

Shaping Inclusive Futures: Gender-Responsive Practices in Pre-Primary Teacher Training in Tanzania and Uganda

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Received: March 17, 2025

Accepted: May 7, 2025

Published: June 25, 2025

doi:10.5296/gjes.v11i1.

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/gjes.v11i1>.

Abstract

This study delves into the transformative impact of gender-responsive practices at Teacher Colleges in two East African countries, Tanzania and Uganda. The study, framed within the Foundation for Learning Project initiative, utilized strategies such as gender clubs, visual advocacy, rule reviews, and technology utilization. The study's latter sections analyze the methods used, the findings that were noticed, and the new problems that are arising to provide a more complex picture of how gender-responsive practices affect pre-primary education in these kinds of institutions. Results showcased stakeholders' profound commitment to gender responsiveness in teaching, infrastructure, and communication. It explores the larger picture of why gender responsiveness in pedagogy matters, emphasizing the role of early childhood education as the cornerstone for cultivating behaviors and mindsets that advance gender equality.

Keywords: Gender-responsive pedagogy, Inclusive practices, Visual advocacy

1. Introduction

Wango (2024) indicated that gender-responsive education is critical for the improvement of the education system, so that students have a variety of needs and experiences. Gender inclusive stresses creating an environment that values and supports every individual, going beyond common ideas of gender-specific education (Bakuza, 2025). The foundation's view supports the deconstruction of stereotypes and promotes an inclusive society in which everyone is afforded equal chances (Rarieya, 2024).

The necessity for diversity and equity from the very beginnings of learning has been recognised by gender-responsive pedagogy, which has emerged as a crucial focus in the educational environment (Wango, 2023). One example of how committed educational institutions are to address gender pedagogical concerns holistically is the training that was held in teacher teaching colleges as part of the Foundation for Learning initiative (F4L). The training focuses on strengthening gender concepts, inclusive practices, and education knowledge and abilities of college tutors to use the knowledge for their practice.

Incorporating gender-responsive teaching methods in pre-primary education is crucial for creating equitable learning environments and challenging deep-rooted gender norms (Machocho, 2023). Early childhood education serves as a vital period when young minds begin to form attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, making it an ideal time to promote gender-equal practices (Makali, 2021). By addressing gender biases in pre-primary settings, educators and policymakers can lay the groundwork for inclusivity and equality.

The studies provide context for comprehending the transformative process these educational institutions have undergone (Ngwaru, 2015; Wango, 2024). Developing an inclusive learning environment requires incorporating gender issues into educational techniques (Oluga, 2011). Rarieya (2024) indicated that gender-responsive practices are deeply ingrained in the classroom using lesson plans and activities. This entails actively including content that reflects the range of gender viewpoints in instructional materials to eliminate biases in them (Oluga, 2011).

Scholars pointed out that gender stereotypes must be addressed outside of the classroom in extracurricular activities (Ngwaru, 2015). Engaging people of both genders in different activities promotes inclusivity and challenges established conventions (Rarieya, 2024). Engaging in a variety of activities helps people become well-rounded individuals as well as achieve scholastic success (*ibid*).

Establishing an atmosphere that fosters diversity requires coordinating institutional policies and infrastructure with gender-responsive concepts (George, 2018). Essential efforts include modifying laws and policies to take gender equality into account and making physical locations more inclusive (Oluga, 2011). Gender equality is greatly enhanced by improvements in the infrastructure, such as the creation of gender-neutral facilities.

To effectively promote gender-responsive practices, the adaptation in using advocacy strategy has proved to impact changes, particularly in education settings (Makali, 2021). UNESCO (2007) states that visual advocacy, via media and posters, cultivates consciousness and shapes

perspectives both inside and beyond the classroom. It has been explained that the experience on the way promotion of gender matters through advocacy has long-lasting cultural change, this iterative process is essential (Machocho, 2023).

1.1 Innovations in Gender-Responsive Pedagogy

Innovative gender-responsive pedagogies are transforming pre-primary education by promoting gender equality from an early age (Machocho, 2023). The Global South showcases grassroots initiatives like gender-responsiveness in the early years (GRP4ECE) and gender clubs, which address local challenges and contexts. Meanwhile, the Global North demonstrates systemic integration into policy frameworks, exemplified by Sweden's progressive curricula and the United Kingdom's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework.

For instance, the GRP4ECE program provides educators with essential tools to create inclusive classrooms. UNESCO (2022) emphasizes that “GRP4ECE equips practitioners with the knowledge and tools to create gender-sensitive learning environments, fostering inclusivity from the foundational stages of education (15).” Similarly, Ethiopia's Gender and Education Strategy prioritizes capacity building; Tadesse and Melese (2023) report that “the recruitment of female teachers and the introduction of gender-inclusive lesson plans have significantly increased girls' enrollment and retention rates (42).”

Literature review thoughtfully explores innovative approaches to gender-responsive pedagogy within pre-primary education, featuring examples from both the Global South and Global North (Jones, 2023). In the Global South, initiatives centered on gender-responsive pedagogy often focus on dismantling stereotypes, nurturing inclusivity, and tailoring practices to fit local cultural contexts (*ibid*). In the Global South, significant resource limitations impede the broad application of gender-responsive pedagogy. The lack of access to teaching materials, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient funding for training programs all compromise the sustainability of these initiatives. FAWE (2023) emphasizes that “Without adequate resources, even the most innovative strategies may fail to achieve lasting impact (11).”

Efforts in the Global North have successfully fostered greater gender balance in classroom engagement (Oluga, 2011). For instance, educators in Sweden and Canada have noted that gender-responsive practices encourage children to venture into activities that defy traditional gender roles (Jones et al., 2023). Moreover, systemic initiatives, including training on using gender-neutral language and incorporating inclusive materials, have played a significant role in diminishing stereotypes within educational environments (Machocho, 2023).

In countries like Sweden, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, there is a strong commitment to integrating gender-responsive pedagogy into educational systems (Jones, 2023). These nations have worked to weave gender equality principles into their teaching frameworks, focusing on systematic implementation, educator training, and the development of inclusive curricula.

In Canada, the “Ontario Early Years Policy Framework” emphasizes the significance of

parental involvement in advancing gender inclusivity. Research by Jones et al. (2023) shows that discussions on gender equality extending beyond the classroom have led to greater community awareness and support for inclusive education (29). In the United States, initiatives like the “gender curriculum” at Hillside Elementary School introduce concepts such as “cisgender” and “non-binary” through engaging storytelling and visual aids. Though this approach has stirred some debate, it highlights a growing dedication to discussing gender inclusivity in an age-appropriate manner.

The integration of supportive policies in countries like India, Tanzania, and Canada illustrates how backing from the top enhances the effectiveness of grassroots movements. Singh et al. (2023) affirms, “National policies provide a framework that ensures the sustainability and scalability of gender-responsive practices (35).”

The adoption of these innovative strategies in both the Global North and South showcases a unified dedication to creating inclusive futures. Gender-responsive pedagogy is transforming current educational methods while also setting the stage for more extensive societal change. By providing educators with essential tools and training, initiatives like GRP4ECE and EYFS cultivate spaces in which children grasp the importance of equality. As noted by VVOB (2023), Children educated in gender-sensitive classrooms grow up to challenge societal norms and advocate for inclusivity in their communities.

These innovative practices inspire a culture of lifelong learning among both educators and students. Ongoing professional development for teachers keeps them updated on effective strategies, while students internalize the values of inclusivity for a lifetime. As Tadesse and Melese (2023) point out, “Empowering teachers through training creates a ripple effect, influencing not just students but entire communities”.

The shared experiences from both the Global South and North highlight a worldwide effort to challenge and change gender biases. By exchanging insights on successes and obstacles, nations can develop personalized strategies that meet local needs while also contributing to a unified vision of inclusivity.

Around the world, cultural norms and entrenched stereotypes present notable obstacles to adopting gender-responsive practices. Take Tanzania, for example, where resistance to gender equity initiatives has hindered advancement. Educators frequently encounter opposition from parents and community members. As Nkya and Kibona (2024) observe, “Parents often question why boys and girls must be treated the same in school activities, reflecting broader societal resistance to change. (21)”

1.2 Capacity Building in Teacher Training Institution

Initiatives in countries like South Africa, Rwanda, Zambia, and Ethiopia have recognized the importance of integrating gender responsive pedagogy in teacher training programs (Mwingi, 1999).

In Tanzania, the government’s Education and Training Policy (ETP) emphasizes gender equity in teacher training programs and curriculum development. Nkya and Kibona (2024) highlight,

“The inclusion of gender-sensitive modules in teacher training colleges has resulted in more inclusive classroom environments and increased gender parity in student outcomes (21).” Uganda’s experience with the Gender in Education Policy (GEP) also reflects significant progress. The policy encourages gender-responsive school management and teaching practices. According to Oketch et al. (2023), “Through GEP, teachers are trained to identify and address gender-based barriers to education, ensuring equitable participation for all learners (33).”

Kenya’s gender clubs present an innovative strategy to tackle gender norms, a concept also being tested in Tanzania and Uganda. These clubs offer safe environments for students to explore and confront stereotypes. The African Population and Health Research Center (2023, p. 18) notes that “Students involved in gender clubs showed greater confidence in challenging traditional roles compared to peers outside these programs.” In Tanzania, students lead community advocacy sessions to address wider social biases.

Adapting educational resources to align with local contexts has been a key feature of several initiatives across the region. In Zambia, the GRP4ECE toolkit includes culturally resonant examples that connect with local communities. VVOB (2023) points out that “teachers in Zambia found the culturally adapted toolkit effective in reducing gender-based disparities in classroom participation (23).” Similarly, in Uganda, locally developed storybooks that challenge gender stereotypes are used in pre-primary classrooms to encourage critical thinking about traditional gender roles (Oketch et al., 2023).

Ensuring teachers are well-prepared is vital, though the quality of training varies by region. Comprehensive training programs are necessary for equipping educators with the knowledge and skills to effectively implement gender-responsive pedagogy. Nkya and Kibona (2024) highlight that, “Without robust training programs, educators may unintentionally perpetuate gender biases despite good intentions (24).” Ongoing professional development and support systems are essential to overcome this challenge.

These efforts are shaping inclusive futures by fostering environments where children grow up understanding the value of equality and advocating for societal change. Addressing ongoing challenges such as cultural resistance, resource constraints, and teacher training gaps requires sustained investments in policy reforms, community engagement, and resource development. By overcoming these barriers, pre-primary education can serve as a powerful tool for creating a more equitable and inclusive society.

India’s “Beti Bachao Beti Padhao” initiative illustrates how policy campaigns can be effectively expanded into pre-primary education. Singh et al. (2023) assert, “The integration of gender-sensitivity workshops into school curricula have led to improved attitudes toward gender equality among educators and students alike (35).” Likewise, Uganda’s Ministry of Education has incorporated gender-responsive guidelines into early childhood education frameworks, establishing a systematic approach to promote inclusivity (Oketch et al., 2023).

These initiatives have fostered notable shifts in classroom interactions, enabling increased participation from both boys and girls in activities traditionally aligned with specific genders. For instance, in Rwanda and Zambia, more girls are getting involved in STEM pursuits,

while boys are taking on nurturing roles. Community awareness campaigns across Tanzania and Uganda have also played a crucial role in diminishing resistance to gender equity in education, leading to a broader acceptance of gender-responsive teaching methods. Educators in these regions report enhanced awareness of their biases and improved capabilities in cultivating inclusive learning environments.

Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap on why gender responsive matters to the pre-primary education. Considering the investment of the government and stakeholders' engagement to promote and support gender responsive pedagogy in the education sector, literature shows the impact is not fulfilled.

2. Methods of Study

This study utilizes a qualitative case study approach to investigating how gender-responsive practices align with the expectations of pre-primary education. We implemented a multi-site design that allowed for a comparison and thorough analysis of the practices at the two (2) Teachers Colleges in Tanzania, and Uganda, aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of institutional efforts as part of the Foundation for Learning Project initiative.

The selection of these two colleges was intentional, given their active engagement in gender-responsive practices and their varied contexts, which enriched our comparative analysis.

The participants in this study included:

- **Tutors:** They play a crucial role in integrating gender-responsive pedagogy into pre-primary teacher training.
- **Student Teachers:** Representing the future of education, these individuals are adopting these progressive practices.
- **Administrative Staff:** Responsible for overseeing policy implementation and enhancing infrastructure.

Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with tutors, student teachers, and administrators to capture their experiences, perceptions, and challenges in applying gender-responsive practices. Separate discussions with student teachers and tutors were organized to delve into collective insights regarding the effectiveness of strategies such as gender clubs, visual advocacy, and reviews of existing rules. Researchers performed direct observations of classroom settings, teacher-student interactions, and the overall infrastructure to evaluate the practical implementation of gender responsiveness. A review of institutional documents, including policies, lesson plans, and advocacy materials, was conducted to assess the formal incorporation of gender-responsive strategies.

3. Results and Discussion

Gender concerns have been deeply integrated into many aspects of the educational environment at the two Teacher Colleges in Uganda and Tanzania, as evidenced by the measurable and transformative consequences of their implementation of gender-responsive

practices. Several key findings are highlighted.

3.1 Integration of Gender Responsive into Teaching Documents

One significant finding was the clear integration of gender-responsive techniques into tutors' lesson plans and scheme of work. From the beginning until the completion of the class, these fundamental teaching resources were utilized as a means of clearly communicating gender behaviors. The dedication to gender responsiveness was methodically ingrained in the design and implementation of educational programs rather than remaining isolated to rhetoric (UNICEF, 2016). It was noted by the tutor in Uganda.

‘.. whatever we deliver in the classroom must be fully gender integrated. We were trained with Aga Khan on how gender inclusive would be applied to our work. We have embedded it; the lesson plan and the teaching material are gender inclusive.’

By creating an action plan, a Teachers' College in Uganda demonstrated that initiatives were operationalized. Best practices for gender responsiveness and inclusion were identified and put into action under the direction of this plan. The strategic planning process made sure that the institutions were considering the durability of these approaches in addition to responding quickly to pressing requirements. A tutor from Tanzania explained that:

“... This goes to even the teaching resources that we make and use for teaching are gender integrated. We have learned how this has improved learning, especially making girls demonstrate excellent contributions during lessons...”

One particularly interesting strategy was to restructure instructional materials to appeal to both boys and girls. Engaging teaching and learning was introduced with access to all through the deliberate use of materials and colors that broke away from conventional gendered connections.

3.2 Inclusive of Gender on Teaching Practices

The success of tutors was evidenced by the accuracy with which student teachers integrated gender pedagogy into many aspects of classroom management. In addition to their theoretical knowledge, student instructors demonstrated practical application in a variety of daily tasks, such as task performances and instructional language. Assessment of the student trainee during practicum practices in Uganda showed that in the classroom, a diverse range of gender-inclusive approaches were applied. Student teachers were seen facilitating conversations in small groups and encouraging boys and girls to actively participate in task presentations. The Uganda tutor pointed out that:

‘..... the external evaluators from the Ministry of Education were surprised to see how our students' teacher would engage the pupils in the classroom. Both boys and girls were fully engaged during the session. They use a variety of teaching resources that would attract the pupils to follow the session in a very joyful way. This was strange, particularly to our community, which is male-dominant, of which the attention would be to the boy pupils....’

This highlights how crucial it is to incorporate gender-responsive principles into the practical elements of teacher preparation and the value of experiential learning. The proficiency displayed by student instructors indicates that the influence of these programs is evident not just in conceptual knowledge but also in the real-world actions and attitudes of teachers.

A deliberate attempt to defy conventional gender stereotypes was evident in the terminology used in instruction, how groups were organized, and even the seating arrangements in classes. A thorough comprehension and internalization of the concepts taught was shown by the effective deployment of gender-responsive methods (Smart & Marshall, 2013). This was also commented with the Tanzania tutor who elaborated that:

‘... as a tutor I feel proud to see how the student teacher would manage their classes by integrating gender issues in their session at the practicum school. We feel happy to see what we have invested to them on integrating gender responsive is now taken forward. This tells us that the nation is going to benefit from tackling gender violence in schools for having these students who are standing as champions...’

One of the most important lessons learned from the initiative was how much information the tutors had. Their grasp of gender-related issues in a variety of contexts, such as institutional policies and infrastructure, was expanded by the workshops in addition to providing them with pedagogical insights. Tutors became advocates with the ability to bring about change in a variety of areas related to education, in addition to serving as carriers of theoretical knowledge. Tutors are positioned as key players who can influence the thinking of future educators and drive institutional change because of the extensive knowledge they have gained.

3.3 Institutionalize Gender Awareness

Teachers College embodied gender-responsive pedagogy, demonstrating various excellent practices beyond theoretical frameworks. These practices ranged from gender-responsive messages through visual awareness campaigns throughout the campuses, in-class activities, and during the practicum practices, among others. The practices are targeted at establishing a comprehensive atmosphere supportive of gender awareness and inclusion in the goal of boosting tutors' capacity. The effectiveness of these practices affects not only the immediate educational context but also the larger pre-primary education landscape, as seen by the altered teaching and learning documents, infrastructural modifications, and dynamic connections within the college community. The interviewed student teacher from Uganda explained:

‘..... we believe gender can not end by teaching at the classroom level. It needs to be addressed by behavior change, of which we have created a message, songs, and a slogan that condemns gender-based violence. We have seen how this has impacted many people at the campus, as not everyone would take gender responsive at one point. It's a gradual process...’

During the study, researchers observed that informational and awareness posters highlighting inclusivity and gender concerns were positioned strategically throughout the college grounds

as a visual commitment to the cause. These posters constantly suggested the colleges' commitment to gender equality. Chosen thoughtfully to embody the essence of gender-responsive approaches, the slogans encompass advocacy statements such as “*kuzingatia usawa wa kijinsia na ujumuishi ni jukumu la kila mmoja wetu*” (it is each of our responsibilities to consider concerns of equality and inclusion). Thus, gender aspects became a part of daily conversation through the intentional use of visual clues.



These striking visuals raised awareness among visitors and acted as continuous reminders for the college community. Beyond the confines of the colleges, these awareness statements found resonance. Inspired by the obvious dedication, visitors were encouraged to use such gender slogans in their establishments. This unanticipated knock-on effect highlighted how visual advocacy can inspire and influence people outside of the initial educational context. A principal of the college in Uganda said;

“ this incredible work has been done with our student teachers. They took their lessons very seriously by now promoting gender responsive pedagogy beyond the classroom. They painted trees, the dormitory, and classes with a good message on gender responsive. For us here, gender responsive pedagogy is our life .. ”

This advocacy-driven knowledge began to emerge, indicating that schools were now acting as both catalysts for larger societal change and incubators for gender-responsive practices. The fact that external institutions and the surrounding communities adopted gender-responsive slogans highlighted how educational institutions have the power to change societal norms and attitudes to promote gender equality and inclusion.

The influence of gender-responsive practices was further enhanced, which showed how these colleges' educational missions might go well beyond their physical boundaries. A greater public commitment to gender equality can be fostered by symbols and slogans, as evidenced

by the unanticipated impact of visual lobbying.

4. Conclusion

Across several educational fields, the two Teacher Colleges demonstrate a profound dedication to and the transformational power of gender-responsive approaches. The guiding principle that promotes gender pedagogy and inclusivity, engagement in extracurricular activities, enhancements to infrastructure, and effective teaching and learning strategies collectively illustrate a significant transformation taking place within these educational institutions. This was further evidenced through lesson plans and classroom observations showing a diligent attempt to incorporate gender-responsive practices at the center of educational approaches.

Furthermore, the changes to the infrastructure modifications, which encompass new restrooms, pathways, and other facilities, showcase a genuine commitment to creating a physically accessible environment that caters to the diverse needs of individuals of all genders. More than symbolic actions, these alterations illustrate a profound understanding of how an inclusive and welcoming infrastructure contributes to fostering gender equality.

Established gender norms are challenged when individuals of all genders engage in extracurricular activities, demonstrating a commitment to overcoming barriers in every aspect of academic life. The participation of tutors and student teachers' involvement in activities with diverse gender groups reflects a holistic strategy for promoting gender inclusion that extends beyond the classroom.

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