get negative favors whereby you find a person complaining about, 'Yeah, you are a woman and you are doing bricklaying and getting a lot of money! I am a man. I am doing bricklaying. And I'm getting less money!' (BP_02).

Naturally, these underlying mentalities and norms influence the way women's voices are valued in the workplace:

Yes, there are a few problems. Especially sometimes you come up, you have an idea, a point to raise, but you will repeat or shout it for them to consider it. Cause they have this tendency of, 'Ah, women are not able to come up with a strong point or a strong ideas' (BP_01).

In spite of some of the cringe-worthy stories they shared, the majority of my respondents did not seem to *feel* oppressed or mistreated. Five of them, in fact, expressed a *preference* for working with men:

No, I enjoy the company of men. Men they are good people to work with, not like womens. ... (Laughing) No, womens, we have problems, you know, talking too much. Working with men is so interesting and they are good at giving ideas cause you can ask something and a person will help you, not try to hide. They are just good. It's just so nice. I like it (BP_01).

I think it's fun. You know men's talk a lot! Then you can ask anything you want to know. Concerned about building or life. They can tell you everything. So it's fun. I like it. ... With women? You know how women are, they actually like, yeah I don't say it would be fun with only women. Or maybe I have that prejudice of working with men. ... [A woman] is kind of, she will sometimes come to you laughing, but it doesn't mean she is happy. That's how they are. She will come, 'Oh can you help me with this one,' and you'll be like, 'Let me see.' She'll be looking at you and say, 'No, I also don't understand' but then actually she does, but she just doesn't want to help you! (BP_03).

I mean working with men, you work! Men they also encourage you, 'Let's get the job finished.' And once you are working with women they say, 'Oh, I'm tired! Oh this, that' and your morale just goes down. ... So for me, if you are with guys, you work. If it's work, it's work and it should be done (PPF_02).

At least as described by these interviewees, the workplace was not a place of conflict.

Instances of teamwork and the shared joy of accomplishment were highlights of the job. One of the carpenters highlighted this positive dynamic,

[Truly] speaking of all the companies that I have worked for, I used to be given, may I say, friendly artisans. They never used to discriminate. If you do something wrong they never say, 'Ha ha, what, what.' They just say, 'From today if you are doing it like this, you must do it like this.' This way. Not this way (JCM_02).

In some environments women even felt celebrated for their presence and participation. One interviewee was the first boilermaker employed in her mine and she said her company took pride in that fact.

Gender identity

Working in construction affected the way the women in this study conceived of their gender identity as well as how others perceived them in those terms. Due to the widespread social perception in Namibia that the construction trades were men's work, women who participate in them were often seen as *less* female by those around them.

[Q: Do you ever feel like men are threatened by your profession?] (Laughs) Yeah, they are threatened because there was a time when we were with a few guys and they were like, 'Isn't that the plumbing lady?' And the guy was like, 'Yeah, she did plumbing.' OK, for most people, because I have basketball and then I'm a plumber, apparently it feels like you're just that tomboy maybe so they don't see you as a real lady anymore, no matter even if you are in a dress. They will still feel like you are that kind of guy-ish person. ... So they just feel like you are not that kind of a woman ... a guy will be just like, a guy is actually afraid of you just to tell you, 'I like you,' because they feel like maybe the way you are going to relate to it is because, I don't know, they just feel like you are going to relate to it in a different way because then you don't seem like a normal lady anymore (PPF_01).

And some of the people will even end up provoking you, 'Oh, you're a beautiful lady building!' Then you get pissed off (laughing) (BP_01).

These social norms also influenced the way that the interviewees saw themselves. One bricklayer dichotomized her work and home life along traditional gender norms, claiming that when she goes to work she leaves behind her femininity:

Because for me I'm a woman and am very different at home and work. When I'm at work I don't bring my woman mind. I'm just a man there because we are all in trousers and we work (WMF_03).

When asked to explain what it meant to be one of the guys at work and how her mindset was different when she left her "woman mind" at home, she said:

To be active now. You don't sit down. You know mos when a lady is at work and is like, 'I'm tired, can you please do it for me?' Those things. You are collecting on your pay. They are paying you for hours, not on someone's behalf. So, when I'm at work, I'm just at work. I'm doing my work. If they say, 'Do this,' I'll do it. If they say, 'Come do this one again,' I won't complain. Don't complain. That's why they like me (WMF_03).

These observations suggest that women also internalize social norms and ideas about what is masculine and feminine into their self-concepts. For example, one interview participant, who is now a welding instructor at a vocational training school, cautions her female trainees in the following way:

If you want to really be in this industry you need to be a hard worker. You cannot be lazy and be a plumber. And you cannot be a chick lady and you want a Brazilian and a cut, yeah, it will not work (laughing). So it's either you give up on something, and work on the other. You cannot combine that. Because if you are that chicky person and you go on the site under the sun, you are sweating, it's dusty, at the end of the day you'll feel like no, I give up. So it's either you go for it or you let it go (WMF_02).

That "chicky person" and a good plumber are thus pitted against each other. This idea of femininity inhibiting artisanship was also recounted by the welder interviewee, who grew up fixing cars with her father:

Because my mom, at home you do the lady stuff and I never liked them. It's just something that I never liked it. I don't know why but I just never liked it. ... Because even my father never liked my food. ... To be honest I never liked to do ladies' things. ... When it's a man thing, even to cause at home I make a garage for cars. My father was here in Windhoek and my mom was at work, and then when she came she just found the garage already there. And she asked me, 'Who helped you?!' And I said it was one guy, I just called him to help me out. So when she came she was like, 'So this is so difficult, but if I just left something

that was ladies stuff you won't even touch it!' I just found those things are weak to do. They are just very weak (WMF_03).

Social characteristics ascribed to men and women can work for or against females. For example, the interviewee who ran her own business reported benefitting from the notion that women are more clean and tidy than men:

Some customers like my products because I can clean them nice, but men cannot clean (laughing). I can do things clean, neat. The products look in good condition. But men cannot. They can just leave a product that's not yet varnished, and they chop money but didn't finish the work for the customer (JCM_03).

Sex refers to biological and physiological differences between men and women and gender to their socially constructed roles and responsibilities. It is evident from this study's interviewees that women who work in male-dominated fields in Namibia both contest and reinforce gender norms as they navigate their positions in their fields.

Benefits of crossing-over

The women interviewed for this inquiry were benefiting economically from their work in several ways. First, many cited their ability to generate additional income by picking up side projects or work. Construction and manufacturing lend themselves to income generation in a way that jobs in the knowledge economy might not because customers are always looking for projects, big and small, to be done. One of the challenges many Namibians face is getting their paychecks to stretch over the duration of the month. "Month end," or the time when many people receive their compensation, is marked by crowds in town, at the ATMs and in the shops. Living life paycheck to paycheck is a reality with which many struggle, but as the following shows, the interviewees were able to mediate this phenomenon because of their skills and position as artisans:

It's better to learn something because if you suffer, you won't go down that easily. Now you are going to work for an office work? You don't know how to struggle. You don't maybe you will be paying your expenses from the whole month. Then from the 15th you don't have money. How will you survive? (WMF_01).

Because once you get to know everything, like you don't need anyone to teach you or help you, you can find something else to do or do it on your own. And find machines and start up your own. A company can start from small and become big. ... Men's work is high in benefits. Like being in the office you may be paid at month's end. And welding you can be paid in an hour (WMF_03).

But then the ladies who come here, some of them failed grade 10 with however many points. Where are you going to get a job? At least if you do carpentry, you can learn how to do something by hand, buy a small machine, get a small workshop for yourself and start working for yourself (JCM_01).

If people know you they will still call you, 'Hello, I have my what-what is dripping, whatever, can you please come and fix it for me?' Then, let's say in a week, if you do how many jobs of that, you still have money on the side that is coming and you don't even have to touch your salary at the end of the month. So it's such things (PPF_01).

Some interviewees also expressed a belief that they made *more* money than they would doing another type of work:

Some women you know, they don't want to get dirty. Those dusts from the boards when you are cutting or sanding, they want to be clean they said they put on these long nails, they just want to work in the office. But sometimes you must, construction, on my own I can say even the salary is much than those ones working in the offices (JCM_02).

We [women in construction] are being paid nawa [well]. Good salary. Being a technician you have to be paid good salary of course. Women are now encouraging to go for it. Unlike a cleaner, who is paid a N\$2,000 we might be getting N\$20,000. That's the difference. That's why we go for it. Let's go for technical. It's even nice working with your hands (PPF_03).

In addition to economic benefits, their (female respondents) work and occupational choice seemed to carry social advantages as well. Many interviewee comments related to the influence of their work on their social standing or how they were viewed in their family. One interesting apparently recurring phenomenon was that most of the mothers or fathers who

expressed concern about their daughter's occupational choice (referenced above) came to see their work in a positive light once they realized that the extended family could benefit from it:

Especially my mom was angry with me why I joined woodwork. She wanted me to become a teacher or whatsoever. Now she feels proud, I think. Anything made of wood, I can do benches in house and fix doors in the home. I can do anything made of wood in our house! (JCM_03).

As noted above, most Wambos have a village homestead from which their family originated. Parents, even if they lived and had a career in town, tend to retire to their village homes. Children and previous dependents then become responsible for supplementing the elderly's pensions and making sure the parents receive adequate care. They will purchase electricity, bring food when they visit and invest in infrastructure for the homestead. Many Namibians culturally value assets, not necessarily liquidity. Cattle, cars and homesteads are important indicators of status and well-being. Therefore, if one's child can help build and repair houses it is a big deal.

Some women in the study also received encouragement from society at large for their work in men's fields. Half of the interviewees shared at least one story of encountering someone who could not believe they worked in the occupation they did. While this phenomenon was sometimes negative and frustrating (e.g. not being given work because of the belief that a woman could not do it), for the majority it was positive and encouraging:

I can remember one day when I was at Outapi, there was like boys passing by and I was plastering. They start looking at me and then they were like, 'Wow! Congratulations meme!' Then they gave me chips [French fries]! Yeah! (BP_03).

Yeah, you find sometimes a person comes to the centre saying, 'No, I have a problem at home my kitchen sink is leaking. I need the plumber.' So they, so oh OK, let me call you, the instructor, to come help you. Now they'll say, 'What?! Seriously? The plumber is a lady?' Yeah, ha ha. Then they let you come. They are interested, like, wow, will she really fix it?! I want to see that! And they're watching, 'Wow, they did it!' (PPF_02).

Maybe when you are introducing yourself you say, No, I'm working. I'm a bricklayer or I'm working as a bricklayer and plasterer. Then people are surprised! 'What?!? Oh!!' Then I got that encouragement that what I'm doing is good because it's surprising the people in a good way. So it just gives me hope and courage. I like it. It's so interesting and I like it now (BP_02).

These passages point to one of the major benefits the women in this study seemed to derive from crossing-over into male-dominated trades: enhanced self-efficacy and self-esteem:

I feel really proud. Really proud. Cause then it's a thing of, 'You can't do this,' and I'll be like, 'Really? I cannot do it just because I'm a lady?' To me that feels like it's a dare. So I'll probably do something that makes you really say, like, oh wow! So it's a big challenge. But that's the kind of challenge that just really brings you up and you just want to do more. So, yeah, to me it makes me really proud ... OK benefits ... OK in a crowd of men, you get to feel like I'm that woman. I'm, not really untouchable, but I'm just that ... I don't know what the word is. OK fine, you just feel like that woman, you really have something going on for yourself (PPF_01).

Being able to build one's own house and supervise work themselves turned out to be very important for seven interviewees, who suggested that it was one of the biggest benefits of their trade:

You see, you do something that, let's say for example myself, even if I would like to build my own house, I don't have to hire someone or to call someone to say, 'See for me if this is straight. Are these people doing a very good job?' No I have just to supervise myself. I don't have to ask someone because I know that if it's not the right way, it's not accurate, I can do it myself. I can tell them myself that no, this is not the right way or you are not following what is on the drawing (BP_01).

My benefit on my trade, for instance I'm building a house. I can do my own woodwork myself. Rather I will just need help, two or three people. But office administration? What will you do. Maybe just face booking with your cell or laptop? What else? You have to work for someone else. Unless you have a company then maybe you will be a secretary for your own company (JCM_02).

You know there's challenges whereby you will be sitting there and thinking, Ah, why would I be a bricklayer? But look, I'm a woman, I know that once I just decide I need a house, you know I can design it myself. And build it. No problems. I don't even need to look for somebody to come explain to me what is a super bricks. I can do it myself ... Because normally you know, mos, when you are in the field all the job you need to do is on your shoulders. And remember I

am a supervisor and now a foreman, so I have to make sure that this and that have been done. If it's not then we won't meet our deadline. So I value myself, I say 'Oh, I am a super high-powered woman! Having a higher position in bricklaying!' So (BP_02).

Even at home, like currently at my house, we didn't have burglar bars. So sometimes I just have to go to the shops and buy and do something on my own. And my husband is coming and it's already there. So I don't really have to suffer to look for someone. Even if I want to buy something, like last weekend I bought tiles. I wanted someone to put tiles in my room. So then I didn't have to call him and ask him, 'How many tiles? How many boxes must I buy?' I just measured myself the room and gave the square meters to the people that are selling. 'My room is this square meters; how many boxes should I buy? How many square meters does one box have?' Then I count myself to see how many it is and I just buy. So for some that don't have technical background will even call a tiler to come and see, 'No just see my room, how many tiles must I buy?' And you are paying from that. Just to call the person to come measure. And then you go buy and the person comes and you pay again. So instead of just paying the labor, you starting to pay for measurings and all those things (WMF_02).

One of the reasons this was so meaningful to these interviewees is because Namibia has a significant housing crisis. While one component of this issue is land distribution and re-distribution after independence, another element of the predicament is that many people simply cannot afford to build the modern-style houses that are increasingly popular. Being able to construct a home on one's own therefore carries more weight than it might in a country where such housing is taken as a given.

Additional findings

Culture arose as an interesting theme and one of the factors influencing how the women in this study perceived their work. As outlined above, Namibia is an ethnically diverse country, with a handful of major tribes and countless smaller ones. All participants in this study were members of the dominant Wambo tribe and based on early conversations, tribal identity became one of the concluding questions in my interviews. Some participants had experience working with women of different tribes and therefore did not believe tribe mattered in one's willingness

to become involved in construction. Others contended there were certain characteristics that predisposed Wambo women to do this kind of work as compared to females from other tribes.

One of the bricklayers related the issue to socio-economic status:

I really don't know, but I've only also seen Wambos. Most of the time I've only seen Wambos ... I don't know, maybe Wambos are the poorest or something. But most of the time you only see them. (BP_03)

Indeed, in Namibia some people refer to certain jobs as “Wambos’ work” (e.g., selling newspapers on the street corner, housekeeping and casual day labor). Used in this way, it is pejorative, but as mentioned above, Wambos also have a reputation for being hard workers and able to “make money.” The North is seen as the major business hub outside of Windhoek and is one of the most developed parts of the country beyond the capital city. Some members of different tribes begrudge this fact and perceive that it is due to the fact that Wambos dominate the political arena and therefore receive preferential treatment and government investment. While this may be partially true, it is also likely that funds are being funneled to the North by people who are willing to do whatever it takes to make money: “Wambos work.”

Others related the physicality of construction work to their responsibilities growing up in rural villages, suggesting that Wambos learn how to work hard from an early age:

Because we have, the way we were raised, our beliefs and our cultures, are different. Ne? You know with Oshiwambo, with us, we have mahangu field where you pound mahangu. So we are used to this handy work. And let me say coloureds or Otjiherero speaking people, they just grew up at the farm they feed on meat and milk only, they do nothing else. So for you now to take this person who was just raised like that, you just go to school come home and eat and sleep and do nothing, and you bring them on the site and ask them to dig a trench from here to there, no. Even with Herero guys, they cannot really do this handy work. They are not used to that. They don't do anything at the farm, they only eat. Yeah so for us this is how we grew up. We do hard work. And for us it's not like cultivating is for men or for women. We do it all of us. Let me say if after looking after the cattle there are no boys at home maybe you are only ladies then you go do it! We are used to that. So in my culture we work (PPF_02).

Some other tribes, like Damaras, Coloreds and Afrikaaners, they feel it's still men's work. 'It's heavy, I can't do it.' They have that thing, 'I can't do it, it's men's work.' ... Maybe I think it's the way they grow up working with hands? In our culture when we grow up at the villages we work every day. So it doesn't matter if it's after cultivation, there's still something you have to do. So I think culture plays a role (WMF_02).

Finally, one joiner and cabinetmaker interviewee referenced the extent to which women from various tribes are perceived to depend on men:

I don't think so. I don't think so. I don't think they can do the work equally. Because those tribes, they depend on mens. They only depend on men. ... We Wambos we like to show up. Like, 'I am!' Not, 'I depend on him.' (JCM_03).

This comment is obviously a personal opinion, but is rooted in stereotypes of other tribes and indicates that amongst the various Namibian tribes there may exist a spectrum along which the degree of a woman's financial autonomy is culturally acceptable.

While it was not a question I specifically asked in the interviews, one respondent raised the connection between financial autonomy and gender-based violence (GBV), a rampant problem in Namibia.

Women, they want to suffer for them to start doing something. Especially you see, when a woman gets a child, ne, it's when she had boyfriend run away, then it's the time that she want to go and look for job. Like there, in Otjomuise, women they are pushing those wheel barrows. Why must a woman first suffer for her to go and look for a job? Why doesn't she start just before she gets a child? They must first suffer for them to do something. Maybe they must first be discouraged, they must be disappointed for them to do something. Unless she was brought up properly that she have to do this and she have to do this. Otherwise women first want to suffer before they do something for themselves... Women, ne, they must not just wait for the man's money. The man is also having his responsibilities. He's having a sister, he's having his brother. So as a woman you must also stand up and work for yourself for your own money so that you can afford your own life. Now, if you are now depending on a man, like some women I truly don't understand them. They like depending on a man from the food to the school. Everything. And then tomorrow they will like to have another boyfriend. That man will obviously be killed. That's why people don't understand why are people being killed. It's because of the money. So it's better. Women must just stand up and work for themselves. Not wait for the man's money. Otherwise it's a problem (WMF_01).

She was referring to passion killings, a form of intimate-partner violence in Namibia that typically happens if someone is unfaithful. It is not uncommon to hear of a man killing his girlfriend and then himself. This violence is inexcusable and never the fault of a woman, but as the passage shows, many Namibians see a connection between money and this violence. Some in Namibia even justify the killings by saying that the woman “stole” all of the man’s money and used him for food and phones, etc.

Key themes

In some ways this study’s findings echo those of previous research treated in the literature review. The women in this study faced scrutiny for their participation in male-dominated occupations and at times were actively channeled away from them. Social norms regarding what is feminine and masculine, particularly that women are clean and men are strong, influenced the way others viewed the interviewees and in turn, the way they saw themselves. The practical component of vocational training was important in encouraging women and men alike to realize that females are equally capable of fulfilling construction-related responsibilities. The support of one’s peers and instructors, both male and female, was also important in successfully completing training.

Labor market entry, let alone success, was not a given, as the interviewees’ stories of discriminatory hiring practices suggested. While previous research has found that women suffer from a lack of social capital to leverage in the hiring process, most of this study’s participants obtained work through family and friend connections. Relationships established with employers during the job attachment portion of one’s training also proved useful in facilitating employment following graduation. The impact that child rearing had on the interviewee’s labor market mobility was mediated by other women in the interviewees’ extended family care network. If a

Namibian woman encounters circumstances preventing her from properly attending to her children, it is culturally acceptable for her to send the children elsewhere for care or to welcome a female family member or nanny into her home to assist with domestic duties.

All interviewees expressed a sense of pride in their work in their respective fields. Enhanced self-image and self-efficacy came from the ability to build and repair things for themselves (a source of potential income and economic autonomy) and others (a source of social capital and respect from friends and family). Despite instances of harassment, none of the women I interviewed for this study expressed distaste for working predominately with men. A handful, in fact, claimed it was their preference.

Thus, the accounts of these women's experiences as "cross over" employees were replete with opportunities and constraints. Although they suffered hardship at times, they appeared generally happy and content with their choice of occupation and had integrated it into their self-identities.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

This study began with the assumption that OSS innately hampers mobility and agency in the world of work. Construction, an industry in which women are severely underrepresented worldwide, is an occupation that will always be relevant. In a country plagued by unemployment, investigating the factors inhibiting equality in this industry and possibilities for expanding opportunity seemed appropriate. By interviewing 12 female artisans who have defied convention and overcome the various structural barriers to succeed in building and manufacturing, this study captured some of the pathways that can lead women to “cross over.” After asking the women in this study how they came to occupy their current roles and in what ways, if any, they have benefited from doing so, it was also important to inquire whether expanding female participation in construction appeared to be worthwhile in general terms.

Benería (2003) has argued that the productivist goals of economic growth and enhanced efficiency should not be the principal concerns underlying economic empowerment. Instead, human dignity and well-being should be the aim (89). Thus an apt question is: how did these women’s involvement in construction trades benefit their human development and dignity, not just improve their perceived productivity and personal and social utility?

The interviews conducted for this inquiry suggest that in addition to increased financial security and autonomy, working in a male-dominated field contributed to these women’s feelings of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Whether it was recognition from peers at work, strangers passing by their site or family members who needed home repairs, interviewees were proud of their abilities to build, create and repair things. Many of the respondents seemed to delight in inspiring surprise and challenging the social norms that suggest females cannot do the type of work in which they are daily successfully engaged. Anyone who has succeeded at something

they have been told they cannot do knows this feeling. Most of these women have been enjoined repeatedly that they both *cannot* and *should not* be doing what they are doing, and to succeed at it in the face of such expectations makes them feel very proud.

With respect to the pathways that led the women to participate in male-dominated fields, many of the interviews reflected findings from previous research, namely that girls are discouraged from certain occupations and that women face discriminatory hiring practices and harassment in the work place. Regarding the “motherhood penalty” and the burden of child bearing and rearing, a different picture emerged from these interviews than the one that often is recounted in western scholarship. Aside from two respondents, these women did not tell stories of the chaos and tribulation of balancing work and motherhood. This could be, and probably was to some extent, a function of them accepting their culturally ascribed roles. Women in Namibia, as elsewhere around the world, spend more time on domestic tasks than men do. However, child rearing did not appear to be the yoke that it seems to be in so many societies, because women in their extended family network alleviated—subsidized—the burden. Whether it was one’s mother or aunty taking care of the child far away in the village or a sister or cousin acting as a live-in nanny in their home, interviewees often were afforded flexibility in their work by means of the support of extended family members. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily constitute a situation to which to aspire, because it seems to pit the agency of one woman against that of another. Instead of challenging the sexual division of labor that leaves women to assume the majority of child rearing duties, it perpetuates the expectation that they will continue to do so.

Gender identity and the social norms influencing ideas of what is masculine and feminine played a role in how the women in this study navigated their vocations. One woman explicitly internalized the idea that women cannot do construction work and seemed to adopt a

dichotomous sense of self: at work she used her “man mind” and at home she was a “woman.” Two others alluded to tensions between their femininity and work: one described herself as a tomboy and the other laughed at women who thought they could build with nice hairstyles and nails. The majority of interviewees, however, seemed to take their success in construction as evidence of the norms’ falseness, confidently debunking the idea that one cannot be feminine and build at the same time. A third of participants agreed that the absence of women in their field was a contributing factor to these misnomers and stereotypes—people simply had too few exemplars to which to turn for role models.

One of the questions this study explored and the data it generated continues to beg is whether these women worked in their fields by choice or out of necessity. Many of those interviewed for this study did not originally choose their vocation because of genuine interest or passion for the work. For those who were not initially keen on vocational training in their trade, the prospect of work after graduation incentivized their participation. The four women who stated that their trade was not their first choice all came to love and appreciate it over time. All but one of the interviewees suggested that their occupations provided them with ways to increase or supplement their incomes, making a compelling case for VET as a continued economic development priority. Furthermore, all of the participants expressed a sense of pride in their work with many reporting that in addition to changing the way they perceived themselves, their capabilities also influenced the way others perceived them. These findings suggest that encouraging women’s participation in construction-related work has the potential to enhance their feelings of self-efficacy and importance.

One unexpected finding arose from the fact that five women I interviewed expressed a preference for working with men. As they perceived matters, males are more direct in their

communication, helpful and goal-oriented in the workplace than women. Conversely, these interviewees saw women as petty, opaque and prone to gossip. While these are obviously generalizations, and possibly subscriptions to larger cultural narratives about the characteristics of men and women, they do challenge the notion, so often advanced in the scholarly literature, that women ally among themselves and advocate for each other. As mentioned before, the myth of female solidarity is popular in development lore and a favored mentality of gender equality advocates who tend to view women as systematically oppressed. But these findings suggest that the assumption that all women feel and experience similar things is misguided and unfairly equilibrates the pursuit of gender equality to the reduction of male oppression of women.

Possible implications

Understanding and comparing the employment choice narratives of the women interviewed for this research helps to illuminate the constraints on the exercise of agency by Namibian women when making decisions regarding work and contributes insights to future VET curricular development and possible educational and social policy interventions. First, government efforts to increase VET enrollment and female participation in non-traditional trades needs to account for the attitudes and behaviors discouraging girls from pursuing them at an early age. Attention should also be paid to gender-sensitive pedagogy in the classroom and workshop once a trainee enrolls in a vocational training institution. As the findings show, female trainee's experiences in school are shaped by perceptions that they are "weaker" and "slower" than boys and men in technical work.

This study also suggested that in some contexts, family friendly policies might not just relate to immediate biological family members, but also to their extended kinship networks as well. Western countries have focused considerable attention on securing paid maternity leave

and are increasingly turning their attention to paternity leave, too. The geographic and social realities in Namibia suggest that policies truly friendly to families will need to account for the fact that a child's guardian is not a static figure and that children are frequently separated from their biological parents by long distances and for relatively long periods.

Recommendations for future research

This study's findings could be augmented by capturing the voices and opinions of the partners, colleagues and families of the women who participated in the study. It would be interesting, for example, to ascertain the extent to which these women's positions within their extended family unit has changed because of their occupational choice. Only two of the interviewees touched on their relationships with their husband or partner. The first's boyfriend taught her to weld so she could get out of the house and make money; the second woman's husband was not initially keen on her moving far to pursue her dream of being an instructor, but has since come to see that it is her passion and supports her. However, it is reasonable to assume that if the women in this study suffer penalties for their participation in a non-traditional profession, their partners might suffer too. The stigmatization for failing to "provide" for their families can be extreme in some patriarchal societies (Mammen and Paxson 2000). Paradoxically, benefits conferred to a woman as an individual might disadvantage her in the broader social sphere.

Another interesting vein of inquiry would be to investigate the trajectories of Namibian men who have crossed over to work in traditionally female occupations. Does society treat breaches in convention the same for men and women or does one suffer or benefit more or less than the other? The academic field exploring gender and development (GAD) has evolved over time away from an initial focus on women in development (WID) on the view that only focusing

on females ignored the reality that *gender* constructs inherently involve both masculinity and femininity. To understand the spectrum of norms shaping OSS in Namibia, it is necessary to study situations in which lines are breached in both traditionally male-and female-dominated occupations.

Tribal affiliation ended up being one of the most interesting features of these interviews because it suggested that, much like race, class and ethnicity do in America, one's tribe acts as an intersecting identity and influences the perceived appropriateness of different types of work. Expanding the sample to include participants from all the major tribes in Namibia would round out perspectives and contribute insights into how individual cultural practices and beliefs influence the occupational choices and judgments of others. Lengthening the historical perspective of the inquiry would similarly enhance this research, especially with respect to the influence of apartheid and the liberation struggle on the labor market. Sparks has claimed that women's full participation in independent Namibia is possible due to the blurring of the traditional sexual division of labor amongst SWAPO supporters in exile during the long battle for freedom (1992).

Lastly, studying the differences in OSS among the various trades would be fruitful because my observations and data suggest that some male-dominated occupations may be seen as more appropriate in Namibia than others. Carpentry, at the vocational training school at which I worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer, had the closest gender parity in enrollment of any of the male-dominated occupations. Two thirds of that trade's teaching staff was also female. One male student expressed the view to me that he did not like the trade as much as welding (which he had taken previously) because it was "women's work." Completing case studies on social

perceptions of the various trades might indicate that views of some occupations are less dynamic over time than others.

Conclusion

This study has contributed qualitative findings to the existing body of OSS literature that is dominated by quantitative data aggregated at a high statistical level. The findings offered here suggest that while some of the experiences women in Namibia face in crossing-over to work in construction were similar to those found by researchers in Western countries (e.g. discriminatory hiring, socialization of children into appropriate occupations, sexual harassment in the workplace), others were not, including the impact of child bearing and child rearing on daily management of home and job responsibilities. Due to the geographic dispersion of concentrated populations and work opportunities, as well as cultural practices of extended family-care networks, women in Namibia with children are afforded more flexibility to work than in many Western nations, even if they cannot necessarily afford formal childcare.

While the promotion and pursuit of paid work for women is not uniformly endorsed or desirable in all cultures, some development scholars and many practitioners have concluded that, “women’s paid work appear[s] to constitute an economic pathway to changes in their lives that [go] beyond the economic domain” (Kabeer 2012, 20). This study suggests that additional social-psychological gains may be obtained when such employment occurs in a domain typically dominated by men. Additionally, it implies that OSS, despite similar cause and effect around the world, should always be examined and interpreted through geographic, historical and culturally sensitive lenses.

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