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Hands that build, hearts that tolerate: experiences of female apprentices in Ghana's informal apprenticeship training system

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ABSTRACT

Although recent policy reforms have increased female enrolment in technical and vocational education and training (TVET), particularly in occupations traditionally dominated by men, the everyday experiences of women during their training remain largely neglected. This study explores the experiences of informal female apprentices in Ghana from the perspective of gender performativity theory. This qualitative study utilizes a phenomenological research design and analyzes data using a content analytic framework. The findings revealed that the experiences of female apprentices in Ghana's informal apprenticeship training system can be explained by gender and occupational choice; gender norms and workplace behaviors; gender and eco-financial independence; and gender and emotional labor. The paper concludes by highlighting an urgent need for policy and practical interventions that reduce gender stereotypes, promote respectful workplace behaviors, and reduce emotional labor for female apprentices in Ghana's informal apprenticeship system.

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Gender performativity theory; informal female apprentices; informal apprenticeship training; Technical and Vocational Education and Training; Ghana

Introduction

Despite the recent global policy reforms and initiatives aimed at encouraging female participation in apprenticeship training programs (UNESCO, 2025), the lived experiences of women in the informal apprenticeship systems remain underexplored (Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2025; Smith, 2025). Informal apprenticeship training system is an informal learning setting where an experienced craftsperson transmits a skill or a trade to a young learner, often without a formal agreement between the apprentice and the master craftsperson (Palmer, 2009). Informal female apprentices are women who learn a trade through hands-on, on-the-job training from a master craftsperson, often without a formal contract or recognized qualification (Hofmann et al., 2022). Though prior research has identified barriers to women's participation in non-traditional skilled trades (Adams & Baddianaah, 2023; Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2025), relatively little is known about the experiences of female apprentices in both traditional and non-traditional occupations in

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Ghana's informal apprenticeship training system. Investigating the lived experiences of these women is critical as evidence and new insights might inform future policy regimes and gender mainstreaming agenda by the Government of Ghana and international development partners within the apprenticeship landscape.

In this study, we investigate experiences of informal female apprentices in Ghana. Using qualitative approach, the paper highlights the barriers, gendered occupational choices, and how female apprentices in both traditional and non-traditional trades navigated these barriers in Ghana. By foregrounding women's lived experiences in informal apprenticeship training, this study makes three significant contributions to existing scholarship. First, it adds to the growing scholarship on gender and informal apprenticeship (e.g. Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2025; Behenna et al., 2026) by explaining the experiences of female in diverse informal apprenticeship training spaces in Ghana. Second, it applies gender performativity theory (Butler, 1990, 2025) to explore and understand how women navigate gender norms in their informal trades. In so doing, the study seeks to demonstrate that informal apprenticeship training is an occupational development process, rather than a purely technical and economic activity performed by apprentices and their masters. The study also deepens our understandings of women's experiences in the informal apprenticeship training systems by highlighting how female apprentices navigate barriers in leveraging skill development opportunities in the informal economy. The study urgently responds to recent call to examine experiences of females in Ghana's informal apprenticeship training environments (Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2025) and practically gather new insights to inform informal apprenticeship training policy and practice. However, unlike the work of Alla-Mensah and McGrath (2025), which focused specifically on females in the automotive apprenticeship sector, the present study extends the analysis by incorporating female apprentices across multiple trades. This broader scope addresses a gap in the literature that has largely concentrated on sector-specific experiences, particularly automotive sector (Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2025), thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of female informal apprenticeship participation. Specifically, the study seeks to provide an answer to the following research question:

1. What are the experiences of female apprentices in Ghana's informal apprenticeship training system?

Context: Ghanaian apprenticeship system

Ghana's apprenticeship system generally exists in two broad forms: informal apprenticeship and formal apprenticeship systems. While these two systems differ, they collectively contribute to the development of technical skills, youth employment, and entrepreneurial activity (Palmer, 2009). Informal apprenticeship training system continues to be a preferred and dominant pathway for skills acquisition, particularly for young individuals who have limited access to formal education (Palmer, 2009). The governance of informal apprenticeship system in Ghana is overseen largely by master crafts persons, apprentices, families and trade associations. Informal apprenticeship system in Ghana is an all age training program, because both older and younger people are involved. Though occasionally some older people participate, the informal apprenticeship system largely involves young people learning a trade under the supervision of experienced or master

crafts persons. The informal training normally occurs within informal workshops located in rural and urban communities. In Ghana, the nature of training process in informal apprenticeship is largely experiential and practice-oriented (Palmer, 2009). The apprentices acquire vocational and technical skills by observing, imitating and applying what they have learned through observation. This training approach of learning-by-doing enables the apprentices to acquire practical skills that are directly relevant to their chosen occupation. The most common occupations within the informal apprenticeship system are catering, plumbing, carpentry, auto mechanics, hairdressing and tailoring or dress-making, basketry, cloth weaving, electrical and electronic installation, and repairs (Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2025). There are no formal stages of informal apprenticeship training; however, the process starts when older or younger individual contacts a master craft person in their communities, where the person who becomes an apprentice, typically enters into an informal agreement with a master craftsman, who owns and oversees the training process. After that, the apprentices and their families pay a training fee at the beginning of the apprenticeship period. Normally, the training duration ranges from 2 to 4 years depending on the trade and the absorptive capacity of the apprentices. During the informal training, some master crafts persons support their apprentices with daily stipend. The apprentices are either expected to stay with the master craftsman or report to work daily from their homes. After the training, the apprentices and their families are expected to participate in graduation ceremonies to mark the end of the apprenticeship training. During the graduation ceremony, the apprentices receive testimonials from their master crafts persons to signify the end of training. Available statistics in Ghana suggest that over 400,000 apprentices are enrolled in the informal apprenticeship system (Armah, 2021). The literature highlights three major concerns with informal apprenticeship systems. One major concern is the absence of standardized training curricula and formal assessment procedures. Palmer (2009) argued that because the training is largely provided by individual master crafts persons, the quality and scope of instruction and curriculum can vary widely across different informal workshops. Another concern also relates to limited access to modern technology and training equipment within many informal workshops. Alla-Mensah and Addae-Kyeremeh (2024) observed that lack of technological exposure may restrict the capacity of apprentices to adapt to changing labor market conditions and industrial practices. Another concern highlights gender inequality. Alla-Mensah and McGrath (2025) revealed that due to sociocultural norms and occupational stereotypes, women often encounter barriers when attempting to enter trades traditionally dominated by men, such as mechanical engineering, construction, or metal fabrication. According to the Government of Ghana (2018), informal apprenticeship training enrolment keeps increasing steadily from 2012 to 2017. However, female students' participation in informal apprenticeship training programs in the country is still far lower than their male counterparts (Adams & Baddianaah, 2023). Commission for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (2023) reported major government interventions such as Ghana TVET voucher project (GTVP), the Ghana Jobs and Skills Project, and the Ghana Education Outcomes Project (GEOP). The Ghana TVET voucher project (GTVP) was implemented to promote access to quality TVET provision and enhance opportunities for decent employment. The Ghana Jobs and Skills Project was earmarked to support skills development and job creation in Ghana. Ghana Education Outcomes Project (GEOP) was also executed to reintegrate out-of-school children into

Ghana's formal education system and enhance learning achievements in primary schools. Moreover, national apprenticeship policy has been a major regulatory intervention to formalize the informal apprenticeship system. Though these policy interventions or initiatives had gender objective of ensuring equal access to TVET programs, they have produced fewer gender-related outcomes due to the persistent gender gap where female participation remains relatively low (Commission for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 2026). This highlights the need for targeted female inclusion strategies to improve female participation.

The formal apprenticeship system operates under Ghana's national technical and vocational education and training (TVET) framework. In Ghana, formal apprenticeship programs are typically organized through government institutions and accredited training centres that follow standardized curricula and assessment procedures (Palmer, 2009). The governance of formal vocational training in Ghana is overseen by the Ministry of Education, Commission for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (CTVET), National Vocational Training Institute (NVTI) and Ghana Technical and Vocational Education and Training Service (GTVETS). Commission for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (2021) revealed that these organizations are responsible for regulating vocational training institutions, developing national competency standards, and administering certification systems for vocational and technical education programs. The formal TVET system in Ghana comprises pre-tertiary and tertiary pathways. Pre-tertiary TVET institutions are technical senior high schools which are managed by the Ghana Technical and Vocational Education and Training Service (GTVETS), while tertiary TVET is delivered primarily through technical universities under the Ministry of Education. However, the Commission for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (CTVET) serves as the national regulatory body responsible for coordinating, harmonizing, and assuring the quality of TVET across both levels (Commission for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 2023). The formal apprenticeship systems in Ghana typically target youth and young adults between 12 and 25 years (Ghana Statistical Service, 2008). Ghana's formal training combines theoretical classroom instruction with practical workplace experience-through workshop training, industrial attachments and internships during vacation or semester breaks. These formal programs adopt competency-based training (CBT) models that emphasize clearly defined learning outcomes and standardized assessment processes (Allais, 2023). The competency-based training systems are intended to align technical training programs with labor market requirements while ensuring that graduates possess verifiable competencies. The essence of the competency-based training is to provide trainees with nationally recognized certificates that can improve employability within formal and informal labor markets in Ghana. Ghana's National TVET Qualification Framework (NTVETQF) now covers all qualification levels up to Doctor of Technology, paving the way for a better progression within the formal apprenticeship system. Within Ghana's formal apprenticeship training systems, since pre-tertiary level are considered technical senior high schools, trainees are not expected to pay fees due to the Free Senior High School Education and Free TVET Policies while those in the tertiary level pay fees. The most common occupations within the formal apprenticeship system are agriculture, information and communication technology, construction, fashion, and hospitality. Current statistics show that

enrolment into TVET institutions has increased steadily and has reached 72,200 learners for the 2025/2026 academic year (Commission for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 2026, p. IV).

Ghana's formal apprenticeship system faces major constraints. One of the major constraints relates to limited capacity of training institutions or training providers, where most of them struggle with inadequate infrastructure, outdated equipment, and shortages of qualified instructors. Another constraint is accessibility. Despite several efforts to expand access, issues such as tuition costs, admission requirements, and geographical barriers continue to prevent many young people from rural and low-income backgrounds from enrolling in formal technical education programs. Moreover, gender disparity is another concern, where more males are enrolled in certain occupation than females (Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2025). Though female enrolment in TVET institutions seems to increase steadily, there are more males in these institutions than females (Commission for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 2023). Despite the absence of an official Ghana Government classification that formally labels trades as traditional or non-traditional, Table 1 shows a CTNET-aligned classification of trades within Ghana's CBT system (Commission for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 2023). The table maps informal apprenticeship occupations onto official CBT program areas under the National TVET Qualifications Framework (NTVETQF) and analytically distinguishes between traditionally male- and female-dominated trades based on historical apprenticeship patterns and current enrolment trends, while also identifying non-traditional participation where either gender engages in occupations outside these norms. Traditional trades refer to occupations with historically entrenched gendered apprenticeship patterns in Ghana, where certain trades have been predominantly associated with either males or females over time. Non-traditional trades refer to occupations where a particular gender group remains underrepresented relative to established gender norms, particularly within the informal apprenticeship system.

Despite these challenges, government interventions have been designed to improve access to TVET, especially at the pre-tertiary level. Free TVET, the Ghana TVET Voucher

Table 1. Gendered trade classification (aligned with CTNET CBT program areas).

Gendered category	CTNET CBT program area	Examples of apprenticeship trades
Male-dominated traditional trades	Construction trades, Engineering and automotive, electrical and electronics, and plumbing programs	Carpentry, masonry, welding, automobile mechanics, electrical installation, refrigeration and air-conditioning
Female-dominated traditional trades	Garment making/fashion design technology (Dress making), cosmetology, hospitality, and catering programs	Dressmaking, tailoring, hairdressing, beauty therapy, catering, nail care
Women in non-traditional trades	Engineering, electrical, and construction programs	Automotive mechanics, welding, carpentry/woodworks, electrical installation, masonry
Men in non-traditional trades	Cosmetology, garment making (Dress making), and hospitality programs	Hairdressing, dressmaking, beauty therapy, catering

Source: Authors' own construct (2026). Note: Classification is based on gendered patterns of participation in Ghana's informal apprenticeship and competence-based training (CBT) systems used as an analytical construct rather than an official CTNET categorization. CTNET's National TVET Qualifications Framework (NTVETQF) defines program areas such as Construction Trades, Engineering and Automotive, Garment Making/Fashion Design Technology, Cosmetology, and Hospitality & Catering (CTNET, 2023).

Project (GTVP), the Ghana Education Outcome Project (GEOP), and Complementary Education are some of the major interventions aimed at ensuring that persons of school-going age are not denied the opportunity to education and training. Therefore, ensuring effective implementation of these government interventions within Ghana's apprenticeship training systems is essential for ensuring that vocational and technical education supports entrepreneurial development among the youths towards sustainable economic development.

Gender performativity theory and informal apprenticeship training

Gender performativity theory (Butler, 1990, 2025) was applied to explore the experiences of female apprentices in Ghana's informal apprenticeship training system. Gender performativity theory posits that gender is not an inherent trait, but rather a social construct that is enacted through repeated behaviors, performances, and practices (Butler, 1990). The key assumption of gender performativity is that gender is socially created and labelled by what we continuously do and not the identity we were born with (Butler, 2025). Gross (2023) opined that gendering is achieved through the repeated citation of rituals, social expectations and gender norms within social contexts. This explains that gender biases and inequalities are gendered within existing social structures, including informal apprenticeship training centres. There are several reasons for applying gender performativity theory to examine gendered experiences of female apprentices in the informal apprenticeship training. Obviously, one of the reasons is that gender performativity theory can provide and guide transnational understanding of gender as performative by drawing on experiences from a developing country. Akurugu (2021) used gender performativity to develop an account of femininities in the rural context of northern Ghana and argued that gender as performative demonstrates the power of gender discourse to create and constrain that which it names. Another reason is that the theory has profound implications for informal apprenticeship training (e.g. Bridges et al., 2020; Brockmann, 2021). Brockmann (2021) established that the social construction of 'male' and 'female' jobs or programs categories within apprenticeship training spaces produces gendered patterns which are likely to be evident in career choices. By adhering to or subverting these gender norms, individuals both reinforce and challenge the power structures that govern gender. This shows that gender binaries are likely to be reinforced by women while devaluing their female identities. Also, several studies indicate that formal and informal vocational fields in Ghana are heavily gendered, with certain occupations deemed suitable for men and others for women (Adams & Baddianaah, 2023; Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2025; Amegah, 2025). Though these studies have stretched our understanding of how gender explains women's underrepresentation in TVET, we are yet to fully understand the experiences of female apprentices in Ghana's informal apprenticeship systems. For example, women are often encouraged to pursue careers in caregiving or cosmetology, while men are steered towards technical trades such as carpentry, plumbing, or engineering (Amegah, 2024). These gendered practices are not merely cultural preferences but are part of the broader performative acts that both reflect and perpetuate gender inequality in the workforce. This theory provides a lens for understanding how the informal

apprenticeship systems in Ghana both shape and are shaped by gender norms, limiting females' potential and perpetuating existing gender roles in informal vocational training and trades. Thus, we can argue that training and career choices in Ghana are largely influenced by societal expectations rather than individual capabilities. As more women engage and perform roles traditionally occupied by men, they begin to create a new gender performative that challenges and deconstructs the established gender norms in informal apprenticeship training. Therefore, these evolving gender performances are essential in breaking down the barriers that limit women's participation in informal apprenticeship training in Ghana.

Gender and informal apprenticeship training

Literature on gender and informal apprenticeship provides enough evidence to situate the experiences of female informal apprentices in existing scholarship. This review synthesizes evidence from previous studies to highlight gendered trade choices and constraints that affect women's participation in informal apprenticeships. Existing studies continue to show that women in informal apprenticeship spaces face several challenges or constraints to participation. Ahadzie (2009) also noted that traditional informal apprenticeships in West African countries are influenced by social and kinship ties, which can both support and hinder women's participation depending on cultural norms. Adams and Baddianaah (2023) analyzed factors affecting female enrolment in technical and vocational education and training institutions in sub-Saharan Africa by using Ghana as an example. They found that the major constraint to female enrolment and academic progression was the high cost of materials and equipment required for practical sessions in TVET programs. Hofmann et al. (2022) conducted a meta study on informal apprenticeship in developing countries and found that gender patterns in informal apprenticeship across many countries show strong male dominance in some trades such as carpentry and car mechanics with almost no female. Alla-Mensah and McGrath (2025) further found that gender roles also influence the types of vocational programs that men and women pursued, with women being disproportionately represented in caregiving and clerical roles, while men dominated technical fields like construction, engineering, and information technology in Ghana. Based on biographical interviews, Brockmann (2021) explored the role of gender in the career decision-making of one German and one English woman motor mechanic apprentice and found that stereotypical accounts of gender by these females foster acceptable ways of being in male workspaces. These women navigated their career decision making and survived by accepting the identities of male counterparts. Bridges et al. (2020) reported that though occupations in the skilled trades are highly segregated with women comprising 1–3% of this workforce in Western nations, these occupation segregations especially in the construction trades are largely shaped by gendered body and informal and unregulated employment practices. Behenna et al. (2026) evaluated the application of a tiered mentoring model to increase the recruitment and retention of women in male-dominated degree apprenticeships in the United Kingdom and showed that women negotiate their inclusion in a male dominated trades through mentoring and representation with the help of peer support and role models.

Methods

Research design

As qualitative approach, a phenomenological research design was used to explore the experiences of female apprentices in Ghana's informal apprenticeship training system. Phenomenological design was adopted because it could provide rich understanding and meaning from individuals lived experiences (Husserl, 1931). The researchers also adopted a qualitative approach because it could help gather personal insights, experiences and perceptions about the phenomenon under investigation. Due to the purpose of the study, we gathered qualitative data using participant observation and in-depth interviews. These qualitative data collection tools have been considered appropriate for gathering lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants who had enough years of training experiences in the informal apprenticeship training programs were purposively selected and interviewed. The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Participants' selection and sampling

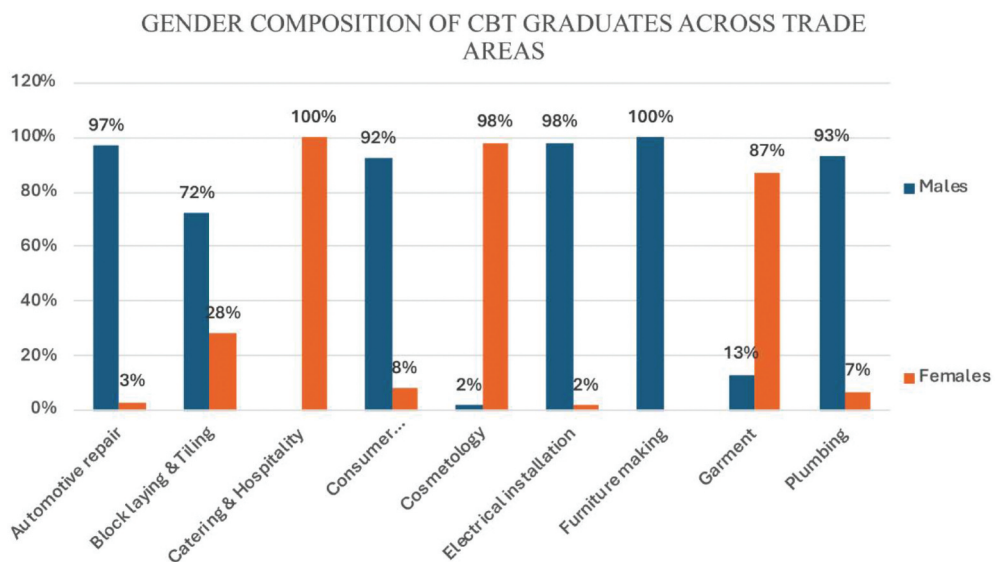
We used purposive sampling technique (Palinkas et al., 2015) to select sixteen (16) female participants who had rich information and had adequate years of experiences. These female apprentices were preferred and deemed relevant participants because they were the primary means of gathering data about sociocultural experiences within the informal apprenticeship system. They were selected by locating and contacting informal apprentice shops with female apprentices within some communities in Accra, the Capital City of Ghana and seeking permission from their masters to contact them for the research. These purposively selected participants were chosen based on specific criteria: each must be a female apprentice with at least 1 year of experience and working under an experienced mentor or master apprentice. The researchers ensured that the participants were at different stages of their apprenticeship, such as beginning, midway, or nearing completion, to provide a holistic picture of the gender experiences of females within the informal vocational apprenticeship in Ghana. The decision to select one participant per trade was intended to capture a broad range of experiences of women across different occupational contexts, rather than just concentrating on within-trade variations. This selection approach ensured that the participants had sufficient experience with apprenticeships in the informal sector to share. Details of participant demographics are presented in Table 2. Figure 1 presents the gender distribution of CBT graduates under the Ghana TVET Voucher Project across cohorts and trade areas. It provides a comparative overview of male and female participation in informal apprenticeship-related trades, revealing persistent gender disparities in competency-based training programmes, with participation predominantly skewed towards males in most trade areas, while a limited number of trades exhibit strong female dominance (CTVET, 2026, p. 29).

Data collection procedure

The data was gathered using in-depth interviews and participant observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These data-gathering tools enabled the researchers to capture participants'

Table 2. Participants demographics.

Pseudonyms	Apprentice Trade	Years of Experience	Locations	Gender	Age
IFA-1	Hairdressing	3 years	Adenta	Female	24
IFA-2	Automobile Mechanic	4 years	Kaneshie	Female	26
IFA-3	Catering	2 years	Tema	Female	25
IFA-4	Fashion Design (Dress Making)	3 years	Tema	Female	26
IFA-5	Electrical Installation	3 years	Adenta	Female	25
IFA-6	Carpentry/Woodwork	2 years	Madina	Female	27
IFA-7	Welding/Metalwork	1 year	Kaneshie	Female	24
IFA-8	Beauty Technician	2 years	Adenta	Female	23
IFA-9	Nail Art and Design	1 year	Adenta	Female	24
IFA-10	Tailoring	4 years	Madina	Female	26
IFA-11	Bead Making	1 year	Madina	Female	23
IFA-12	Jewelry Making	1 year	Adenta	Female	26
IFA-13	Wedding Planning	2 years	Tesano	Female	27
IFA-14	Laundry and Ironing Services	1 year	East Legon	Female	25
IFA-15	Painting and Decorating	2 years	Adenta	Female	24
IFA-16	Make-up Artistry	1 year	Tema	Female	23

**Figure 1.** Gender composition of graduates from competency-based training (CMT) across trade areas. Source: CTNET Survey data (2025).

experiences and perceptions in their own words and offered a first-hand experience of the training process and work conditions of these female apprentices. The interview guide had interview questions focused on participants information, gender experiences, including challenges, motivation, and aspirations within the informal vocational apprenticeship sector. Sample interview questions included: Can you tell me about yourself and how you became an apprentice? Which informal trades are you being trained in and why? Were there any barriers you faced when trying to start? In your opinion, how does being a woman affect your experience as an apprentice in this trade? How are you treated by your master/madam and co-workers? How do you cope with challenges or difficult situations? Is there anything else about your experience as a female apprentice that you

would like to share? Interviews took place at their shops. Each interview lasted between 60 and 70 minutes. Regarding ethics approval, the researchers considered the study exempt from formal ethics review due to minimal risks (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). However, the study strictly adhered to standard ethical principles, including informed consent from both apprentices and their master craft persons, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Preliminary exploratory observations were also conducted during the research process to familiarize the researchers with the field context and to inform the development of the interview guide. These observations were not treated as formal data for analysis but were used to refine interview questions and enhance contextual understanding of apprenticeship practices (Al-Kuwari, 2024). The data gathering exercise was completed within 5 months. With the permission from the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis.

Data analysis technique

This study employed qualitative content analysis following the three-phase framework of preparation, organization, and reporting (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In the preparation phase, interviews were anonymized using pseudonyms and transcribed in NVivo 12, enabling data management and facilitating repeated reading for familiarization and immersion. During the organization phase, the unit of analysis included phrases, sentences, or short passages that captured relevant aspects of female experiences in the informal apprenticeship training system. A two-stage coding process was applied. Open coding was first used to generate initial codes while preserving participants' original expressions. These initial codes were refined and grouped through axial coding based on emerging patterns and relationships within the data. This process involved linking related codes and organizing them into coherent sub-categories and subsequently broader categories. For example, a participant's description of 'I know there are so many men in this occupation' was initially coded as 'awareness of male occupation' which was then grouped with similar codes under the sub-category 'breaking gender stereotypes', and ultimately abstracted into the broader category of 'gender and occupational choice'. This stepwise abstraction shows how the data analysis progressed from codes to categories. Moreover, the phenomenological approach guided the analysis by prioritizing participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes during coding, with attention to how individual female apprentices interpreted and gave sense to their experiences and interactions. The resulting categories were reviewed with the help of the research question and theoretical framework, and verified to ensure they accurately reflected the data, culminating in a categorization matrix. In the reporting phase, the final categories and supporting codes were interpreted and presented in relation to the research question and the purpose of the study. Four key categories emerged, capturing participants' experiences, with anonymity maintained throughout using pseudonyms (IFA = Informal Female Apprentices).

Findings

Four categories emerged from the content analysis, explaining the experiences of informal female apprentices in Ghana. These categories include gender and occupational

choice, gender norms and workplace behaviors, gender and eco-financial independence, and gender and emotional labor. These categories and their sub-categories are presented and supported with supporting evidence.

Category 1: gender and occupational choice

Gender and occupational choice explain how gender shapes occupational decisions and choices within the informal apprenticeship training in Ghana. Participants showed how an individual's decision to pursue a specific career is shaped by personal desires or the person's gender. According to the participants, two factors underscore gender and occupational choice: breaking gender stereotypes, and passion and social expectations. Some of the participants mentioned that they decided to choose occupations dominated by men. These decisions depict that these females decided to be actively engaged in careers that subvert societal norms. This evidence aligns with gender performative theory (Butler, 1990) by showing that breaking gender stereotypes by rejecting traditional gender roles demonstrates how gender is performed in ways that disrupt the binary norms that are often imposed on women by the Ghanaian society. For example, a 27-year-old female apprentice in the carpentry and woodwork occupation responded that:

During that period because it was mostly a male dominated occupation it was difficult to be motivated as a female, yet I still believed I could get some skills from it and profit from in future. I also realized that not a lot of women are into this occupation so that is another reason for me choosing this profession. My greatest challenge firstly is that women are not motivated to enter this occupation because they have the belief that it is solely a male occupation. (IFA-6, Carpentry/Woodwork)

Similarly, a 26-year-old female apprentice in the automobile mechanic occupation mentioned that:

I know there are so many men in this occupation. But I chose it because I wanted to challenge myself. Growing up, I'd always wanted to be a hair stylist especially in aspects like barbering and styling but during that period, I did not get enough support and encouragement from my family because there were less women in that occupation unlike today. (IFA-2, Automobile Mechanic)

Another factor is the tension between personal desires and societal expectations. The quotes below further showed that the Ghanaian society ascribes certain occupation to males and others to females. However, the female apprentices had to struggle to dismantle gender role expectations imposed by their parents. The participants said that they had to choose occupation that aligned with their childhood ambitions and passion despite parental persuasions. This shows that social norms and expectations can limit female apprentices' freedom to pursue careers that are often considered non-traditional to their gender. In Ghana, fashion making or dressmaking is predominantly a female occupation, whereas tailoring has traditionally been a male-dominated occupation, although a few men are currently involved in fashion making or garment making. For example, a 26-year-old female apprentice in the fashion design or dress making occupation also remarked that:

I chose this occupation because it has been my passion since childhood, and I have also wanted to learn the skills and techniques of being a fashion designer from an experienced

occupational. I have the passion for designing and making good clothes and the hope of being a fashion designer someday because I got inspiration from some people and I feel like this is my field. The experience has been good so far although aspects like taking measurements and meeting people has been somehow difficult. It hasn't been an easy or difficult experience. (IFA-4, Fashion Design/Dress making)

Similarly, a 26-year-old female apprentice in the tailoring occupation also recounted:

My mom being a seamstress made it possible to learn the skill from her although my father was against it because he wanted me to rather go to school and get an office work. So far, I've gained the skill in cutting, sewing, and fitting. With the knowledge, I've gained the idea of foreseeing some style of dresses and work on them. So far, it has been a good experience despite there being some petty things I sometimes struggle to grasp. My greatest challenge is that I sometimes make a crooked line when sewing a dress. (IFA-10, Tailoring)

Additionally, a 26-year-old female apprentice in the fashion design occupation explained how she managed to break gender norm by convincing her father so that she could choose a feminine occupation of her interest:

It was after my SHS (Senior High School) education that I decided to learn the skill in fashion design because I felt I had pleased my father enough, so it was my mother's turn. To please both I decided to go to school and learn the skill in fashion design. I have acquired a lot of skills, one of them is how to take measurements to be able to sew an accurate dress, I also know how to do embroidery, knitting and other designs and being able to sew dresses for both sexes. I already had an experience with sewing female dresses through my mother, but it is at my new place that I have learnt how to sew the male aspect. (IFA-4, Fashion Design/Dress Making)

The above quotes also emphasize the pressure to conform to gender norms from families or parents. The father's expectation of his daughter choosing an office work mirrors a societal idea of what is appropriate for women. As a cultural norm in Ghana, feminine and less physically demanding job roles or careers are expected to be performed by females (Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2025). Consistent with gender performative theory (Butler, 2025), the daughter's passion, however, becomes her performative act of defiance, as she chooses an occupation that both aligns with her interests and challenges gendered expectations imposed on her by the Ghanaian cultural norms.

Category 2: gender norm and workplace behaviors

According to the participants, two factors, such as gender norm and workplace behaviors, explain how gender influences the behaviours of the female apprentices at the informal training grounds. The participants mentioned that female apprentices were traditionally expected to show respect to superior and customers in exchange for skills training and job opportunities. The performance of respectability reflects how gender norms about respect and deference to authority are performative (Butler, 1990). A 24-year-old female apprentice in the painting and decorating occupation emphasized that:

I've learnt to be disciplined and respectful to my superiors and to be hardworking. As a female apprentice you are expected to be respectable and attentive to your superior so that you can learn more skills and gain more experience. I mainly acquired the skill of being patient with

people in this occupation. It is important because of how you must treat and respect others no matter how difficult it may get sometimes. (IFA-15, Painting and Decorating)

Additionally, a 24-year-old female apprentice in the hairdressing occupation stated:

I had always wanted to be a hair stylist especially in aspects like barbering and styling but during that period because it was mostly a male dominated occupation. It was difficult to be motivated as a female. It is important because with hair dressing you meet lots of people every day and with an attitude of tolerance, you would be able to handle the difficult customers or difficult situations. It is difficult staying up to date with the new trends in hair styling, health wise it takes a toll on us because at times it takes long to service customers, and this affects our sleep or causes us to fall ill especially in the festive periods (IFA-1, Hairdressing)

Based on the above quotes, it can be said that workplace behaviours were gendered. The participants said that workplace behaviours stem from gender norms, which are traditionally established by the local culture in Ghana. Participants also indicated that female apprentices had to perform submissive and respectful behaviours to gain access to skill development and career growth opportunities. Therefore, female apprentices had to perform workplace behaviors deemed appropriate for their gender, and these are common in both traditional and non-traditional trades or occupations. For example, a 24-year-old female apprentice in nail art and design also remarked that:

I chose it because it is my passion. I have learnt so many things and I'm yet to learn more. In terms of behaviour, I've learnt how to talk to customers respectfully. In terms of skills, I've learnt how to style up hair, fix nails and I'm yet to better myself. As an apprentice, I've learnt from my mentor that this profession is what she makes a living from and so I learn from her so that in the future when I become my own boss, I'd also use my skills and benefit from it. (IFA-9, Nail Art and Design)

A 25-year-old female apprentice in the catering occupation further highlighted that:

I have learned the importance of attention to paying attention, being patient, and coming to work early. I like cooking and learning more about food. I have improved a lot in catering and being able to cook many dishes. I have been able to acquire a lot like baking and being able to learn about customer service. I think it's important because when you have good customer service, you'll attract more customers, and I've also learnt more skills in the baking and cooking aspects which would help my profession. (IFA-3, Catering)

The above quotes further show that the sociocultural expectation in the Ghanaian society is that women must be socialized to be respectful, patient, and accommodating, particularly in customer-facing occupations. This evidence supports the views of Adams and Baddianaah (2023) that the feminine qualities of Ghanaian women stem largely from cultural expectation by the wider society. Essentially, this evidence further echoes the theoretical view of gender performativity that women are expected to perform behaviors to maintain their occupational ethics (Butler, 2025).

Category 3: gender and eco-financial independence

Gender and eco-financial independence explain the desire of female apprentices to achieve economic and financial progress before and after graduation. According to the participants, two factors underscored gender and eco-financial independence: desire for

economic and financial independence, and challenges of financial instability. The influence of gender is that, compared to men, women in the Ghanaian society do not have enough financial resources to be independent, which affects their career-decision-making abilities and financial autonomy (World Bank, 2025).

The desire for economic and financial independence was mentioned by the participants. The participants said that joining apprenticeship training was to acquire skills and start their own shops, which demonstrates the desire for economic independence. This evidence is essential because earlier study has shown that lack of capital or land resources comprises the financial independence of women in male-dominated trades in Ghana (Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2025). Moreover, this evidence further signals the need for economic empowerment of female apprentices after graduation. Gupta and Roy (2023) argued that economic and financial independence foster economic empowerment and improve women's decision-making abilities at the informal workplaces. A 26-year-old female apprentice in the automobile mechanic occupation also stressed that:

I chose this occupation because I want to learn from it. My experience has been good so far. I have learned many things like how to straighten a damaged car's leather work. It is important because the skills are what I need to earn a living from. Cars and their operation have always captivated me; the mechanics of automobile captivates me. It has been a challenging but rewarding experience. (IFA-2, Automobile Mechanic)

The quotes below also show the desire for financial independence among female apprentices. The participants mentioned that their financial independence depends on access to financial support including loans. The participants further explained that access to loans could help them purchase needed tools and equipment to start their own shops after graduation. Therefore, income-generating skills also enhance women's decision-making, underscoring the vital role of financial independence in sustaining their self-employment (Gupta & Roy, 2023). Another female apprentice, a 26-year-old in the jewelry making occupation stated that:

We need financial support. As a lady, I do not know how to get loans to start our own shops after graduation. I would like people to invest in the craft and sharing or advertising my designs either through word of mouth or through pictures and other sources. Because I want to earn from handy work, I would want to be supported financially to start my own business and use my skills to train others. (IFA-12, Jewelry Making)

Financial instability was mentioned as one of the major challenges to economic and financial independence. The participants indicated that the desire for economic and financial independence was hindered by financial instability. They explained financial instability as limited access to finances or loans. For example, a 26-year-old female apprentice in the fashion design occupation mentioned that:

I would like to have the patience to teach others who want to be in this field. I would like to be financially supported. Because of the passion I have for fashion, I still sacrifice to learn despite the financial issues. Since I'm an apprentice and not getting paid I can go through having a difficult time in getting financial support to work. (IFA-4, Fashion Design/Dress Making)

Moreover, a 24-year-old female apprentice in the painting and decorating occupation added that:

One of the issues I have is that I do not have new and modern tools and equipment to do my work, unless I borrow from elsewhere. And the reason is that I do not have money to buy new ones. I need capital or funds or loan to get the necessary materials and be paying little by little. I need money to support myself and purchase tools or start our own business. (IFA-15, Painting and Decorating)

The above accounts also demonstrate that a lack of access to income, loans and other financial support means less access to materials and equipment to work. Therefore, there is the need for financial support to enable female apprentices to be economically and financially viable. Commission for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (2023) highlighted that one of the challenges of TVET in Ghana is inadequate financing and investments in support institutions and learners.

Category 4: gender and emotional labor

Gender and emotional labour reveal how expectations around managing emotions intersect with unequal treatment based on gender within the informal apprenticeship training. According to the participants, two important considerations exist for gender-based emotional labor among the female apprentices in Ghana: gendered disrespect and emotional strains.

Gendered disrespect highlights the presence of disregard for females in male-dominated informal trades. Participants mentioned that both male colleagues and customers often show personal disregard for them as females in male-dominated informal trades. This evidence suggests that emotional labour is gendered as it is more often expected from women than men. Compared to men, women are socially expected to be empathetic, nurturing, and emotionally supportive, so they tend to perform more emotional labour both at home and in workplaces (Nartey et al., 2023). A 25-year-old apprentice in the laundry and ironing services stated that:

Some male customers get disrespectful at times. In the future, I would like to be my own boss and hire others and train them as well. Despite this challenge, it's been quite a good experience because I have been able to learn many things like how to talk to customers and how to serve people because positive interaction is key in this cleaning business. (IFA-14, Laundry and Ironing Services)

A 25-year-old female apprentice in the electrical installation also added that:

I feel the need to prove myself more than my male counterparts to be taken seriously where there are many men. Sometimes some of my male colleagues here think that women are weak and need help. Some of them regularly check-up on me when working as if I will kill myself when I make a mistake. Feeling less fit for this occupation makes you feel drained. (IFA-5, Electrical Installation)

A 24-year-old female apprentice in the welding and metalwork occupation responded that:

My major problem is how disrespectful some of the customers get during or after providing services to them. I hardly see same treatment for my male counterparts. Initially I lacked communication skills with men but as of now I know how to talk to them and receive male customers among others. It is important because without them you wouldn't be able to learn how to work with people (IFA-7, Welding/Metalwork)

Emotional strains show the intricate connection between gender disrespect and emotional labour. The participants noted that female apprentices were expected to properly manage their emotions when dealing with customers. The idea that these females were expected to be emotionally alert when managing customer expectations and maintaining a friendly demeanour in customer-facing roles depicts gender role expectation. A 23-year-old female apprentice in the make-up artistry occupation reported that:

I had to manage my feelings so that I do not disappoint the customers even though some of them sometimes can be emotionally charged due to misunderstanding. Last week, I had to struggle with one male customer. I think he took me for granted because I am woman. My madam does receive male customers who demand female to provide service to them. I had to deal with some difficult male customers, especially when it comes to pricing after services. (IFA-16, Make-up Artistry)

A 25-year-old female apprentice in the catering occupation also added that:

It takes a toll on us because at times it takes a long time to provide service to the customers, and this affects our sleep or causes us to fall ill, especially in the festive periods. My worry when the customer is a male asking you to prepare dishes for them. Some are good but others can be handful to deal with them. I prefer female orders than male because they do not understand what goes into catering services. (IFA-3, Catering)

Interestingly, the notion that females in informal apprenticeships are expected to manage customer expectations by sacrificing personal well-being to provide quality service clearly aligns with performing gendered expectations in emotional work. This echoes the existing view that emotional labour can be tied to gender. Harness et al. (2021) explained that emotion management can be considered an occupational competence offering positive means for identification as a critical resource for young people's negotiation of identity in apprenticeship programs.

Discussion

This study has explored the experiences of informal female apprentices in Ghana. Key findings are discussed relative to relevant literature. The discussion focuses on the importance of the findings by explaining how gender issues played a role in shaping the experiences of informal female apprentices in Ghana.

The findings show that female apprentices' choices of occupations or trades were influenced by gender stereotypes and social pressures in Ghana. The participants indicated that gender stereotypes and social pressures play significant role in shaping career decisions and occupational choices. The participants explained that entrenched gender norms from families, friends and training institutions foster stereotypes and social pressures. Though Adams and Baddianaah (2023) argued that high cost of materials and equipment required for practical sessions in TVET programs, lack of female role models in TVET and derogatory remarks by the public that portray TVET as inferior affect female enrolment in TVET in second-cycle institutions in Ghana, unfortunately our findings show that gender norms, especially from families and friends, rather tend to be the dominant explanation for occupational choices among female apprentices in Ghana's informal apprenticeship training systems. Moreover, the current findings support the views of Bridges et al. (2022) that gender inequality in some skilled trades is structurally embedded within apprenticeship

systems and intermediary organizations, which simultaneously enable and constrain women's participation, especially in some male-dominated occupations. Therefore, gender stereotypes and social pressures, which manifest in explicit and implicit messages and friendly advice from parents, often influence career and occupational choices. However, navigating these gender stereotypes based on traditional gender roles and entering a male-dominated space such as barbering or mechanics is an example of how gender is performed in ways that disrupt the binary norms that are often imposed on women by societies (Butler, 2025). Therefore, gender norms have the tendency to affect how people are raised, what training they receive, and the types of careers they pursue.

The findings also demonstrate that gender norms and workplace behaviors significantly shape the experiences of informal female apprentices in Ghana. The participants revealed that female apprentices were expected to perform behaviors deemed appropriate for their gender. These gender expectations often influence who gains access, the types of skills taught, and the type of mentoring provided and received. The findings suggest that workplace gender behaviors in Ghana are rooted in traditional gender norms such as unequal respect between male and female, limited trust in women's technical abilities, or the expectation of submissiveness influence the occupational choices of female apprentices within traditional and non-traditional trades in Ghana. These findings align with the views of Adams and Baddianaah (2023) that women in the Ghanaian society are socialized to be respectful, patient, and accommodating, and these gender-based behaviours, whether expected at home or workplace, largely predispose them to certain occupational choices. Therefore, gender norms and workplace behaviors are performative (Butler, 2025), because they tend to shape the narratives about which career or occupation is possible and which ones are impossible for female apprentices to choose.

The findings further indicate that financial instability challenged female apprentices' desire for economic and financial independence in Ghana. Established literature suggests that every female apprentice wish to develop requisite skills or trade and set up personal businesses (e.g. Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2023; Bullough et al., 2022). However, the reality is that these female apprentices often struggle to achieve this goal due to lack of access to economic and financial resources, which was described as financial instability. The participants indicated that skills development was good entrepreneurship process where female apprentices expect to open their own shops after graduation. Consistent with the views of Alla-Mensah and McGrath (2025), Ghanaian women acquire skills or develop trades with an ultimate aim of generating income and providing for themselves and their families. This finding further echoes the views of Alla-Mensah and McGrath (2025) that men have adequate access and ownership of both economic and financial resources than females in Ghana. This implies that without adequate and equal economic and financial capital, female apprentices in Ghana are more likely to struggle for financial and economic independence. This evidence further supports existing view that gender biases negatively influence women's ability to access adequate financial capital for entrepreneurship (Bullough et al., 2022). Therefore, easy access to loans and credits can help female apprentices in traditional and non-traditional trades gain equal access to new and modern equipment and establish economic ventures after graduation.

The findings also emphasize that gender influences emotional labour in the informal apprenticeship training system in Ghana. The participants mentioned that they experienced emotional strains from dealing with customers in male-dominated occupations

than their male counterparts. Ghanaian women are often expected to relate in ways that emphasize respect, care, and relational harmony, while men are expected to relate in ways that tend to emphasize authority, independence, and assertiveness (Narthey et al., 2023). Pierotti et al. (2024) revealed that women are constantly faced with teasing and mockery for pursuing careers in fields that are male dominated. Consistent with earlier studies (e.g. Brockmann, 2013; Harness et al., 2021), emotional labour management among females during apprenticeship training should be considered an occupational competence. This is because occupational competence from female apprentices and their master craft persons can enhance interpersonal relationship and further keep customers. The perceived lack of recognition and increasing disregard for females involved in male-dominated trades by male customers and peers reflect gender performativity (Butler, 2025). Moreover, gender-based emotional management style may represent a tool for gender identification, where women are expected to be emotional competent than men.

Implications for practice and policy

Insights from the major findings have several implications for practice and policy. Gender stereotypes and social pressures could be reduced by educating the public, including customers and peers about the importance of gender mainstreaming in male-dominated trades. Though gender norms and behaviors are wider societal phenomenon, master crafts persons have a moral duty to shield these females from being exposed to negative consequences of binary roles in male dominated trades. Financial literacy for apprentices, including female cohorts, is urgently needed to expose them to financial knowledge required to access available financial support from banks and governments. Though emotional labour management is both personal and occupational competence, it is important for master crafts persons to organize informal training on emotional intelligence for both male and female apprentices in their shops.

Insights from the major findings further have several policy implications. Despite the significant reforms and intervention introduced by the Government of Ghana through its allied policymakers and implementing institutions, gendering the TVET sector remains a significant hurdle to manage. Without adequate attention to gendering the informal and formal apprenticeship training systems, interventions recently introduced by the Government of Ghana, including Ghana TVET voucher project (GTVP), Ghana Jobs and Skills Project, Ghana Education Outcomes Project (GEOP), Free TVET, and Complementary Education (Commission for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 2023), could widen gender gaps and produce reversed outcomes. Therefore, policy reforms should also address gender and inclusion barriers within the informal apprenticeship training systems. The implementation of the national apprenticeship policy aimed at formalizing the informal apprenticeship training systems should seriously mainstream gender equality and equity in traditional and non-traditional trades or informal skills training spaces by paying attention to women and other marginalized groups.

Limitations and directions for future research

The study is subject to several important limitations. Its limited applicability, relatively small sample size, and exclusive focus on female apprentices without males in

the capital city of Ghana constrain the generalizability of the findings. As a result, the outcomes may not fully capture the dynamics of inclusive vocational education and training institutions across Ghana, particularly in diverse geographic and socio-cultural contexts. These factors suggest that the conclusions should be interpreted with caution when considering broader national implications. Another key limitation of this study is that it does not distinguish between participants in male-dominated and female-dominated trades, despite evidence of variation across occupational contexts. Future research should explicitly compare experiences across these two groups, as differences in training environments and mentorship structures may yield important insights into gendered apprenticeship pathways. Additionally, future research should aim to address these gaps by drawing on larger and more diverse samples, including both male and female participants to enable meaningful comparative analysis. Further investigation could also examine the role of emotional labour and the coping mechanisms that shape effective trainer–trainee interactions. In addition, exploring the subcultural and institutional drivers that reinforce binary gender roles within informal apprenticeship systems in Ghana would provide deeper insight into structural influences and inform more inclusive policy and practice. Lastly, though the participants did not provide sufficiently detailed or consistent insights regarding the mentoring role of master crafts persons to support a meaningful analysis, mentorship of female informal apprentices presents an interesting avenue for future research.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of female apprentices in Ghana's informal apprenticeship training systems. As a phenomenological research design, sixteen (16) females from sixteen informal trades were interviewed to understand their lived experiences. Insights from the findings suggest that gender stereotypes and social pressures continue to influence gendered career decisions among female apprentices. The study further revealed that the existence of gender norms and behaviors in informal apprenticeship training could be curbed to promote inclusive vocational development of female apprentices in the informal sector. Many participants reported challenges with economic and financial independence, which negatively affected entrepreneurial ambition and passion of informal female apprentices. Female apprentices receive inadequate financial and economic support during and after graduation. The study revealed that female apprentices also struggled with emotional labour management. Though considered an occupational competence or skill, emotional labour management required emotional regulation skill training. These findings aligned with the theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990, 2025) which provided powerful theoretical lens to understand the experiences of female apprentices in Ghana's informal apprenticeships systems.

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Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all the participants in this study.

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