

**Role of Teacher Gender Preference in the Education of Preschool Children in Oyo State, Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

Preschool education is a critical stage in a child's development, laying the foundation for cognitive, social, and emotional growth. In Nigeria, particularly in Oyo State, little attention has been given to how teacher gender preferences influence early learning experiences. This study tackles this gap by examining parental and institutional attitudes toward teacher gender in Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE) and their implications for children's development. Guided by Gender Schema Theory, the research relied on a review of local and international literature, policy documents, and empirical findings from Oyo State. The aim was to explore the nature of preschool education, the role of teacher gender preference, and the challenges this creates in achieving balanced early childhood teaching environments. Literatures reveal a strong bias toward male teachers, with more parents preferring women for preschool roles due to perceptions of greater patience, nurturing ability, and trustworthiness. School proprietors often align hiring practices with these preferences, leading to male underrepresentation and reinforcing stereotypes about caregiving roles. This imbalance reduces children's exposure to diverse role models and limits progress toward gender equity in education. The paper highlights the need for awareness campaigns, policy reforms, and inclusive hiring strategies to promote gender diversity in ECCDE. Addressing these issues can help create richer learning environments and challenge restrictive gender norms from the earliest stages of education.

**Keywords:** Teacher Gender Preference, Preschool Education, Gender Equity, Oyo State, Nigeria.

**Introduction**

Early childhood education (ECE) is widely recognized as the foundational stage of formal learning, shaping a child's cognitive, emotional, and social development. Globally, research has affirmed that the quality of teaching in early years significantly influences a child's readiness for primary education, as well as their long-term academic success (Józsa et al., 2022). In these formative years, teachers play a crucial role not only as educators but also as caregivers, mentors, and early social role models. This period, usually encompassing children aged 3 to 5, is therefore marked by deep interactions between learners and their educators. In many cultural contexts, including Nigeria, the

gender of preschool teachers is more than a demographic statistic, it is a sociocultural factor that shapes parental perceptions, hiring practices, and children's learning experiences. Historically and culturally, early childhood teaching has been viewed as a predominantly female profession, largely because of the association between women and nurturing roles (Aina et al., 2024). Consequently, the presence of male teachers in preschool settings remains minimal, often met with suspicion or reduced acceptance. This imbalance raises a significant question: does the preference for one gender over another in preschool teaching matter in terms of children's learning and development?

Teacher gender preference refers to the societal inclination to favour either male or female teachers in specific educational roles, often based on stereotypes or perceived abilities. In the context of preschool education, this preference is usually tilted toward female teachers. Parents and administrators often believe that female teachers are naturally more patient, emotionally responsive, and better suited for working with young children (Kadogo, Okaya & Sichari, 2023). While such perceptions may appear justified in some cases, they risk ignoring the potential contributions of male educators who may bring diversity in perspective, behavioural modelling, and interpersonal relationships for both boys and girls.

Understanding this dynamic is especially important in Oyo State, Nigeria which is a region with a diverse cultural makeup and an expanding education sector (Ajayi & Adediran, 2024). Oyo State has made significant strides in early childhood education, with numerous public and private preschools now in operation. However, studies have revealed that teacher demographics remain heavily skewed, with male teachers constituting a small minority in ECE roles (Agarry & Fawole, 2024). While teacher qualifications and curriculum materials are being improved, gender representation in classrooms is yet to receive adequate attention. The implications of gender preference in preschool teaching are far-reaching. For children, early exposure to a single-gender teaching environment may shape gender stereotypes and limit their understanding of adult roles in society. For male teachers, societal bias may lead to reduced recruitment, job insecurity, or negative perceptions. And for the education system, the lack of gender diversity may affect the holistic development of children and deny them balanced emotional and behavioural modelling (Akinwale, 2023).

This paper seeks to explore how teacher gender preference influences the education of preschool children in Oyo State. Specifically, it examines the perceptions of parents, teachers, and school administrators regarding the suitability of male and female teachers in early years education. It also considers how these preferences affect children's academic performance, emotional growth, and classroom engagement. Through a review of relevant literature, supported by local studies and contextual evidence, this paper will provide a clearer understanding of the cultural assumptions surrounding teacher gender in ECE and their consequences. With increasing advocacy for inclusive education and gender equity in teaching, this topic offers timely insight into an issue often overlooked in educational planning.

In many parts of Nigeria, including Oyo State, there is a strong and often unspoken preference for female teachers in early childhood education. This preference is rooted in cultural beliefs and social expectations and has created a significant gender imbalance in the staffing of preschools. Parents and school administrators often assume that women are naturally more suited to care for young children, leading to the recruitment and placement of mostly female teachers in preschools. As a result, male teachers are underrepresented and sometimes even discouraged from taking up teaching roles at this level. While this may seem like a harmless cultural norm, it carries deeper consequences for the children, the teachers, and the educational system as a whole. This trend

raises a critical question: What are the implications of consistently favouring one gender over the other in early childhood teaching? Are children missing out on diverse role models? How does this preference affect the perception and professional identity of male teachers who wish to work in preschools? If left unaddressed, teacher gender preference may continue to reinforce stereotypes, limit career opportunities for men, and affect the overall quality and balance of early education. There is a need to understand this issue more deeply and why it exists, how it affects children's development, and what can be done to promote a more inclusive and effective learning environment for pre-schoolers in Oyo State.

### **Theoretical Framework: Gender Schema Theory**

Gender Schema Theory, developed by Sandra Bem in 1981, provides a powerful lens for understanding how gender-based attitudes and behaviours are learned, reinforced, and perpetuated from early childhood (Bem, 1983). The theory posits that children internalize cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity through mental frameworks known as schemas. These schemas are cognitive structures that help individuals organize and interpret gender-related information. From a young age, children use these schemas to understand what behaviours, roles, and characteristics are appropriate for boys and girls within their specific cultural context. In early childhood, the environment plays a significant role in shaping these gender schemas. Family, media, and especially schools serve as powerful agents of gender socialization. One of the most influential figures in a young child's daily experience is the preschool teacher. When children consistently encounter only female teachers in nurturing and educational roles, they begin to associate such roles as inherently feminine. Over time, this shapes their perception of gender roles, influencing how they understand themselves and others within a gendered society.

In the Nigerian context, particularly in Oyo State, this theory becomes even more relevant. Cultural expectations often position caregiving, emotional labour, and teaching young children as roles best suited for women. As a result, male teachers are either underrepresented or actively discouraged from participating in early childhood education. When teacher recruitment practices, parental preferences, and institutional policies reflect this bias, children grow up within educational spaces that unintentionally reinforce restrictive gender norms. For instance, a boy who never sees a male teacher in a preschool setting may unconsciously conclude that nurturing and teaching are "not for men." Similarly, a girl raised in a female-only teaching environment may assume that only women are responsible for caregiving and emotional support. Over time, such internalized beliefs can influence their future aspirations, behaviours, and expectations of others. This not only affects how children understand gender but also how they navigate their social and professional roles later in life.

Furthermore, Gender Schema Theory highlights how gendered assumptions influence adult behaviours as well. Parents, teachers, and school administrators, having developed their own schemas, may act in ways that limit gender inclusion in ECCDE. For example, a school administrator might hesitate to hire a male preschool teacher, not based on competence, but on deeply rooted beliefs about gender-appropriate roles. Likewise, parents might resist placing their children in a classroom led by a male teacher due to internalized assumptions about safety or emotional capability. By applying Gender Schema Theory, this paper opined that not only the presence of gender preference in early childhood education but also its developmental consequences. The theory helps illuminate how teacher gender preference, though subtle or unspoken, shapes children's gender perceptions in powerful ways. It allows us to understand that

the exclusion of male teachers is not merely a staffing issue but a reflection of broader societal patterns that restrict gender equality in learning environments.

### **Education of Preschool Children**

Preschool education, widely known as Early Childhood Education (ECE), represents the earliest structured phase of a child's learning journey, typically serving children between the ages of three and five. This stage is foundational, as it fosters the development of essential life skills such as communication, social interaction, emotional regulation, motor coordination, and early literacy and numeracy. At its core, preschool education emphasizes the child's holistic growth, intellectual, emotional, physical, and social, through a combination of guided play, exploration, and interactive learning. Unlike the formal rigour of primary education, the focus at this level is not academic achievement in the conventional sense, but the nurturing of curiosity, confidence, creativity, and social adaptability. Children learn best through play and meaningful interaction, which help to build the confidence and cognitive readiness needed for future schooling (Farisia & Mukhoyyaroh, 2025). Ogunkoya (2023) expressed that in Nigeria, preschool education is delivered primarily through Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE) centres, as outlined in the National Policy on Education. These centres may be public or privately operated, and they are often attached to primary schools. The policy framework emphasizes learning through play and structured routines, delivered in a child-friendly and emotionally supportive environment. Preschool teachers, in this context, take on several roles. They are educators, caregivers, role models, and protectors. Their responsibilities go beyond teaching letters and numbers, they create emotionally secure spaces where children feel safe to express themselves, ask questions, and develop a sense of belonging. The teacher's ability to provide warmth, consistency, and support during these formative years significantly impacts a child's long-term learning outcomes and social behaviour (Ayob, 2022). Thus, the quality of preschool education in Nigeria is deeply linked to the competence, care, and character of those who deliver it.

### **Teacher Gender Preference in Education: The Nigerian Context**

Teacher gender preference refers to the societal tendency to favour either male or female educators based on perceived roles, traits, or suitability (Saloviita, 2022). In Nigeria, this phenomenon is especially evident in early childhood education, where female teachers overwhelmingly dominate the preschool landscape, which makes this imbalance nonaccidental as it is rooted in longstanding cultural and traditional beliefs that associate nurturing, patience, and caregiving with women, while assigning authority and leadership roles to men (Nwosu, Oladeji, & Okechukwu, 2025)

In many parts of the country, including Oyo State, parents and school administrators are more inclined to trust women with the care and instruction of young children (Temisanren, Akintayo, & Ayo-Ayinde, 2024). As a result, male teachers in preschool settings are rare, and when present, they may face social suspicion or even institutional reluctance. Despite possessing relevant qualifications or genuine passion for teaching, male educators are often marginalized or discouraged from working in ECCDE (Early Childhood Care Development and Education) centres. This preference, though socially normalized, has far-reaching implications. First, it reinforces gender stereotypes by subtly promoting the idea that caregiving is exclusively a woman's responsibility. Second, it limits children's exposure to diverse role models. Young boys, in particular, may grow up without seeing positive male figures in caring and educational roles, potentially affecting how they understand gender roles and future aspirations (Puzio & Valshtein,

2022). Moreover, the lack of gender diversity in the teaching workforce may narrow perspectives within the classroom, restricting opportunities for balanced learning experiences. In a society striving for gender equity, addressing biases in early education is a critical step toward achieving inclusive and holistic child development.

### **Parental and Institutional Influence on Gender Preference**

In the context of early childhood education, both parental attitudes and institutional practices play a pivotal role in shaping teacher gender representation. Particularly in Nigeria, these two forces often reinforce each other, creating and sustaining a strong preference for female teachers in preschool settings. This pattern is not merely a result of administrative policies or recruitment challenges, but is deeply embedded in cultural beliefs, emotional considerations, and perceived gender roles, especially in environments where early childhood care is viewed primarily through a maternal lens. Parents are among the most influential stakeholders in early childhood education because their perceptions, shaped by cultural norms, past experiences, and social beliefs, often guide their expectations regarding who should teach their children (Okello, 2023).

In Nigeria, there is a widespread belief that women are more nurturing, patient, and emotionally attuned to young children's needs. As such, many parents assume that female teachers are naturally better suited for preschool roles. Empirical evidence supports this trend. In a study conducted in Ibadan North Local Government Area, nearly 85% of parents preferred female teachers for children under the age of five and the primary reasons cited included emotional sensitivity, maternal instincts, and safety concerns (Temisanren, Akintayo & Ayo-Ayinde, 2024). Many parents felt that female teachers were more trustworthy and less likely to engage in abusive or inappropriate behaviour, a belief not based on documented cases, but on deeply ingrained social biases. Notably, these views were more pronounced in urban areas where parental involvement in schools was higher, possibly due to greater access to information and direct communication with school staff.

The preferences held by parents do not exist in a vacuum, they significantly influence how educational institutions operate. School proprietors, particularly those running private ECCDE (Early Childhood Care Development and Education) centres, frequently shape their recruitment policies around parental expectations. In essence, the market demand for female teachers creates a supply chain that actively excludes or overlooks male candidates. In a recent study by, school administrators across several states in Nigeria, including Oyo, admitted that they deliberately hired more women than men for preschool teaching roles (Amosun, Ogunniyi & Ogunbiyi, 2021). The rationale was straightforward: doing so aligned with what parents wanted and helped maintain the school's reputation as a "safe and nurturing" environment. Even when qualified male teachers applied for preschool positions, they were often redirected to roles in upper primary classes or administrative duties.

This institutionalization of gendered hiring not only reinforces existing stereotypes but also undermines Nigeria's national efforts to promote gender equity in education. The National Policy on Education (2013) emphasizes inclusive teaching environments and equal opportunity for both male and female educators. However, without structural accountability, such policies remain aspirational. The real-world practices of many ECCDE centres are still governed more by cultural expectations than by formal policy frameworks. The mutual reinforcement between parental attitudes and institutional practices creates a cycle that is difficult to break. Parents prefer female teachers, institutions hire to meet this demand, and male teachers are marginalized, resulting in

fewer visible male role models in early education settings. Consequently, children grow up with limited exposure to nurturing male figures in school environments, which may influence their own understanding of gender roles from an early age. This cycle also has implications for teacher diversity and classroom dynamics. A mono-gender teaching environment may unintentionally limit the range of experiences, teaching styles, and role modelling available to young learners. More critically, it sends a subtle but powerful message that caregiving and teaching young children are exclusively female responsibilities, thus reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes and discouraging boys from seeing themselves in such roles in the future.

Furthermore, male teachers who do manage to enter early childhood classrooms often face additional scrutiny and professional isolation. They may feel the need to prove their trustworthiness more than their female counterparts, and in some cases, limit their interactions with children to avoid misinterpretation. This not only affects their teaching effectiveness but also diminishes the emotional safety of the classroom environment for both teacher and student.

### **Challenges Arising from Teacher Gender Preference**

At first glance, the preference for female preschool teachers in Nigeria may appear harmless or even natural, given longstanding cultural associations of women with caregiving and child-rearing. However, this deeply rooted gender bias presents several significant challenges that impact the effectiveness, inclusivity, and equity of early childhood education. One of the most visible consequences is the gender imbalance in the preschool teaching workforce. In many ECCDE (Early Childhood Care Development and Education) centres across Nigeria, particularly in states like Oyo, female teachers make up the overwhelming majority (Ige & Orisabinone, 2022). While their dedication and competence are not in question, the absence of male educators results in a lack of diversity in teaching styles, perspectives, and role modelling. Classrooms shaped by a single-gender teaching force can inadvertently deprive children of balanced social interactions and limit their understanding of gender diversity in adult roles (Wills, 2003; Tucker, 2024).

This imbalance also leads to the marginalization of male teachers. Men who pursue careers in early childhood education often encounter subtle and overt forms of discrimination, they may be viewed with suspicion, stereotyped as emotionally unfit for nurturing roles, or outright discouraged from participating in the field (Rohrmann, 2016). Some parents feel uneasy about leaving their children in the care of male teachers, regardless of their qualifications. This societal mistrust not only devalues the professional contributions of male educators but can also damage their confidence and career progression. Furthermore, the persistent gender preference reinforces harmful stereotypes about gender roles in society. When caregiving and early education are consistently portrayed as feminine responsibilities, children internalize narrow definitions of what men and women are expected to do. These stereotypes take root early and may affect children's future aspirations and interpersonal relationships. Gender-based assumptions, if left unchallenged in the early years, can shape lifelong attitudes toward work, family, and leadership. Another critical concern is the limited availability of male role models for young learners, particularly boys. Preschool is a vital stage for identity formation and emotional development. Children often look to teachers as figures of guidance, safety, and aspiration. The absence of male teachers may result in boys having few, if any, examples of men in nurturing or emotionally expressive roles. This can restrict their emotional vocabulary and skew their understanding of masculinity.

## **Conclusion**

This study examines the role of teacher gender preference in preschool education, with particular focus on its prevalence, implications, and challenges within Oyo State, Nigeria. Drawing from theoretical insights, especially Gender Schema Theory and empirical evidence from both local and international contexts, the paper concludes that gender preference is a deeply embedded issue, shaped by societal expectations, parental beliefs, and institutional practices. In Nigeria, early childhood education is heavily feminized, largely due to the widespread assumption that women are more suited to nurturing and caregiving roles. This perception, often rooted in cultural norms rather than professional competence, significantly influences hiring decisions in ECCDE centres and parental attitudes toward male teachers. While the dominance of female teachers may appear to offer emotional comfort and safety, it simultaneously marginalizes male educators and restricts the diversity of role models available to young children, particularly boys.

Moreover, the continued absence of male teachers reinforces narrow gender stereotypes, potentially influencing how children construct their understanding of gender roles from an early age. It also places undue pressure on male educators, who may face suspicion or lack of support within school communities, regardless of their qualifications or dedication. These patterns reflect broader social dynamics and contribute to the underrepresentation of men in early education. The implications are clear: teacher gender preference not only limits professional inclusivity but also has lasting effects on classroom experiences, policy implementation, and children's developmental outcomes. Therefore, addressing this issue is essential for creating equitable, balanced, and developmentally appropriate early learning environments.

## **Way Forward**

### **1. Public Awareness and Community Sensitization**

A critical first step is to challenge societal norms that associate caregiving solely with women. Awareness campaigns through schools, religious groups, media, and parent-teacher forums, should emphasize that both men and women can nurture, teach, and support the development of young children effectively. These initiatives must aim to reshape public perception and build trust in male educators.

### **2. Gender-Inclusive Teacher Recruitment Policies**

Education stakeholders, especially within ECCDE centres, must adopt more inclusive hiring practices. Ministries of Education and school proprietors should be encouraged to recruit qualified male teachers without bias. Recruitment guidelines and job advertisements must reflect gender neutrality, focusing on professional competence and experience rather than implicit gender roles.

### **3. Support Structures for Male Teachers**

To retain and empower male educators in early childhood settings, schools should establish mentorship programs, peer support networks, and protection policies against discrimination. Creating a safe and affirming environment for male teachers helps reduce stigma and encourages longevity in the profession.

### **4. Curriculum and Teacher Training Reform**

Colleges of education and teacher training institutes should integrate gender sensitivity into their curriculum. Pre-service teachers must be equipped with the tools to understand and challenge

gender stereotypes, both in themselves and in their students. Encouraging men to specialize in ECCDE during training can help normalize their participation.

### **5. Policy Implementation and Monitoring**

Although Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2013) supports inclusivity, its enforcement remains weak. Government agencies must take active steps to monitor gender representation in ECCDE institutions and ensure compliance with gender-equitable policies. Regular audits, reporting frameworks, and incentives for gender-balanced staffing could accelerate progress.

### **6. Inclusive Classroom Practices**

Regardless of gender, teachers must intentionally model equality, empathy, and respect in the classroom. This includes avoiding gendered language, ensuring diverse classroom resources, and encouraging children to explore a wide range of emotions, activities, and aspirations beyond societal expectations.

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