
BREAKING STEREOTYPES: MALE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER ROLES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study examined how male in-service and pre-service teachers in Makassar, Indonesia, navigated gender stereotypes in early childhood education (ECE), a profession often viewed as inherently feminine. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected from ten participants through surveys and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative results showed moderate to high levels of stereotype absorption ($M=3.9$), understanding ($M=4.2$), and critical evaluation ($M=4.1$). Thematic analysis revealed four dominant stereotypes: ECE as a feminized occupational identity, devaluation of professional status, economic disincentive, and institutional neglect. Despite these challenges, participants expressed strong vocational commitment and a desire to redefine masculine roles in nurturing work. The findings emphasized the need for inclusive teacher preparation, gender-responsive policies, and broader public engagement to normalize male participation in ECE. This study offers empirical insight into the lived experiences of male educators and contributes to the pursuit of more gender-equitable and humanistic early education systems.

Keywords: early childhood education, gender stereotypes, male teachers, pre-service teachers

Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE), or *Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD)* in Indonesia, marks a foundational stage in child development. According to Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978), children in early developmental stages absorb social norms primarily through interaction and imitation, particularly within school and family environments. The presence of both male and female educators is crucial to ensure balanced gender socialization and inclusive developmental outcomes (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Lamb et al., 2021).

Despite this, global trends indicate a significant gender imbalance in the ECE profession, where men are severely underrepresented. Sumsion (2005) and Peeters (2013) emphasize that male teachers often face stigma, suspicion, and structural exclusion, which reinforce the perception that caregiving roles belong solely to women. These issues are not only cultural but also institutional. Research in various countries highlights how stereotypes about masculinity discourage men from pursuing careers in early education, perpetuating gendered divisions of labor in the teaching profession (Cushman, 2008; Hayes, 2010).

In Indonesia, this issue is further compounded by local cultural expectations and systemic limitations. ECE (*Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*), or early childhood education, remains largely feminized. Studies by Dianita (2020) and Pancaningrum and Pasiningsih (2023) confirm that men are discouraged from pursuing careers in ECE due to perceptions of low professional prestige, economic

challenges, and entrenched gender norms. The lack of visible male role models and the persistence of stereotypes continue to hinder gender inclusivity in this sector.

In the context of Makassar, South Sulawesi, the situation is particularly stark. According to 2023 data from the Department of Early Childhood and Community Education, less than 2% of registered ECE teachers in the city are male. Many institutions operate without a single male educator, reinforcing public assumptions that early childhood teaching is “women’s work.” This reflects findings by Warin (2023) and Hayes (2010), who note that male educators often encounter public doubt, institutional indifference, and gendered hyper-visibility in the classroom. However, limited research has explored how these societal pressures are internalized by male ECE educators in Indonesia, especially outside Jawa. Given these patterns of underrepresentation and persistent stereotypes, it becomes essential to investigate how male educators internalize, negotiate, and respond to the societal perceptions surrounding their professional roles. Prior studies (Brody, 2014; Sumsion, 2005; Warin, 2023) have shown that male ECE teachers often struggle with feelings of alienation, social suspicion, and institutional neglect particularly in environments where they constitute a tiny minority. However, such insights remain underexplored in the Indonesian context, especially within ECE institutions beyond Jawa.

To address this gap, this study seeks to explore how male in service and pre-service ECE educators perceive and respond to gender stereotypes in their professional environment. Through the integration of a quantitative survey utilizing three psychological indicators of perception, absorption, understanding, and evaluation and qualitative interviews guided by four thematic categories of stereotype, feminized occupational identity, devaluation of professional status, economic disincentive, and institutional neglect this research aims to uncover the lived experiences of male educators in a feminized profession. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of how gender shapes educational roles and offers empirical support for more inclusive, humanistic practices in early childhood education.

Literature Review

This literature review establishes the theoretical and empirical foundation of the study, focusing on the intersection of gender stereotypes and male participation in early childhood education (ECE). It presents the relevant concepts and theories in four key domains: early childhood education and gender development, gender stereotypes in the ECE profession, theories of perception relevant to the study’s analytical framework, and the specific local context and research gaps within Indonesia. These sections offer the necessary theoretical scaffolding for interpreting the study’s findings.

Early childhood education and gender role development

Early childhood education (ECE) is widely recognized as a critical phase in human development, particularly for fostering cognitive, emotional, and social growth. According to Piaget (1962), during the preoperational stage, children begin to engage in symbolic thinking and imaginative play processes through which they also absorb social constructs such as gender roles. Vygotsky (1978) adds that social interaction with adults and peers is key to shaping children’s cognitive development and sociocultural understanding. These theoretical perspectives underscore the importance of role models, including teachers, in influencing children’s conceptions of identity and behavior.

This understanding is supported by Bronfenbrenner (1979), ecological systems theory, which positions the microsystem comprising family, school, and peer environments as fundamental in reinforcing social norms, including gendered behaviors. It is in line with research by Aina and Cameron (2011), who found that children often imitate the gendered behaviors of their teachers, thus highlighting the pedagogical importance of gender diversity in ECE settings. Similarly, a study by Lamb et al. (2021) demonstrates that the presence of male educators broadens children's exposure to different relational styles and supports the development of empathy and cooperative behavior.

This statement is further supported by Wong and Rao (2020), whose research in multicultural preschool environments shows that children taught by both male and female teachers display more flexible understandings of gender roles and demonstrate higher social adaptability. Their study emphasizes that male presence in ECE is not only symbolic but instrumental in disrupting stereotypical associations between nurturing and femininity. In addition, Fitriani et al. (2022) conducted a study on PAUD institutions in Indonesia and found that children who were exposed only to female educators were more likely to adopt rigid, binary gender stereotypes in their play and interaction. This supports the view that balanced gender representation among teachers is essential for inclusive developmental outcomes.

Moreover, Rosyidah and Nurwati (2019) highlight how cultural and religious interpretations in Indonesia restrict male involvement in early childhood education by framing it as incompatible with masculine identity. Their findings reinforce earlier claims by Hayes (2010) and Sumsion (2005), who argue that structural and social biases contribute to the feminization of the ECE profession across different global contexts. Taken together, these theories and empirical studies suggest that gender inclusive staffing in early education is not simply a matter of representation, but a foundational element in promoting inclusive, equitable, and stereotype-free development in young learners.

Gender stereotypes in the ECE profession

The ECE profession has long been characterized by gendered assumptions that associate caregiving, emotional labor, and nurturing exclusively with women. Connell (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity posits that dominant social structures uphold certain ideals of manhood often centered on authority, independence, and rationality while devaluing traits such as empathy and care that are deemed feminine. These gendered valuations render caregiving professions, including early education, incompatible with socially constructed norms of masculinity. This assertion is supported by a qualitative study by Sargent (2005), which found that male preschool teachers in the United States experienced internal conflict when trying to reconcile their professional identity with traditional masculine ideals. Participants often reported feeling the need to overcompensate with "masculine" traits, such as assertiveness or disciplinary control, to gain respect in the classroom.

Eagly and Wood (2012), social role theory further reinforces this framework by explaining how societal expectations about gender are internalized and enacted through occupational roles. According to the theory, women are perceived as more nurturing and communal, while men are expected to be agentic and task-oriented. As a result, roles in early education are predominantly ascribed to women, both culturally and institutionally. This theoretical claim is in line with empirical research by Warin and Adrian (2017), who found that male ECE teachers in Indonesia are frequently viewed with suspicion or curiosity, and often experience exclusion from caregiving tasks considered "naturally feminine." The study also revealed that institutional practices such as school policies or parent

expectations can reinforce such stereotypes, limiting the professional opportunities for male educators.

Cameron et al. (1999) also trace the feminization of early childhood teaching to its historical roots, when preschool education was seen as a domestic extension of maternal care. This has had lasting effects on how society frames the role of the early childhood teacher, perpetuating the notion that men lack the emotional suitability for such work. Findings from Cushman (2008) provide further evidence that male teachers are often relegated to roles involving physical activity, discipline, or administrative tasks, rather than being entrusted with nurturing or emotionally intimate interactions with children. Such division of labor not only reinforces gender stereotypes but also restricts male teachers' ability to fully engage with the pedagogical dimensions of ECE.

In the Indonesian context, Dianita (2020) found that even male students in early childhood education programs expressed anxiety about their future acceptance in the profession due to prevailing gender norms. These findings suggest that stereotypes are internalized early in the professional pipeline and are reinforced by a lack of male role models, limited support structures, and public skepticism. Overall, the persistence of gender stereotypes in ECE represents a significant barrier to achieving gender equity in educational settings. Without challenging the cultural and institutional narratives that assign caregiving to women, efforts to diversify the profession remain insufficient. Theoretical frameworks on masculinity and occupational roles must therefore be coupled with critical empirical inquiry to inform inclusive policy and pedagogical reform.

Local context and research gaps

Gender disparity in early childhood education (ECE) staffing remains a striking phenomenon in Indonesia. In particular, the participation of men in the PAUD (*Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*) workforce is extremely low. This underrepresentation not only reflects gendered occupational segregation but also signifies the persistence of cultural norms that associate nurturing and caregiving exclusively with women. Peeters (2013) explains that in many societies, including Indonesia, male participation in ECE is constrained by deep-rooted gender ideologies, institutional inattention, and limited policy incentives. These structural and sociocultural forces collectively shape public perceptions of male educators as deviating from the norm.

This condition is well documented in several empirical studies. Dianita (2020) found that male teachers in PAUD institutions face public scrutiny and economic challenges that lead to role conflict and career discontinuity. Similarly, Pancaningrum and Pasing Sih (2023) showed that societal expectations around men as primary breadwinners hinder their engagement in caregiving professions such as early education. In a more region-specific case, Rosyidah and Nurwati (2019) argue that in certain Islamic communities in Indonesia, religious interpretations reinforce the idea that early childhood instruction should be led by women, further marginalizing male educators. These findings illustrated that barriers to male participation are both cultural and institutional, and they vary based on geographic and religious contexts.

In Makassar, South Sulawesi, the situation is particularly alarming. According to recent data from the Department of Early Childhood and Community Education (2023), less than 2% of PAUD teachers are male. Many early childhood institutions operate without a single male educator, reflecting not only gendered expectations but also the absence of targeted efforts to promote male participation. This reinforces public assumptions that ECE is inherently a woman's domain, leading to what Warin (2023) terms "gendered hyper-visibility," wherein the few male educators who do participate are

subject to intense scrutiny and symbolic tokenism. However, the lived experiences of male teachers in such localized Indonesian settings remain underexplored in current literature.

Thus, despite growing interest in gender and education, few empirical studies in Southeast Asia, especially outside Jawa have investigated how male educators internalize and respond to gender stereotypes in feminized professional settings. The lack of contextualized data from regions like Makassar creates a gap in understanding how national discourses on gender equality are experienced at the local institutional level. This study aims to address that gap by examining the perceptions and experiences of male in-service and pre-service educators in *PAUD* institutions in Makassar, providing grounded insights into how gender roles are negotiated in early education settings.

Methodology

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, following Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) framework. This approach integrates qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena. It was selected to effectively respond to the study's objectives: to explore how male teachers and pre-service teachers perceive and respond to gender stereotypes in early childhood education (ECE). This method supports triangulation, allowing for the synthesis of attitudinal trends and personal narratives.

Research design and approach

This study employed a convergent mixed-method design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to gain a comprehensive understanding of how male teachers and pre-service teachers perceive and respond to gender stereotypes in early childhood education (ECE). The approach was chosen to ensure a balanced exploration of measurable perceptions and lived experiences. Quantitative data were collected through structured surveys using Likert-scale items, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. The triangulation of methods aimed to enhance the validity of findings and enrich the analysis.

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, a metropolitan area with a diverse educational landscape. Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), based on the following criteria: participants had to be male, either currently working as in-service *PAUD* teachers or enrolled as pre-service ECE students at one of two major universities in Makassar. Additionally, they were required to have direct teaching or practicum experience in early childhood education settings and be willing to provide informed consent and participate in both survey and interview phases. A total of ten participants were involved, comprising five in-service male *PAUD* teachers from five different kindergarten institutions and five male pre-service teachers from two leading universities.

Data collection

Two research instruments were used: a survey questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The survey measured participants' perceptions using three indicators, absorption, understanding, and evaluation adapted from established models of perception measurement. The interview protocol explored four dimensions of gender stereotypes in ECE: feminized occupational identity, low risk and challenge, economic disincentive, and institutional neglect.

Instrument validation

Both instruments underwent expert validation to ensure content relevance, clarity, and theoretical alignment. Validation was conducted by three experts two senior lecturers in early childhood education and one expert in gender studies. The validators reviewed each item for construct validity, linguistic clarity, and alignment with the study's theoretical framework. Based on their feedback, revisions were made to refine terminology and improve item focus.

Data analysis

In quantitative analysis, survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and percentage agreement across the three indicators of perception. The results were tabulated to reveal overall trends and participant agreement levels. In qualitative analysis, interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and read multiple times to achieve familiarization with the data. Next, key phrases and meaning units were highlighted and systematically coded. These initial codes were then clustered into preliminary themes that represented significant aspects of the participants' lived experiences. In the reviewing stage, these themes were cross-checked against the raw data to ensure coherence and consistency. The final themes were refined and clearly named to encapsulate their content accurately. Lastly, thematic narratives were crafted, supported with direct participant quotations, to convey the depth and complexity of male educators' perspectives in early childhood education.

Trustworthiness

This study ensured trustworthiness by applying Lincoln and Guba (1985) four criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of survey and interview data, peer debriefing, and prolonged engagement in the research setting. Transferability was addressed by offering thick descriptions of participants' backgrounds and institutional contexts. To ensure dependability, a clear audit trail documented the research process from instrument design to data analysis. Confirmability was strengthened through member checking, allowing participants to validate key findings. These strategies ensured that the voices of male ECE educators were represented ethically and accurately, reinforcing the study's rigor and integrity.

Results

Perceptions of male ECE teachers on gender stereotypes

To explore how male educators perceive gender stereotypes in early childhood education (ECE), quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed based on three indicators of perception: Absorption, Understanding, and Evaluation. The survey was completed by 10 participants (5 in-service male teachers from five different kindergarten institutions in Makassar and 5 male pre-service teachers currently enrolled in two major universities.). The findings are summarized in the table below:

Table 1. *Descriptive summary of male ECE teachers' perceptions*

Indicators	Mean Score	% Agree	% Strongly Agree
Absorption	3.9	45%	48%
Understanding	4.2	40%	55%
Evaluation	4.1	43%	50%

Respondents indicated that stereotypes were largely absorbed through social interactions and digital platforms, particularly narratives framing ECE as an inherently feminine profession. These stereotypes were often subtly reinforced through everyday conversations, media content, and even within their academic settings. Despite these influences, the majority of participants expressed a clear understanding that these stereotypes were socially constructed rather than inherently valid. They highlighted the significance of male educators in modeling diverse gender roles for children and emphasized that pedagogical ability transcends gender. In evaluating the impact of gender stereotypes, many respondents showed a high degree of critical awareness. They rejected notions that question male competence in caregiving roles, and several indicated that their commitment to the profession was fueled by a desire to challenge and change these narratives.

Responses of male ECE teachers to gender stereotypes: insights from thematic analysis

To explore how male in-service and pre-service teachers respond to gender stereotypes in early childhood education, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the thematic analysis framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes representing key stereotypes experienced by participants.

Table 2. *Thematic analysis of gender stereotypes experienced by male ECE educators*

Theme	Description	Representative quotes
Feminized occupational identity	Male teachers are perceived as deviating from traditional masculinity because ECE is seen as feminine.	<p>"I'm often considered soft because I work at a kindergarten." (T3)</p> <p>"Friends joked that I was doing a 'woman's job.'" (S2)</p> <p>"They think we lack emotion." (T1)</p> <p>"Peers questioned why a man would choose PAUD." (S3)</p> <p>"Society expects men to be strict, not nurturing." (T2)</p>
Devaluation of professional status	ECE work is seen as low-skilled, leading to feelings of diminished respect.	<p>"People say PAUD is just playing with kids." (T1)</p> <p>"PAUD isn't considered 'real teaching.'" (S4)</p> <p>"Even other teachers look down on us." (T5)</p> <p>"Children require the most care and understanding." (S1)</p> <p>"You constantly have to prove your work matters." (T2)</p>
Economic disincentive	Low salaries in ECE make it economically challenging for male providers.	<p>"The salary makes people think it's not worth it for men." (T5)</p> <p>"They thought it wouldn't support a family." (S5)</p> <p>"Reality bites. A man needs stability." (T2)</p> <p>"Parents think we must have no other options." (T4)</p> <p>"We need better pay to attract men." (S1)</p>
Institutional neglect	There is a lack of training, mentorship, and institutional acknowledgement of gendered challenges.	<p>"There are no male mentors." (T4)</p> <p>"No discussions about gender experience." (S3)</p> <p>"Materials always for women's perspectives." (T2)</p> <p>"We need male-friendly spaces." (S5)</p> <p>"It's not just hiring men, we need support." (T1)</p>

Theme 1: Feminized occupational identity

This theme captures how male ECE teachers are frequently perceived as performing roles outside traditional masculine expectations. Participants expressed that their professional identity was often questioned due to the association of early childhood teaching with maternal and feminine traits. The perception that nurturing is inherently feminine leads to the marginalization of men who choose to engage in such work. For example, one pre-service teacher (S1) shared, *"People think I don't belong here just because I'm a man, but I see myself as a caring and skilled educator."* Another participant (P4) recalled, *"My relatives laughed when I told them I wanted to teach young children."* These quotes exemplify how social constructions of gender impact self-perception and professional confidence among male educators.

Theme 2: Devaluation of professional status

Many participants noted that PAUD is seen as an easy or undemanding job, which contributes to its low status. This undermines professional recognition and affects male teachers' self-image and motivation. Participants consistently reported experiencing public suspicion and surveillance when interacting with children. The emotional labor required to maintain appropriate boundaries while expressing care created a heightened sense of vulnerability.

A practicing teacher (P1) described: *"Some parents used to ask if it's safe to leave their children with a male teacher. That was hurtful."* Another participant (P5) recalled: *"I was once accused of being inappropriate just for tying a child's shoelace."* Such experiences highlight how male teachers are subjected to additional scrutiny, making emotional engagement a source of professional risk.

Theme 3: Economic disincentive

The stereotype that PAUD teaching is not financially suitable for men was another recurring theme. Participants spoke of societal expectations that men should be primary breadwinners and how PAUD teaching is seen as economically unviable.

As one student (S4) expressed: "*Even my professors suggested I switch to another department.*" A teacher (P2) added, "*The pay is low, so people think men shouldn't bother with this career.*" These statements underscore how economic narratives reinforce gendered career paths and discourage male retention in early education.

Theme 4: Institutional neglect

Participants expressed a lack of mentorship, representation, and tailored professional development for male educators. They felt isolated and unsupported within predominantly female institutions. One teacher (P3) shared, "*I'm the only male teacher in my school. It's isolating.*" Another (S2) stated, "*During training, most materials are designed with female educators in mind.*" The absence of male-focused professional networks or mentorship structures emerged as a significant barrier to professional growth and confidence.

Collectively, these themes illustrate how male ECE educators in Makassar experience multi-layered challenges that impact their professional identity and retention. The findings affirmed that while male teachers demonstrated resilience and dedication, structural, social, and institutional barriers remain deeply embedded in the PAUD profession.

By combining the survey and interview findings, this study revealed a layered understanding of how male educators in PAUD perceived and responded to gender stereotypes. Survey data showed moderate to strong levels of stereotype absorption, yet also high levels of critical understanding and resistance. Interview data further enriched this insight, demonstrating how these men confront feminized perceptions of their roles, navigate financial and social constraints, and seek legitimacy within a largely female domain. Their narratives highlighted a pressing need for structural reforms that not only welcome men into ECE but also support their sustained participation and professional development.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed the complex and layered experiences of male in-service and pre-service early childhood educators in Makassar, particularly in how they perceived and responded to gender stereotypes embedded in their professional environment. These insights not only answered the core research question but also exposed deeply rooted cultural and institutional structures that continued to shape the early childhood education (ECE) landscape in Indonesia.

The first major theme, feminized occupational identity Expectation, demonstrated how male educators are often perceived as violating traditional gender norms by taking on nurturing roles. Participants' narratives reflect how the dominant discourse positions early education as an extension of maternal care. This finding aligns with Connell (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which posits that cultural ideals of masculinity often marginalize men who engage in roles associated with caregiving. It is further supported by Eagly and Wood (2012), social role theory, which explains how societal expectations assign nurturing responsibilities to women, reinforcing occupational segregation.

Studies by Sumsion (2005) and King (1998) similarly confirm that male educators are frequently stigmatized in feminized professions, affecting their self-perception and legitimacy. This is consistent with more recent studies such as Sefotho and Letseka (2022) and Asemah and Edegoh (2023), which show that men in early childhood settings continue to face public skepticism and reduced opportunities due to persistent gender norms.

The second theme, devaluation of professional status, shows how male teachers face heightened scrutiny in their interactions with children. These findings are consistent with Brody (2014) concept of emotional labor and Anliak and Beyazkurk (2007) notion of gendered hyper-visibility, in which male teachers must maintain constant self-monitoring to avoid misinterpretation. Participants expressed fear of misjudgment even in simple acts of care, such as tying shoelaces or comforting a crying child. This emotional burden not only adds stress but also diminishes pedagogical freedom. Warin (2023) also highlights the psychological toll of performing care under public suspicion, further reinforcing the precariousness of male presence in ECE. A meta-analysis by Liu et al. (2022) confirms that excessive emotional self-regulation, such as surface acting, leads to teacher burnout and job dissatisfaction, especially among minority groups within feminized professions.

The theme of Economic disincentive underscores how gendered economic expectations intersect with professional choices. Participants discussed societal beliefs that *PAUD* teaching lacks financial prestige and is therefore unsuitable for men. This perception supports the work of Cameron et al. (1999), who argue that early education is undervalued in both financial and cultural terms. Dianita (2020) and Pancaningrum and Pasiningsih (2023) further emphasize that low compensation continues to be a major barrier for male participation in Indonesian *PAUD* settings. These findings align with the results of studies conducted in Uganda and Malaysia (Musoke, 2023; Karim & Yusuf, 2022), which also show how masculinity ideals discourage men from working in sectors deemed less lucrative or prestigious.

Finally, the theme of Institutional neglect reveals how systemic structures further isolate male educators. The absence of mentorship, gender-sensitive training, and professional networks tailored for men in ECE was a recurring concern. These findings echo Peeters (2013) argument that institutional neglect is crucial for sustaining gender diversity in education. The participants' experiences of isolation, lack of representation, and unresponsiveness of training curricula to male educators' needs suggest the urgent requirement for inclusive professional development frameworks. UNESCO (2015) similarly advocates for teacher education policies that promote diversity and provide scaffolding for underrepresented groups in teaching professions. Recent findings from Hopkins House (2024) support this by recommending structured peer networks and male-led mentorship schemes to improve retention and well-being of male early educators.

Taken together, these themes reveal that male educators in Makassar are not passive victims of gender stereotypes; rather, they actively negotiate their professional identity within a constrained sociocultural environment. However, the cost of such negotiation is high. They often face emotional fatigue, identity conflict, and diminished job security. These challenges not only impact individual teachers but also reinforce broader gender disparities in early childhood education.

This study contributes to the existing literature by centering the voices of male educators in a non-Western context, where cultural, religious, and institutional dynamics create unique expressions of gender norms. It affirms the necessity of rethinking policy frameworks to ensure gender inclusivity and support for all educators. Moreover, it calls for longitudinal efforts to challenge the symbolic and structural exclusion of men from caregiving professions, particularly through curriculum reform, mentorship programs, and public awareness campaigns.

In sum, the discussion confirms that the stereotypes experienced by male educators rooted in perceptions of femininity, devaluation of professional status, economic disincentive, and lack of institutional backing are deeply interwoven with societal expectations and institutional design. By unpacking these layers, this study advocates for an inclusive, reflective, and humanistic approach to transforming early childhood education in Indonesia.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored how male in-service and pre-service early childhood educators in Makassar perceived and responded to gender stereotypes within the context of a highly feminized profession. The quantitative findings demonstrated that while participants had been exposed to gender stereotypes particularly through societal narratives and media, they showed strong levels of understanding and critical evaluation toward those stereotypes. The qualitative findings revealed four specific types of stereotypes that male educators encounter: expectations to conform to feminized occupational identity roles, devaluation of professional status, perceptions of economic disincentive in the profession, and a institutional neglect. Despite these challenges, participants actively negotiated their professional identity by affirming their role, demonstrating emotional resilience, and redefining masculinity within the context of care work.

In conclusion, the study confirms that gender stereotypes in early childhood education are deeply rooted in cultural norms and institutional practices, which significantly shape the experiences of male educators. The voices of these educators underscore the need to foster inclusive and gender-aware policies and practices that recognize the value of male participation in early education. The findings highlight the urgency of supporting gender diversity in the ECE workforce as part of a broader commitment to equity and humanistic educational values.

This study was limited by its small sample size and its regional focus on Makassar. Future research should encompass broader geographic and demographic coverage and adopt longitudinal designs to track evolving perceptions, policy responses, and gender dynamics in ECE. Transforming early childhood education into an inclusive and gender-equitable field will require sustained efforts to both dismantle structural barriers and reframe cultural narratives.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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