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		Gender dimensions in preschool education: an analysis of teachers' professional competencies, pedagogical practices, and gender-sensitive approaches in early childhood development	
Mollayeva Elza, Alipasha		Dr. Associate Professor	
		Baku State University	
		Algeria	
		E-mail: elzamollayeva@rambler.ru	
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Abstract Gender-sensitive pedagogy has become one of the defining features of contemporary educational reform. Although gender research has a half-century-long history in leading global academic contexts, it has emerged relatively recently in Azerbaijan. This study explores the gender aspects of teachers' professional activity in preschool educational institutions, emphasizing the role of gender competence as a determinant of pedagogical effectiveness, equality, and inclusiveness in early childhood education. The research examines the meso-level of gender implementation, which directly relates to the teacher's ability to interpret gender-related issues pedagogically, to model tolerant behaviors, and to promote egalitarian values among young learners. Drawing on both theoretical and applied frameworks, the study identifies and discusses the principal components of gender competence—informational, reflexive, and organizational—as well as the implications of gender asymmetry in teacher practices. The findings reveal that despite the widespread acceptance of gender equality as a pedagogical principle, implicit biases and traditional stereotypes persist in preschool education, influencing the teacher's interactions, evaluation methods, and role modeling behaviors. The article concludes by proposing practical strategies to strengthen gender awareness, promote balanced development among boys and girls, and support the formation of a new pedagogical model based on gender justice, inclusivity, and psychosocial sensitivity.			
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Introduction

Gender equality has become an essential pillar of contemporary democratic societies, reflecting not only social justice but also pedagogical necessity. In Azerbaijan, gender studies began to take shape at the end of the 20th century, marking the beginning of a gradual transformation in educational philosophy. The concept of

gender now transcends biological distinctions and is viewed as a **socially constructed system of roles, expectations, and behaviors** that profoundly influences identity formation, learning outcomes, and socialization processes from early childhood.

In preschool institutions, the teacher acts not only as an educator but also as a **cultural mediator of gender values**. The development of gender competencies among teachers ensures that children grow in an environment that encourages empathy, equality, and balanced self-expression, free from rigid gender stereotypes.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a **qualitative-descriptive and analytical approach**, combining theoretical analysis of gender pedagogy with an interpretative review of contemporary educational practices in preschool institutions. The primary focus is on how gender sensitivity manifests in teachers' professional activities and how it impacts children's psychosocial and cognitive development.

2.2 Data Sources and Framework

The research relies on **documentary analysis** of pedagogical and psychological literature, gender theory sources, and official education policy materials. The theoretical framework draws upon the works of A. N. Kamenskaya, O. B. Otvechalina, V. P. Simonova, and O. P. Nagel, among others, who conceptualized **gender competence** and its application in pedagogical contexts.

2.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis focuses on identifying:

1. Structural components of teachers' gender competence (informational, reflexive, organizational);
2. Manifestations of gender asymmetry in preschool pedagogical practices;
3. The relationship between teacher gender worldview and child socialization outcomes;
4. Practical approaches to integrating gender-sensitive pedagogical strategies into the preschool curriculum.

2.4 Limitations

The study is conceptual rather than empirical. While it provides a comprehensive theoretical synthesis, future research should incorporate **empirical observation and classroom-based fieldwork** to validate the theoretical propositions presented here.

Although the history of gender research in several leading countries of the world spans about half a century, in Azerbaijan such scientific inquiries began only in the late 20th century, and in this sense, gender studies are relatively new for the country. Given the multidimensional nature of gender issues, it is essential to study them from the perspective of various scientific disciplines. In every country that prioritizes democratic values, the basic principle of gender – **egalitarianism** (family relations based on equal rights and equitable division of labor) – occupies one of the central positions in state policy.

In recent years, the widespread use of the concept of gender has been driven by the increasing relevance of problems associated with the distribution of social roles according to sex-based affiliation. The expansion of democratic values in our society necessitates the creation of equal conditions for the realization of the interests and rights of all members of society, regardless of gender. Still in the process of defining its place within the system of sciences, the concept of gender represents a set of ideas about the personal and behavioral characteristics of men and women, and it emerges as the outcome of the process of educating a particular **gender role behavior**.

According to a modern definition, *“people are born biologically as male or female, but in the process of development – primarily through upbringing within the family and society – they learn to become boys and girls, and later men and women. They are taught corresponding behaviors, attitudes, roles, and activities, as well as how to relate to others... It is precisely this behavior that defines their gender role”* (1, p. 5).

There are several reasons for introducing the concept of gender into science: to shift analytical focus from the biological to the social dimension; to refute the existing assumptions and stereotypes about the “natural purpose of the sexes”; and to eliminate social inequalities between genders. This is because *“being a man or woman in society is not merely about possessing certain anatomical features; it also entails performing a pre-assigned gender role. Gender is constructed as a social model that determines the position of men and women in society. It is impossible to make assumptions about behavior or tendencies based solely on biological sex. Being a woman does not automatically mean possessing feminine traits, just as belonging to the male sex does not necessarily coincide with masculinity”* (2, p. 200).

Today, consideration of gender aspects in the education system emerges as a necessary factor. The promotion and implementation of gender equality ideas at all levels of education depend largely on the teacher's personal gender competencies and worldview.

The Implementation of Gender Approaches in the Teaching and Upbringing Process

Among the three levels identified for the implementation of gender approaches in the teaching and upbringing process, the **meso level** is directly related to the teacher's **gender competencies**. The teacher's gender competence manifests itself in their ability to correctly interpret gender-related issues from a pedagogical perspective, to instill these ideas in the younger generation, and to demonstrate gender tolerance through their personal example. According to A. N. Kamenskaya, *“a teacher's gender competence encompasses three areas: gender skills in pedagogical activity, gender skills in pedagogical communication, and personal gender competence”* (4, p. 269).

Gender Skills in Pedagogical Activity. These include understanding the psychological and age-specific characteristics of learners from a gender perspective; possessing knowledge about the influence of preschool programs and textbooks on children's gender self-awareness; mastering pedagogical techniques that help in selecting and grouping the necessary instructional materials to enhance efficiency in instilling gender values; and identifying latent gender potentials.

The teacher is the **bearer of gender culture**, and the extent of their gender awareness plays a significant role in their communication with children and in the gender socialization process. In modern education systems, there is a growing demand for specialists who consider gender characteristics and possess comprehensive gender knowledge, as gender competence is now recognized as one of the core skills in modern pedagogical training.

Gender Biases in Pedagogical Practice. Contemporary gender studies show that at both preschool and other educational stages, teachers tend to differentiate between male and female characteristics based on traditional gender approaches. Many teachers believe that since boys and girls differ in abilities and skills, their education and upbringing must also differ. For instance, they associate girls with kindness, care, delicacy, and compassion, while associating boys with firmness, endurance, and goal orientation. By nurturing these qualities, teachers unconsciously introduce gender stereotypes into the children's consciousness.

O. B. Otvechalina, who examined the activities of preschool teachers from a gender perspective, notes that *“gender asymmetry is evident among kindergarten teachers, stemming from contradictions in their gender worldview.”* Although they verbally accept gender equality as a fundamental pedagogical principle, in practice they often disregard it in their attitudes toward children's clothing, task distribution, assessment of personal qualities and achievements, and disciplinary measures (5).

For example, female teachers tend to adopt a stricter approach toward boys than girls and are more likely to punish them. They view boys' aggressiveness or quarrelsomeness as natural, while considering such behavior

undesirable for girls. This tendency reflects the teachers' adherence to traditional gender expectations, which remains prevalent among most educators. Although modern teachers acknowledge the necessity of integrating gender approaches into the teaching process, they often lack the theoretical knowledge and practical gender competencies required for implementation. The absence of such knowledge can lead to misconceptions about social equality between men and women.

Only a teacher equipped with gender competence can successfully apply a gender-based approach in pedagogy. Gender competence can be understood in **narrow and broad senses**.

- **In the narrow sense**, it refers to the teacher's ability to correctly identify the social roles, functions, relationships, and statuses of men and women within society and to apply this understanding in their pedagogical practice. Such a teacher can transfer gender knowledge effectively to children and groups, while also critically evaluating their own pedagogical activity from a gender perspective.
- **In the broad sense**, gender competence implies the teacher's psychosocial and sociocultural understanding of gender, as well as the ability to accurately evaluate the rights and responsibilities of men and women within their cultural contexts.

According to researcher G. A. Olkhovik, a teacher with proper gender orientation should *"be able to correctly determine their own gender identity, instill gender equality values in children, and utilize the potential of gender pedagogy to enhance the effectiveness of the educational process"* (6).

Components of Gender Competence. A teacher's gender competence also involves the consideration of gender characteristics in the psychological, pedagogical, and didactic management of children's activities. The scientific-pedagogical literature identifies **three main components** of a teacher's gender competence: **informational, reflexive, and organizational** (7).

1. **Informational Component:**
This includes knowledge of gender pedagogy and psychology, as well as an understanding of the gender characteristics of educational subjects, the social status of men and women in society, and gender analysis of children's literature and textbooks.
2. **Reflexive Component:**
This involves the teacher's personal attitude toward gender issues and their willingness to engage in self-development and self-reflection regarding gender-sensitive practices.
3. **Organizational Component:**
This pertains to the teacher's ability to organize gender socialization in educational settings, to recognize and address existing gender disparities, and to create psychologically and pedagogically favorable conditions for equality.

Gender competence also encompasses the ability to structure lessons around **gender-sensitive themes** and to utilize the opportunities provided by various topics to foster gender awareness and inclusiveness.

Taking gender aspects into account in the improvement of the pedagogical process constitutes the foundation of a new model of education. According to V. P. Simonova, the teacher's ability to identify both their own and the children's **gender dominance** significantly enhances the effectiveness of the learning process. The concept of gender dominance refers to the predominance of either the feminine or masculine component within an individual (8).

People are generally divided into four types according to gender dominance: **masculine, feminine, androgynous, and amorphous**. Every human being possesses both masculine (from Latin *masculinitus* – male) and feminine (from Latin *femina* – female) characteristics at both biological and psychological levels. The balance between these two elements is determined by the concentration of male (testosterone) and female (estrogen) hormones in the blood, as well as by the degree of one's gender consciousness.

If an individual's masculinity is more dominant, they tend to display typically male traits such as leadership, assertiveness, analytical thinking, determination, strength, confidence, independence, decisiveness, and risk-

taking behavior. Conversely, when femininity predominates, feminine traits are more pronounced: charm, cheerfulness, empathy, modesty, sensitivity, gentleness, compassion, emotionality, affection for children, and calmness.

Specificity of Organizing the Learning Process According to Gender Orientation

Scientific research on the learning process highlights that its organization should differ depending on the gender orientation of the group. It also identifies the considerations and strategies teachers should adopt when working with **masculine** or **feminine-oriented** groups.

For masculine-oriented groups, the teacher should:

- Give priority to visual information and present data in columns;
- Allow a degree of abstraction in the explanation of material;
- Provide summaries and conclusions at the end of each session;
- Organize dialogues and discussions;
- Focus on logical reasoning and argumentation;
- Encourage pair work and self-assessment practices.

For feminine-oriented groups, the teacher should:

- Apply concrete written examples and calculations;
- Utilize participants' speech and communication abilities;
- Employ collaborative and collective learning formats;
- Provide commentary and reflection on the learning process and results;
- Incorporate emotionally engaging, real-life examples.

The Model of Teacher Activity Based on Gender Approach

The model of a teacher's activity based on the gender approach for preschool-aged children was developed by **O. P. Nagel**. Her classification identifies four major groups of skills:

1. **Theoretical skills** – understanding the psychological differences between boys and girls, knowledge of the development of gender-role socialization in preschool age, and awareness of methods and tools for forming feminine and masculine characteristics.
2. **Diagnostic skills** – the ability to use diagnostic research methods in the study of gender-role socialization.
3. **Personal skills** – awareness of one's own personal qualities, gender stereotypes, identity, and the gender role being enacted.
4. **Technological skills** – the ability to apply a gender-based approach in organizing activities during the preschool period.

A teacher who aims to implement a gender-based approach in preschool education must be able to:

- Diagnose the level of **gender-role socialization** among preschoolers;
- Design and structure the surrounding environment by taking into account children's gender characteristics, identifying and applying gender-related models present within it;
- Analyze existing general education programs and technologies from a gender perspective;
- Develop methodological and didactic tools to support gender-role education;
- Prepare guidelines and recommendations for parents.

Key Factors in Organizing Gender-Sensitive Educational Processes

When working with groups composed of both boys and girls, teachers should consider several important factors that can positively influence children's gender upbringing:

1. **In selecting forms, methods, and tasks**, the teacher should:
 - Consider the **gender composition** of the group: if one sex significantly outnumbers the other, gender characteristics may take longer to manifest;
 - Take into account **psychophysiological traits** such as memory, perception, mathematical and verbal abilities, emotions, shyness, interests, self-esteem, self-control, intrinsic motivation, and communication style;
 - Stimulate the **individual gender development** of each child by helping them reveal their abilities, creative potential, and gender uniqueness;
 - Encourage the **active participation** of girls, especially when boys tend to dominate interactions and display higher levels of self-confidence.
2. Recognize that **boys typically exhibit higher exploratory activity and dominant mathematical thinking**, which should be considered in instructional planning.
3. Take into account that **girls often display stronger social and communicative interests**, and guide them toward greater independence and initiative.
4. Observation and analysis of children's behavior reveal clear **psychological and behavioral differences**:
 - Boys tend to be more active and noisy; however, this does not necessarily mean they commit more mistakes. In fact, girls may display more subtle, less noticeable forms of misbehavior.
 - In cases of conflict or confrontation, girls are more inclined to complain to adults, which often results in their being perceived as the "injured party." From a gender perspective, this perception is misleading.
 - Since boys are generally more physically active, they are often regarded as the main source of classroom disorder or noise during breaks.
 - Differences are also evident in **self-evaluation**: research shows that boys usually **overestimate** their abilities, while girls tend to be more **realistic and self-critical** (3, p. 412).

When assessing the activities and performance of boys and girls, it is important to take into account the following **gender-based differences**:

a) Boys tend to demonstrate a higher level of exploratory ability and creativity, often generating new ideas. However, compared to girls, they tend to be less precise and organized in implementing these ideas. As noted by Prof. Ə. S. Bayramov and Ə. Ə. Əlizade in their textbook *Psychology*, "*Girls tend to obey more readily, display a stronger sense of responsibility for assigned tasks, and usually strive to complete them enthusiastically*" (3, p. 412).

b) Any assessment provided by a teacher is inherently **subjective**, and it largely depends on the teacher's level of gender awareness and worldview.

Supporting the Harmonious Development of Boys and Girls

For the harmonious development and activity of both sexes, the learning materials must be designed to accommodate both **logical** and **figurative-intuitive** modes of perception. As stated in psychological literature, "*To influence a boy effectively, one must consider his interests and be able to justify the requirements placed upon him logically. To influence a girl, however, it is necessary to appeal to her emotions*" (3, p. 411). Thus, it is essential to ensure that assigned tasks can be solved through multiple approaches and methods, catering to different cognitive and emotional modalities.

Addressing Emotional Sensitivity in Feedback

When expressing dissatisfaction with boys' performance, the teacher should take into account their **emotional sensitivity and vulnerability**. The teacher's remarks should be short, precise, and constructive; otherwise, the boy may react defensively or refuse to listen, being unable to withstand emotional tension.

Similarly, when pointing out girls' mistakes, teachers must remember that **emotional sensitivity** can hinder the proper understanding of feedback. Therefore, corrections should be communicated gently and supportively, so as not to undermine their confidence or motivation.

The Role of Teachers' Gender Competence

As in all levels of education, the implementation of a **gender-sensitive approach** in preschool education relies heavily on the **meso level**, which directly relates to the teacher's gender competence.

The teacher's gender competence is reflected in their ability to explain gender-related issues from a pedagogical standpoint, to impart gender equality values to the younger generation, and to model gender tolerance through personal behavior. According to A. N. Kamenskaya, *"a teacher's gender competence encompasses three areas: gender competence in pedagogical activity, gender competence in pedagogical communication, and personal gender competence"* (4, p. 269).

Gender competence in pedagogical activity includes:

- Understanding the psychological and age characteristics of learners from a gender perspective;
- Awareness of how higher education programs and textbooks influence students' gender self-awareness;
- Mastery of pedagogical techniques and the ability to select, group, and apply learning materials effectively to enhance gender education;
- The ability to identify and utilize hidden gender potentials in educational content.

Teachers must not only study the gender characteristics of children but also conduct **self-diagnosis** to understand their own gender individuality.

Gender Pedagogy as a Modern Field of Educational Science

In the modern era, **gender pedagogy** has developed as a specialized branch within general pedagogy. It defines the **concept of gender education**, sets its goals and objectives, determines its content, identifies optimal ways of applying gender approaches in education, and focuses on the **formation of teachers' gender competencies** as a central pedagogical task.

Relevance of the Study

The **relevance** of this research lies in the fact that fostering **gender equality values** among the younger generation is one of the fundamental goals of modern education in a democratic society. However, not all teachers possess sufficient gender competence to achieve this. The effectiveness of gender-sensitive education depends largely on the teacher's awareness, attitude, and ability to integrate gender principles into daily pedagogical practice.

Scientific Novelty

In Azerbaijani pedagogical science, the gender dimension remains a **relatively new and underexplored area**. This article scientifically and pedagogically highlights, for the first time, the **importance of considering gender approaches at all educational stages**, with particular emphasis on preschool education. It also explores the specific characteristics of teachers' and caregivers' gender competencies in this context.

Practical Significance

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The findings and recommendations presented in this article can be utilized in **gender research**, as well as by **teachers and caregivers in preschool institutions**, to overcome the difficulties encountered in integrating gender approaches into educational and upbringing processes.

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to international research ethics in education and social sciences.

- **Integrity and Transparency:** All interpretations are grounded in verified academic literature and pedagogical frameworks.
- **Respect for Diversity:** The research avoids any bias related to sex, ethnicity, religion, or culture, in accordance with UNESCO and COPE ethical standards.
- **Protection of Participants:** Since the study does not involve direct human subjects, no personal data or interventions were used.
- **Academic Responsibility:** All cited sources are appropriately acknowledged following APA 7 citation norms.

The author acknowledges the sensitivity of gender topics in educational discourse and emphasizes the importance of **contextual and culturally respectful adaptation** of gender equality principles within Azerbaijani preschool education.

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6. Conflict of Interest

The author declares **no conflict of interest**. The views and conclusions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the positions of any affiliated institution or funding body.

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