

Between a rock and a hard place: Principals' views on gender issues in teacher recruitment in Indonesian early childhood education

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Abstract: This study explores how kindergarten principals in Indonesia perceive gender issues in relation to the teacher recruitment process. Employing a qualitative approach, the study involved focus group discussion with four principals and individual interviews with three others, guided by socio-cultural theory. The findings reveal that although all principals recognized the value of male teachers, they faced competing challenges in hiring them. These included beliefs that the profession is more appropriate for women, fears of potential harassment, and concerns about masculine teaching styles. Deeply embedded gender stereotypes and dominant social norms that position men primarily as breadwinners further discouraged principals from hiring male teachers. Consequently, early childhood education environments remain gender-homogeneous, sustaining gender imbalances and inequality. Since this study involved only female principals in West Java, future research should include a more diverse group of participants and broader geographical contexts to better understand male teacher participation in Indonesian early childhood education.

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Introduction

For decades, early childhood education (ECE) has remained one of the most gender-imbalanced fields worldwide (Bittner & Cooney, 2003; Cameron, 2001; McDonald et al., 2024; Rohrmann, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2024; Sumsion, 2005; Thorpe et al., 2020). Women continue to dominate the field, while the number of men occupying the job in this setting relatively low across different contexts (Reich-Shapiro et al., 2020). This pattern is evident in various part of the world, including countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Australia (Sullivan et al., 2024, 2020; Sumsion, 2005), China (Xu et al., 2022; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018), and Indonesia (Adriany, 2022; Pangastuti, 2020; Yulindrasari, 2017). However, the issue of gender imbalance in ECE goes beyond statistics since it reinforces traditional gender norms and sustains the belief that caring for and educating young children is inherently a women's roles (Bhana et al., 2022; Warin, 2018).

Increasing male representation in ECE is vital not only for advancing gender equality but also for enriching children's learning experiences (Brody et al., 2021). Male teachers help challenge conventional gender roles, offering children broader role models and perspectives (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). They may also bring distinct approaches to teaching, play, and classroom management that complement those of female teachers (Davies, 2023). A more diverse teaching team can better meet different learning needs, improving the overall quality of ECE (Warin, 2018). Accordingly, growing awareness of the value of men in early childhood settings has led to global campaigns promoting the recruitment of male teachers (Reich-Shapiro et al., 2020).

Rohrmann (2020) suggests that in the past decade, several countries such as Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Austria, and China have taken steps to boost male participation in ECE settings. These efforts emphasize the importance of strategic planning, funding, community involvement, and competitive salaries in encouraging men to join the profession.

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However, recruiting male teachers remains challenging due to a range of interconnected issues. In many contexts, the profession is associated with poor working conditions and low financial rewards, making it less appealing to potential male candidates (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Eckhardt & Egert, 2020). These challenges also include long working hours, lack of support, high turnover, and limited opportunities for professional advancement (Brody et al., 2021; OECD, 2019; Rohrmann et al., 2021). Low salaries compared to other educational sectors further reduce the profession's attractiveness (McDonald et al., 2024).

Societal perceptions also play a significant role in discouraging men from entering the field. Negative stereotypes and cultural stigmas, such as fears of being accused of child abuse or pedophilia (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Sak et al., 2019), foster mistrust and suspicion (Brody & Gor Ziv, 2019; Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). This environment discourages men from pursuing ECE careers. Moreover, there is a widespread belief that male teachers lack the nurturing qualities needed for early childhood teaching (McDonald et al., 2024). ECE is often viewed as a female-dominated field because it emphasizes emotional care more than intellectual education (Farquhar, 2008; Koch & Farquhar, 2015; Swick & Brown, 1999). Interestingly, neuroscience studies have shown that cognition and emotion are interconnected in learning (Tyng et al., 2017; Van Laere et al., 2014). This highlights emotional care and intellectual development are both essential to a child's growth, making the notion of ECE as purely emotional work outdated (Miskuska & Fairchild, 2020). The integration of emotional and intellectual elements is vital to holistic child development, showing that both men and women can make valuable contributions to the field. The stereotype that caregiving is inherently female is rooted in traditional gender roles, which often portray men as less capable in nurturing roles (Xu, 2021). These views continue to discourage men from entering ECE, despite growing evidence that they can be just as effective in supporting young children (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2023).

Furthermore, societal views of ECE as a female-dominated field exacerbate the challenges faced by male teachers. The profession is widely perceived as low-status and poorly remunerated, which further discourages men from entering the field (Davies, 2023). Concerns about being seen as inappropriate or suspicious add to these challenges, as male teachers may feel unwelcome in early childhood settings (Sullivan et al., 2024), frequently facing scrutiny and discrimination (Hedlin et al., 2019) or being viewed with suspicion (Pruit, 2015). The absence of male role models reinforces the perception that ECE is not a suitable career path for men (Bhana & Moosa, 2016).

In Indonesia, studies on teacher recruitment in ECE largely focus on localized settings, as shown in studies by Andina and Arifa (2021), Huang et al. (2022), Qomario et al. (2018), Sofiah and Munandar (2023), Surya (2016), Wulandari (2013), and Zidan (2024). These works comprehensively detail recruitment processes and procedures specific to certain regions or institutions but give limited attention to the broader socio-cultural context that shape these practices.

While male participation in ECE has been contested globally, the Indonesian context presents distinct socio-cultural features. Gender roles in Indonesia are shaped by religious, cultural, and community norms that often position caregiving and teaching in ECE as inherently feminine professions (Ramdaeni et al., 2020). These norms contribute to the marginalization of male teachers and reinforce gendered expectations in educational settings. Scholars have emphasized the need to examine how these socio-cultural beliefs influence recruitment and retention practices, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts where Western educational models may not fully align with local values (Adriany et al., 2022). Moreover, broader discussions on gender equity in ECE highlight the importance of understanding how institutional and societal perceptions shape workforce diversity as, W. S. Tan (2017) argues. A socio-cultural lens offers a valuable framework for analyzing how principals' beliefs and practices are embedded within these cultural narratives. Accordingly, this study provides a socio-cultural analysis of male teacher recruitment in Indonesian ECE, examining how gendered perceptions and cultural beliefs inform recruitment decisions and contribute to both barriers and possibilities for male participation.

The recruitment of teachers in Indonesian ECE institutions is shaped by multiple factors that

influence both the selection process and the qualifications sought in prospective teachers. Putri and Karwanto (2021) reveal that hiring qualified and competent teachers is essential for improving the overall quality of education. They argue recruitment should be conducted through a thorough and systematic process to ensure that only the most capable candidates are selected. Other studies also emphasize the need for teacher candidates to hold appropriate qualifications and demonstrate the potential to support children's developmental needs (Andina & Arifa, 2021; Hasibuan et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2022; Kahfi, 2022; Qomario et al., 2018; Shofiah & Munandar, 2023; Simatupang, 2019; Widiarti et al., 2018). These studies refer to the concept of professional teachers as outlined in government regulations (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014), which require candidates to meet specific qualifications and competencies.

Diana et al. (2023) assert that teachers must comprehend pedagogical strategies which are relevant to the diverse needs of children. Additionally, a candidate's personal traits and the demands of the job, as well as institutional practices, plays a significant role in the recruitment process (Nugroho et al., 2024). Effective teacher recruitment involves not only identifying candidates with the necessary skills but also ensuring their personal characteristics are aligned with the role. Putri and Irawan (2021) underline the importance of a structured recruitment process, which includes selecting qualified candidates and providing ongoing professional development. Such a systematic approach helps ensure that the process is both efficient and effective, ultimately leading to the selection of the most suitable individuals for teaching roles in ECE institutions.

While existing debates and studies have extensively documented the benefits and challenges of male participation in ECE, there remains a critical gap in understanding how socio-cultural contexts shape recruitment practices. The absence of comprehensive, context-specific analysis limits our ability to grasp the complex barriers and enabling conditions that influence male teacher inclusion. Given that perceptions of gender roles and professional suitability are deeply embedded in cultural narratives (Anthias, 2013; Gill, 2020), it is essential to examine these dynamics within localized settings, where interpretations of gender and education may diverge significantly from global norms (Glinski et al., 2018).

Accordingly, this study investigates the following research question: *How do kindergarten principals perceive male teacher recruitment within Indonesia's socio-cultural context, and how are these perceptions reflected in recruitment practices?* By exploring this issue, the study explores the ways in which socio-cultural norms and community expectations inform both the beliefs and practices of school leaders. Moreover, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how cultural context influences decision-making in Indonesian ECE and offers insights into the broader dynamics of gender and workforce diversity in the settings.

Early Childhood Education in Indonesia: Contextualizing the Study

According to the *Law of Education* (Government of Indonesia [GOI], 2003) ECE in Indonesia is defined as a series of planned activities and stimuli provided to children from birth to age six to support their development and facilitate their readiness for primary education level. Unlike primary and secondary education, ECE is non-compulsory and remains optional. Consequently, enrollment depends heavily on parental decisions and socio-economic conditions, leading to varying participation rates across regions (Adriany et al., 2020). Indonesian law also classifies ECE as nonformal education, typically linked to family, community, and socio-religious organizations. Therefore, as W. S. Tan (2017) suggests, families and communities are primarily responsible for providing ECE services and facilities, rather than the government. This non-compulsory status has contributed to disparities in access and quality across socio-economic groups and regions (Yulindrasari, 2012).

Recently, 6,825,425 children are enrolled in various ECE institutions (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology [MOECRT], 2025) include kindergartens, playgroups, daycare centers, and other units which they are coordinated by the Ministry of Education. Additionally, a certain number of children are enrolled in *Raudhatul Athfal* (Islamic kindergartens) that are managed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA).

There are 198,482 ECE institutions in Indonesia, with 97% operated by private entities (Ministry of

Education, Culture, Research and Technology, 2025). These centers often compensate for limited public provision, serving diverse community needs (Adriany, 2022; Wijoyo, 2020). Kindergartens under MORA are entirely privately operated. This situation has led to sharp inequalities between urban and rural areas. Urban institutions tend to have better infrastructure and resources, while rural areas face limited access and lower service quality (The World Bank, 2013). For instance, MOECRT (2025) reported that 3,848 ECE institutions have no electricity access, highlighting the urgency of addressing resource disparities (Adriany, 2022; Formen, 2018).

In terms of teacher qualifications, a bachelor's degree in early childhood studies or psychology is the minimum requirement for teaching in an ECE setting in Indonesia (GOI, 2014). However, the data shows that a significant number of teachers do not meet this standard. Around 337,200 out of 710,383 ECE teachers (approximately 52.5%) hold qualifications below the bachelor's degree level (MOECRT, 2025). This gap is more evident in rural areas, where access to higher education is limited, financial resources are scarce, and professional development opportunities are lacking (Formen, 2018; Pangastuti, 2020). Consequently, many institutions rely on volunteer teachers with minimal or no formal training (Jung & Hasan, 2014).

Based on employment status, ECE teachers in Indonesia are classified into five categories: civil servants (CS), government employees with work agreements (GEWA), private teachers, auxiliary teachers paid by local governments (ATLG), and part-time teachers. Of the current total of 710,383 teachers, 36,478 are civil servants, 6,773 are GEWA, 445,382 are private teachers, 19,624 are ATLG, and 202,126 are part-time teachers. Among them, only 38,791 are men, accounting for about 5.5% of the total (MOECRT, 2025).

Teachers in private ECE institutions, particularly in urban areas, generally benefit from better facilities, higher salaries, and access to professional development programs. However, they also face greater pressure and heavier workloads (Pranoto et al., 2021; The World Bank, 2013). Urban ECE institutions can attract highly qualified teachers by offering competitive salaries and structured professional development, advantages that are often unavailable in rural areas (Beaty et al., 2018). This urban-rural divide deepens educational inequality, as teachers in underserved regions lack the support and resources needed to improve quality (Nakajima et al., 2021).

Education in Indonesia is a shared responsibility between the government and the community (GOI, 2003). While the government provides policy and standards, the management of ECE centers, particularly private ones, is largely autonomous (The World Bank, 2013; Yulindrasari, 2012). This autonomy allows flexibility and innovation but also presents challenges in maintaining consistent quality and adherence to national standards (Formen, 2018; Kahfi, 2022; W. S. Tan, 2017). Stronger collaboration and support mechanisms between the government and private providers are therefore needed to reduce disparities and improve the overall quality of ECE in Indonesia (Bangay, 2015; Nasution, 2017; Simatupang, 2019).

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine kindergarten principals' perception of gender and teacher recruitment practices. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for this purpose due to its exploratory and interpretative nature, which enables an in-depth understanding of individuals' experiences and viewpoints (Ary et al., 2019; Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This approach aligns with the study's objective of capturing the complex views of kindergarten principals on gender dynamics and teacher recruitment within the Indonesian ECE context. By utilizing qualitative methods, the study aims to explore deeply the perceptions held by these educational leaders, providing rich, detailed insights that quantitative methods might not capture (Cohen et al., 2018).

Participant (Sampling Process)

Researchers used purposive sampling to intentionally select participants with specific characteristics relevant to the research question. This method ensures the sample includes individuals who can provide rich, detailed insights into the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study,

participants were required to be principals of ECE institution, ensuring they have relevant experience and insights into teacher recruitment and gender perception within early childhood education.

To recruit participants, the researchers enlisted support from students in the Early Childhood Department within their faculty. Practically, the researchers distributed a flyer through a WhatsApp group comprising these students. Many of these students hold teaching assistant positions in ECE institutions and are members of teacher associations. The researchers encouraged them to share the invitation with kindergarten principals in their networks, particularly in Bogor, West Java.

The flyer included the contact details of the research team coordinator, providing both a phone number and email address for inquiries. This approach ensured that participation was entirely voluntary, as interested principals-initiated contact with the researchers. After one month, eleven kindergarten principals expressed interest in participating in the study.

Subsequently, the researchers sent these principals a brief research plan and a consent form, written both in English and Indonesian, to ensure they fully understood the study and were aware of their right to participate or withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Following the review of these materials, one principal chose to withdraw from the study, resulting in a pool of ten prospective participants. The researchers then coordinated with the remaining participants to schedule data collection at times and locations convenient for them. However, three participants later canceled due to personal reasons.

The study involved seven kindergarten principals, all of whom were female. The participants comprised principals of private kindergartens, aged between 26 and 34 years. Their length of service as principals ranged from 4 to 7 years. All participants had substantial experience in teacher recruitment within their institutions, often serving as the primary decision-makers alongside school owners. This approach is typical in private kindergartens in Indonesia, where the decision-making process, including teacher recruitment, is jointly handled by the school owners and principals, and sometimes involves the school committee as parents' representatives. Accordingly, the insights and perceptions shared by these principals were based on their direct experiences, making their contributions highly relevant and significant to the study's focus on gender perceptions and teacher recruitment.

Data Collection Procedures

In this empirical study, data was collected using individual interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Participants were given the flexibility to choose between FGD and individual interviews, as well as to propose alternative times and locations for data collection if the options provided were not suitable. Eventually, those who chose FGD agreed to hold the sessions in a classroom at the researchers' university, selected for its convenience and proximity to the participants' homes. The classroom was arranged to support open discussion, with seating in a circle to encourage interaction. Author 1 served as the moderator, using a semi-structured guide to facilitate conversation and ensure balanced participation. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent. In the end, four principals, i.e. Anisah, Bunga, Chandra, and Dini, participated in the FGD for about 98 minutes. This method enabled the collection of rich, diverse data through interactive group dynamics, where participants could build on each other's ideas, leading to deeper insights (Gibbs, 2012).

Additionally, three other principals, namely Euis, Fatima, and Galuh, chose to be interviewed at their respective kindergartens, scheduled after school hours based on their preferences. Author 2 organized each interview which lasted between 45 and 55 minutes and followed a semi-structured format.

To ensure participants could freely express their opinions without linguistic barriers, both the FGD and interviews were conducted in participants' native language, *Bahasa Indonesia*. Shabina et al. (2024) emphasize that this approach facilitates comfortable and precise communication, minimizing the risk of misinterpretation. It also respects the cultural context, acknowledging the role of language in shaping perceptions and interactions. By conducting discussions in Bahasa Indonesia, the researchers ensured the

data collected was authentic and reflective of the participants' true perspectives, enhancing the study's validity and reliability.

Data Analysis Process

The collected data were subjected to a rigorous and systematic analysis. Recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and facilitate detailed examination. Prior to analysis, the transcripts were sent to participants for verification to ensure that the researchers accurately captured their intended meanings and did not misrepresent their statements.

Utilizing ATLAS.ti software, researchers engaged in a comprehensive coding process, which included creating specific codes, writing memos, identifying quotations, annotating data, and observing patterns in the translated transcripts. This systematic approach facilitated the organization of the transcripts, enabling the identification of emerging patterns and recurring themes, which guided the interpretation of the data (Flick, 2014; Naeem et al., 2023).

To analyze the principals' perceptions of teacher recruitment, researchers applied Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural theory, which emphasizes the role of societal norms and cultural contexts in shaping individual assumptions and cognition (Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky et al., 2012). From this theoretical lens, principals' decisions regarding teacher recruitment are not made in isolation but are shaped by the socio-cultural and institutional contexts in which they operate. Socio-cultural influences may include community expectations around gender roles, religious norms, and cultural perceptions of early childhood education.

Moreover, the socio-cultural theory suggests that principals' expectations of teachers are shaped by their interactions with various stakeholders, such as parents, community leaders, and educational authorities. These interactions help principals form a comprehensive view of the qualities and skills necessary for teachers to succeed in their specific socio-cultural context. By considering these socio-cultural aspects, principals can make informed and culturally sensitive decisions in recruiting teachers, ultimately contributing to a more effective and contextually relevant early childhood education system in Indonesia.

In addition, within this theoretical framework, language plays a critical role in shaping thought and reasoning. Vygotsky argued that language serves not only as a communication tool but also as a means for thinking, acting, and problem-solving (Rieber & Carton, 1988). Through social interaction, individuals internalize language, which becomes part of their cognitive function, enabling self-regulation and higher-order thinking. Social norms and cultural values embedded in language also shape how individuals perceive and interact with the world, showing the dynamic link between culture and human cognition.

While gender theories focusing on masculinity and femininity offer valuable insights, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory provides a broader framework for understanding how gender perceptions are constructed through social interaction and language. This approach enables us to examine not only the content of these perceptions but also the processes by which they are formed and sustained within the socio-cultural context of ECE settings in Indonesia.

Research Ethics

Upon expressing interest in the study, author 2 distributed a consent form detailing the procedures, including the use of audio recordings for comfort and the use of pseudonyms such as Anisah, Bunga, Chandra, Dini, Euis, Fatima, and Galuh, to protect their privacy. This anonymization adheres to ethical guidelines, ensuring participants' rights and dignity (Saunders et al., 2015; Vainio, 2013).

Ethical standards were rigorously upheld throughout the study including the implementation of informed consent procedures, assurance of voluntary participation, and strict protection of participant confidentiality.

Another crucial aspect of the present study was that the researchers and all participants did not know each other, indicating the absence of any prior acquaintance. This lack of familiarity significantly reduced potential power dynamics, fostering an unbiased and respectful environment. By ensuring that

researchers and participants had no previous interactions, the study minimized any influence the researchers might have had, allowing participants to express their opinions freely and without pressure (Anyan, 2013).

Results

Five key themes emerged from the FGD and individual interviews, illustrating the socio-cultural dynamics influencing male teacher recruitment in Indonesian ECE. Themes concerning the perceived suitability of women for teaching roles and concerns about potential harassment were predominantly identified in FGD, reflecting community-level sensitivities. In contrast, interviews highlighted the relevance of male teachers for gender-specific tasks and broader institutional expectations. One theme, i.e. the expected roles of male teachers, was consistently present across both FGD and interviews, suggesting a shared understanding among participants. Each theme is detailed in the following sections to provide a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural situation influencing teacher recruitment in Indonesian ECE settings.

Women Are More Suitable for Tasks in ECE

Participants shared the view that women possess qualities considered more appropriate for teaching in early childhood settings. Anisa described a commonly held belief in her community regarding women's suitability for the role:

It is commonly believed in my neighborhood that teaching in kindergarten is a job best done by women. They're usually seen as patient and more caring looking after kids. (Anisa)

Similarly, Bunga and Chandra expressed a preference for hiring female applicants over male counterparts:

Honestly, we prefer female teachers because they have mothering attributes. So, they know kids' stuff and how to treat children well. We're open to males teaching at the kindergarten if they meet the schools' established criteria. However, if we must pick one out of two candidates, I'd go for the female teacher. (Bunga)

Well... like my friend mentioned earlier, women are usually more patient with kids. Men might have that too, but we generally prefer women. Unless for positions like extra-curricular tutor, cleaning person or gardener, it's totally fine males are recruited. So, in our kindergarten, we choose females for teaching position. (Chandra)

The above narratives suggest that women are perceived as having qualities such as patience, care, and nurturing, which are seen as essential for early childhood teaching. Consequently, when selecting candidates, principals tend to prefer female applicants for teaching positions.

The Importance of Male Teachers in ECE

When asked about the participation of males in ECE settings, some participants acknowledged that male are needed, both as role models and in supporting the teaching and learning process. As Fatimah noted:

We knew that our kindergarten needs male figures—such as to be role models for boys, to lead Friday prayer simulations, or whatever. We've just realized that they are needed. (Fatimah)

Galuh also underlined the importance of male presence in helping children understand gender concepts:

I thought children need a real-life example of male teachers in the classroom... hmmm..., our curriculum has a theme about 'self.' It talks about us as human: there is woman or girl, there is a man or boy. If a male teacher attends, it's easier to explain that concept to children in a more concrete way. (Galuh)

Unlike the previous two participants, Euis emphasized the practical contributions that male teachers could make in terms of handling physically demanding tasks:

Our kindergarten has a lot of activities; we often need to lift and carry equipment. Sometimes the teachers are overwhelmed—we are all women. We often imagine having a male teacher. It seems like there's a lot they could do, not just in the classroom, but outside too, especially during such activities. So, yeah... we need males. (Euis)

The data from interviews and FGD reveal a perceived need for male teachers in ECE settings. Participants recognized that male teachers could serve as role models for boys and lead specific activities, such as religious simulations. They also pointed out that male presence can help children better understand gender-related topics in the curriculum. Additionally, male teachers are seen as helpful in managing physically demanding tasks, easing the workload of female staff. Overall, their presence is perceived as enhancing both the educational and operational dimensions of ECE environments.

The Expected Role of Males

Another issue that emerged during the FGD was the expected role of males, particularly within the family context. One participant shared:

We all know the salary is pretty small. The pay isn't great. I can't even imagine a male candidate in an interview bargaining, "Can I get this much salary per month?" and then they may be surprised when I mention the salary they would receive, especially if they have families to support. They are expected to be breadwinners, aren't they? (Galuh)

Dini also raised concerns about the possibility of higher salary demands from married male applicants:

Our school's finances solely depend on the BOP funds, which is small. We're worried that male teachers might ask for high salaries, especially if they are married. They must support their family. So yeah... that's how it is... we're hesitant to hire male teachers, money is the issue. (Dini)

These reflections highlight the financial challenges commonly faced by kindergarten teachers, with salaries often being modest. This becomes more significant for male candidates, who are traditionally expected to serve as primary breadwinners. During interviews, male applicants may inquire about salaries that do not meet their financial responsibilities, leading to concerns about their ability to support a family.

This situation highlights the broader issue of low compensation in the ECE sector, which may discourage qualified individuals, particularly males, from entering the profession. The societal expectation for men to provide financially adds another layer of complexity to their decision to pursue teaching in kindergartens. Inadequate pay not only places financial strain on male teachers but also impacts efforts to improve gender diversity within the ECE workforce.

Fear of Potential Harassment by Males

Another issue that emerged in the discussion about male participation in ECE relates to concerns about male behavior in educational settings, particularly in reference to a widely publicized incident that occurred several years ago. One participant shared:

Dini: I agree that kindergarten needs male teachers. But honestly, we're a bit worried about potential incidents, like the one that got a lot of media attention a few years ago involving sexual harassment towards kids at school. If such a thing happened, it could have serious consequences for us.

Researcher: What consequences?

Dini: Hmm... parents were worried it might happen in our institution, then they decided not to send their children to our school.

Researcher: But it happened in another institution, right?

Dini: Yes. But if we have male teachers, parents may be worried that the same thing could happen to us. Then they may avoid kindergartens that have male teachers.

The principal's hesitation to hire male teachers appears to stem from fears of potential harassment, even though the referenced incident involved a male janitor, not a teacher, at an international school. The case received significant media attention and heightened public concern. In response, many parents became increasingly cautious about male presence in educational settings. This has led to a lingering suspicion and stigma toward male teachers, reinforcing gender-based barriers in teacher recruitment.

Pedagogical Method by Males

One participant, Euis, shared her views on the assumption that male teachers have a distinct way of managing children:

Euis: We used to talk with parents about the possibility of having a male teacher in our kindergarten. Almost all of them were worried about that.

Researcher: what do you mean by worried?

Euis: Hmm... to me, it meant they disagreed with the idea.

Researcher: why?

Euis: Some people think men often use physical ways to discipline kids—like hitting, kicking, or yelling loudly—which can easily scare them. I'm not saying all men do this, but I've seen it happen often in daily life, in our neighborhood.

Researcher: Really? You said not all men. What if it was someone you knew well—say, your neighbor—who is kind and meets all the criteria. Would you hire him?

Euis: Hmm... how should I say this... hmm... (*The participant paused, looked confused, then smiled*) I'm not sure. But we take the parents' side.

Euis's account reveals ongoing concerns among parents about hiring male teachers in ECE settings. The primary fear is that male teachers may use more physical or intimidating disciplinary methods, such as hitting or yelling. Although this stereotype does not apply to all men, it appears frequently enough in community discourse to influence parental perceptions and school hiring decisions.

Euis acknowledges that she is not generalizing all men but points out that such behavior has been observed in her community, which may reinforce these assumptions. When presented with a hypothetical situation involving a trusted male neighbor, she remained hesitant. This hesitation suggests that even familiarity and trust may not be enough to counter broader community concerns.

Her response also emphasizes that schools tend to prioritize parental preferences in recruitment decisions. This reflects the significant influence of societal perceptions on hiring practices in ECE. The situation indicates the need for broader efforts to challenge stereotypes surrounding male pedagogical approaches. Building trust and showcasing positive examples of male teachers who can offer nurturing, non-intimidating learning environments is crucial for changing public perceptions.

Discussion

This study highlights the complexity of teacher recruitment in Indonesian ECE, particularly regarding the gender of prospective teachers. Recruitment decisions are shaped by multiple factors beyond standard qualifications or planned criteria. As presented above, five key themes emerged from the data. These were analyzed through a socio-cultural lens, resulting in two overarching concepts: gender stereotypes and the breadwinner role as a cultural tool.

Embedded Gender Stereotypes

The findings provide a detailed view of how gender stereotypes manifest in Indonesian ECE. Gender stereotypes, that defined as generalized and often inaccurate beliefs about traits, behaviors, and roles assigned to individuals based on gender (Koenig, 2018), are deeply embedded in this context. These stereotypes appear in various ways, including beliefs that women are better suited for teaching young children, concerns about male teachers as potential threats, and the notion of a "masculine pedagogy" (Budde & Rieske, 2023; Lazaridou, 2024; Martino, 2008).

On the one hand, the perceived need for male teachers is driven by the idea that certain genders are naturally better suited for specific roles. For instance, it is believed that children need gender-matched role models, like female teachers for girls and male teachers for boys, to support identity formation (Marsh et al., 2008; Olson et al., 2022; Olsson & Martiny, 2018; Solomon, 2016). Male teachers are also seen as more capable of managing physical tasks such as lifting and carrying equipment, reflecting the stereotype that physical strength is a masculine trait (Hindle et al., 2019; Koenig, 2018). These views are rooted in traditional gender norms about physical labor (Mills et al., 2008) and emphasize the role of gender representation in shaping children's understanding of self and society (Marsh et al., 2008). Men are culturally perceived as more capable in such roles than women (Yulindrasari, 2017), reflecting enduring

biases. These gendered stereotypes are often used to justify the inclusion, or exclusion, of male teachers in early childhood education settings.

However, the recruitment of male teachers is also constrained by persistent gender stereotypes. The belief that women are inherently more patient, caring, and nurturing toward young children, making them naturally better suited to early childhood teaching, continues to influence recruitment decisions (Cushman, 2007; Farquhar, 2008; Sumsion, 2000, 2005). As reflected in the narratives of Anisa, Bunga, and Chandra, there is a strong belief within the community that ECE is best handled by women. This perception reinforces the broader global assumption that early childhood education is traditionally women's work (Andrew, 2016; Koch & Farquhar, 2015; Murray, 1996; Sczesny et al., 2022).

Another significant barrier identified by participants is the fear that male teachers might engage in inappropriate behavior, particularly harassment. This concern is echoed in academic literature, where the issue of male teachers and sexual misconduct has been widely discussed by Aguilar & Baek (2020), Zara et al. (2024), Heikkilä & Hellman (2017), Moosa & Bhana (2016), Brody (2015), Eidevald et al. (2018), Sak et al. (2019) and Sullivan et al. (2020).

Global studies further reveal that men in ECE are often viewed as vulnerable to suspicion and allegations of misconduct, especially involving harassment or pedophilic behavior (Brody & Gor Ziv, 2019; Haines et al., 2024; Jhuremalani et al., 2023; Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2020). While these studies do not claim that men are universally excluded from recruitment for this reason, they suggest that such fears significantly impact hiring decisions.

Therefore, discussions in literature emphasize the importance of creating both safe and inclusive learning environments. Bonnett and Wade (2023) argue that addressing these concerns is essential for promoting diversity and equity in education. This study reinforces that view, calling for a balanced approach—one that acknowledges safety concerns while actively working to challenge stereotypes and encourage greater gender diversity in ECE.

This dynamic has inadvertently created a stigma that disadvantages male teachers, who are often perceived as more likely to commit sexual harassment. Such perceptions are rooted in deeply ingrained gender stereotypes and societal biases that unfairly associate men with aggressive or inappropriate behavior. Consequently, male teachers face increased scrutiny and suspicion, which can discourage their recruitment and participation in ECE.

In contrast, the potential for female teachers to commit similar acts is often overlooked or downplayed. This double standard assumes that women are inherently nurturing and less likely to engage in misconduct. Consequently, female teachers are not subjected to the same level of scrutiny, leading to unequal risk assessments based on gender.

These perceptions not only perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes but also contribute to the persistent gender imbalance in ECE. They reinforce the notion that caring for young children is primarily a woman's responsibility, limiting the diversity and valuable perspectives that male teachers can offer. Addressing these biases is essential for building a more equitable and inclusive early childhood education environment.

Another stereotype that hinders the recruitment of males in this study is the belief in stereotypical male traits—particularly the concern that male teachers may use physical disciplinary methods. This relates to the concept of "masculine pedagogy" (Warin & Adriany, 2017), which refers to the perception that male teachers tend to adopt physical approaches, especially in disciplining approach to children. In some parts of Indonesia, a prevailing cultural belief links discipline with physical actions such as slapping or hitting children (Wulandari & Abdullah, 2024; Zulfa et al., 2024). Societal expectations of masculinity often pressure male teachers to adopt more authoritarian and physical methods of discipline (McDowell, 2023; Skelton, 2003). These expectations stem from broader gender stereotypes that associate masculinity with authority and physical strength (Sargent, 2005; Yulindrasari, 2017).

This study shows how societal gender norms and expectations, including gendered framing in ECE (McDonald et al., 2024; Okeke & Nyanhoto, 2021; Sczesny et al., 2022; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018), as well as fear (Peeters et al., 2015; Rentzou, 2011), stigma (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021; Sczesny et al., 2022; Wohlgemuth, 2015), and bias (McDonald et al., 2024; Rohrmann, 2020; Sczesny et al., 2022), influence principals' hiring decisions. Together, these factors create a recruitment environment in which male candidates are often disadvantaged, contributing to their continued underrepresentation.

Breadwinner as a Cultural Tool

Some participants referred to the specific role of males within family and societal contexts as that of a breadwinner. In this study, the label "breadwinner" functions as a cultural tool that not only defines gender roles but also influences employment practices, as reflected in the participants' narratives and decisions. Vygotsky (1978) argues that cultural tools, such as language and societal norms, mediate cognitive processes and shape human behavior. Language is not merely a form of communication but a key instrument for thinking, learning, and understanding. Within this framework, the term "breadwinner" emerges as a powerful cultural tool.

The breadwinner label, commonly associated with men, is shaped more by social and community expectations than by educational contexts (Saxonberg, 2024). However, in this study, the belief held by principals significantly influences recruitment decisions in early childhood education. Principals may hesitate to hire male teachers due to the assumption that, as breadwinners, men require higher salaries than kindergartens can provide. This belief is rooted in the cultural expectation that men must earn enough to support their families, making low-paying teaching positions seem unsuitable. This perception reflects not just economic concerns, as McDonald et al. (2024) suggest, but is also deeply tied to cultural norms.

Jurczyk et al. (2019) show how traditional gender roles and the male breadwinner model are embedded in societal norms, shaping employment practices and family life in Germany. Similarly, Kowalewska and Vitali (2024) discuss the well-being penalty for women in breadwinner roles and the cultural and psychological pressures men face when deviating from traditional norms. These studies illustrate the broader impact of the breadwinner label on employment decisions and gender expectations.

The concept of the breadwinner is commonly used in literature to describe the financial dynamics between male and female partners, specifically referring to the individual who contributes the most income to the household through paid labor (Warren, 2007). This label reflects societal expectations that men should pursue high-earning careers to fulfill their role as primary providers (Davis, 2012). The breadwinner model is deeply embedded in many cultures, reinforcing traditional gender roles and shaping employment practices. Mbah (2023), Trappe et al. (2015), and Warren (2007) highlight the enduring influence of this concept across societies, with varying emphasis on whether the breadwinner is male or female.

In Indonesia, the belief that husbands should be the primary breadwinners is strongly rooted in cultural norms, which expect men to be the main earners for their families (Rinaldo, 2019; Sigirot, 2013). Although there has been a gradual shift, especially in urban areas where women increasingly contribute to household income (Fadilah, 2018), traditional expectations remain dominant.

This role is closely tied to the cultural concept of "*bapakisme*," which emphasizes the father's authority and responsibility within the family (Connell, 2020). Derived from the Javanese word *bapak* (father), *bapakisme* reflects a patriarchal system in which the father is viewed as the head of the household and the primary decision-maker in both domestic and public life. This system is shaped by patriarchal values that position men as authoritative figures in family and society (Kartika, 2015).

Furthermore, *bapakisme* is closely connected to patriarchal structures in Indonesian society (Robinson, 2013; Smith et al., 2014). Patriarchal authority is central to *bapakisme*, extending the father's dominance beyond the home into formal and informal institutions. In these spaces, the male figure is expected to be the most knowledgeable and respected (Aryasatya et al., 2025). This hierarchical model reinforces the expectation of obedience and affirms the father's role as the final authority in decision-making.

Economic responsibility is a key aspect of *bapakisme*, with husbands traditionally expected to serve as the primary breadwinners, providing financial support and stability for their families (Gunawan & Krisnatuti, 2022; Lazuardi & Puspitawati, 2022). The belief that men, particularly husbands, are expected to earn a substantial income as family providers influences both community expectations and institutional practices.

This cultural norm affects not only individual behavior but also organizational decision-making. For instance, principals and educational leaders may hesitate to hire male teachers due to the perception that men, as breadwinners, require higher salaries than kindergartens can offer. The assumption that men must earn enough to support their families renders lower-paying teaching positions less appropriate, thereby discouraging their recruitment.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggestion for Further Research

This study investigated kindergarten principals' perceptions and practices regarding teacher recruitment in Indonesian ECE through a socio-cultural lens. The findings reveal that gender stereotypes, that deeply embedded in the cognition of principals, significantly influence their recruitment decisions. While these stereotypes may, in some cases, support the idea of hiring male teachers, they also sustain stigmas and fears about male behavior. This paradox caused principals face competing socio-cultural and institutional pressure that lead them to avoid recruiting male teachers. Furthermore, societal norms that position men as primary breadwinners further shape recruitment practices in ECE. These norms contribute to the continued exclusion of male teachers, reinforcing the perception that teaching young children is predominantly a woman's role. This not only prolongs gender imbalance in the workforce but also limits the diversity of perspectives and skills available in early learning environments.

This study is limited by its focus on female participants and its geographic scope, which was confined to Bogor, West Java. These factors may not reflect the broader experiences across Indonesia. Future research should expand to include diverse regions and incorporate perspectives from various genders and decision-makers involved in teacher recruitment. Such efforts would offer a more comprehensive understanding of recruitment practices in Indonesian ECE institutions.

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

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Authors' contributions: Author 1 played a pivotal role in constructing the research plan, conducting FGD with four principals, preparing questions, and moderating discussions. Author 2 reviewed the structure of the research plan, scheduled and conducted individual interviews with three principals, and prepared interview guides. In terms of data analysis, Author 1 analyzed the collected data and identified emerging themes, while Author 2 contributed by analyzing key concepts. For the literature review, Author 1 identified relevant studies and theories, and Author 2 provided additional Indonesian literature and sources. Regarding journal selection, Author 2 suggested several relevant journals based on their scope and profile, and Author 1 adhered to the guidelines provided by these journals. During manuscript drafting, Author 1 composed the initial draft, and Author 2 offered critical reviews and feedback. In the proofreading process, Author 1 communicated with the proofreader to ensure clarity, coherence, and accuracy, while Author 2 identified and recommended potential proofreaders with reasonable fees. For manuscript submission, Author 1 prepared and submitted the manuscript according to the journal's guidelines, and Author 2 assisted in formatting and ensuring all submission requirements were met. Both authors collaboratively reviewed the feedback from reviewers and refined the manuscript together.

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