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The Call For Gender Balance, Levelling The Engineering Gradient For More Female Students: The Case Of Gweru Polytechnic College.

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ABSTRACT: *Women are important partners in economic development but their underrepresentation in engineering courses is a cause for concern in Zimbabwe polytechnics. The study's purpose is to unravel reasons for this anomaly. Purposive and random sampling was used to select participants made up of 10 lecturers, 5 parents and 40 students from engineering division. The research employed a case study approach where data was collected through focus groups, face to face interviews, questionnaires and document analysis. Results of the study were thematically analysed in line with qualitative and quantitative approaches. The study's findings highlighted that little knowledge, unfavourable working conditions, lack of funds to pursue Engineering career trade, challenging and demanding courses for females, low entry qualifications and discrimination against females by society were noted. This study recommends that technical engineering courses be introduced early at primary and secondary schools. There is need of career guidance and extensive marketing of engineering programmes. Repeat of the study on a national level will help to verify this problem for policy implications.*
Keywords: *gender imbalance, marginalisation, under representation, TVET, engineering.*

I. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Affirmative action intervention strategies adopted in Zimbabwe in 1995 appear to be effective though confined to universities only. However, this has achieved at least 33% female enrolment in universities. In 1995, institutions such as the University of Zimbabwe adopted an affirmative action policy which admits into university aspiring female students who may have lower entry points than males in order to increase their participation in education. Special attention has been paid to achieve equal access of girls and women to academic education but little has been done to promote gender main streaming in scientific, technical and vocational education and training. The support for women education has been promoted by UNESCO policy initiative. To this effect the Convention on Technical and Vocational Education, and the Project 2000+ declaration was recommended. In Zimbabwe a special project on "Women and Science and Technology" was also launched by the Science Sector to promote women's participation in science and technology education and related careers at a global level.

Recent history has demonstrated the potential of science and technology (S&T) for improving the quality of people's lives. Hitherto it has been realised that S&T has profound effect on the quality of life across the human species. As a result, it is now widely accepted that socio-economic and indeed cultural development, is largely dependent on the harnessing and application of S&T achievements. Many countries of the world have adopted and are signatory to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) whose main agenda was to achieve equality and empowerment of females. Currently, the gender disparities are unacceptably high and in most cases women are on the loosing end. Taeuber (1991) posited that sixty percent of all working women hold clerical, service, or professional positions; however, more than sixty percent of the women holding professional positions are concentrated in female-intensive fields such as school teaching and nursing. Studies indicate that women are still generally underrepresented in higher institution in the field of science, engineering and technology (Ceci & Williams, 2011). A study of women scientists in the United Kingdom (UK) reveal that women are still underrepresented in the higher echelons of science, engineering and technology (Van Langena et al., 2006). In Zimbabwe women are 52% and males are 48% but the distribution of resources and services are slope-sided and in favour of males. In 1992, Eileen Byrne arguing for equal participation of women in education and labour force stated: "God put 51 per cent of the brains of the world into female skulls, and to be used" (Farago 1992:14). This perception merits consideration taking cognisance of the fact that female students are to date recording low enrolment levels in the Engineering courses in Zimbabwe polytechnic education. Yet education is viewed as an instrument for preparing the community for life. (Nyerere, 1968: 274) affirms that "Education … must impart knowledge and skills needed for family life and for participation in the development and maintenance of the community." This articulation seems to spell that those who are not accessing education may be left out in the development and maintenance of the community. It is therefore imperative for this