

Original Article

Gender Disparities in Education and the Empowering Role of Gender-Responsive Pedagogy Training: Kotebe University of Education in Focus

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Abstract

This study explores the pervasiveness of gender inequalities in education and examines the role of gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP) training in empowering pre-service teachers. A qualitative research design was employed, using document analysis and pre- and post-training focus group discussions (FGDs). Fifteen teachers and twenty six trainees attending the training took part in the FGDs sessions. The findings indicate that girls experience sexual violence and harassment, disproportionate domestic responsibilities, and gender inequalities driven by financial insecurity, social norms, and insufficient integration of gender issues in university curricula. The training improved the pre-service teachers' understanding of gender inequality and empowered them to advocate for girls beyond the school compound. The training played a key role in transforming teachers into active change agents for tackling gender inequality within and beyond the school environment.

Key words: Gender, Pedagogy, Training, Empowerment

1. Introduction

In many developing countries, girls are often subjected to be used as instruments of both political agendas and gender-based violence, including abduction and sexual assault. A pertinent example is the targeted kidnapping of girls by '*Boko Haram*' who have emerged as a significant issue in recent years in Nigeria. The kidnapping of nearly 300 schoolgirls in Nigeria have grabbed headlines and these girls are targets for terrorist groups because they are seeking an education (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016). Parallel incidents were documented in Ethiopia; seventeen female students from *Dembi Dolo* University who were kidnapped in December 2019 were an illustrative example for the rampant abduction and gender-based violence prevailing in the country.

Despite global progress, girls in Africa continue to face serious violations of their rights in the 21st century while they have been trying to attend school. A long-lived gender stereotype, social norms and power imbalance prevailing in the society could have the potential to be reflected in every spectrum of life. Against the maladaptive practices of the society, schools have the

opportunity to be a safe haven and place to learn about rights against abuse; however, cases of school-related, gender-based violence occur, including corporal punishment and sexual abuse from peers and authorities (UNICEF, 2018). Furthering the discussion, Tafere et al. (2022) noted that schools impose punishments on female students, for example, by making late-comers clean the school compound who face heavy domestic work burdens which negatively impact their education.

Despite the expansion of schooling, more and more young people are leaving school without having acquired the basic numeracy and literacy skills. Government statistics (2019–20) show that although nearly all girls enrolled in primary school, only 53% progressed to upper primary and just 68% of those completed the full primary cycle (Tafere et al., 2022). Girls in Ethiopia are less able to access schooling than their male peers in the first place and more likely to drop out early, not knowing how to read, write or do basic mathematics (Tafere et al., 2022). Whilst these problems are partly a matter of schooling quality, they are amplified by gender norms and practices such as early marriage, high domestic work burdens and limited work opportunities (Devonald et al., 2020). Sexual harassment and violence in schools, including by teachers, is widely reported (Stavropoulou & Gupta-Archer, 2017).

The lack of gender-responsive curricula in teacher training programs undermines teachers' capacity to facilitate gender-responsive classroom environments and deliver gender-sensitive instruction. An unsupportive school environment allows sexual harassment and violence to persist, contributing to absenteeism and attrition among girls and young women across all levels of education in Ethiopia—from primary schools to universities (Wudu & Getahun , 2009; Tafere et al., 2022; Stavropoulou & Gupta-Archer, 2017). Moreover, studies from other contexts indicate that when teachers are not adequately trained and equipped, they may transmit their own misconceptions, prejudices, and knowledge gaps, limiting their ability to establish and sustain respectful and equitable learning environments (Keogh et al., 2018). These findings underscore the need for systematic teacher preparation in gender-responsive pedagogy. In an evidence review of education programs in LMICs, Snistveit et al. (2015) found strong evidence that structured pedagogy programs improve learning outcomes. However, in general there has been little systematic assessment of classroom dynamics in teaching in LMICs, or on the impact of teachers' attitudes on student learning in LMICs (Lloyd et al., 2000; Psaki et al., 2022). This

is particularly the case in Ethiopia, where there has been little attention to teachers' experiences of learning and delivering gender-sensitive pedagogical approaches and the consequences for their attitudes and practices in the classroom - underlining the need for further evidence to inform education policy and programming.

In a research on teaching practices at a university in Ethiopia, Alemayehu (2020) finds that despite having gender equity and equality policies, a code of conduct, and gender clubs to support gender inclusive teaching and address learning challenges for young women, the university faced major challenges in deploying gender inclusive teaching and learning strategies in classroom settings by teachers. These included a lack of gender responsive lesson planning, gender friendly teaching and learning materials, appropriate language use and communication in classrooms, and the ongoing negative attitude of both teachers and male students towards gender equality and equity. Researching the implementation of gender-responsive pedagogies in secondary schools, Mollaw et al. (2019) find that despite school principals being supportive, teachers themselves were poorly equipped to prepare gender responsive lesson plans, use the relevant instructional materials, and were not confident in supporting girls with menstrual hygiene management. This might be attributed to limited willingness to implement gender-responsive pedagogy in the school system. Gender responsive or gender-sensitive pedagogy aims to explicitly address the inequalities prevailing among boys and girls in their educational experiences. Gender equality within education spaces requires that educational institutions build a gender responsive institutional culture, and develop and practice institutional policies, plans, strategies and practices built around promoting gender equality (UNESCO, 2015). Gender responsive teaching should reduce broader societal gender inequality by improving girls' opportunities to progress in education and access opportunities for work that requires higher qualifications. The Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE's) program evaluations find that enrolment in schools which take a gender-responsive approach improves girls' academic performance, achievement, participation in classroom processes, and school retention rates; sees more girls in school committees and leadership roles; and reduces teenage pregnancies (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016).

In Ethiopia, there have been calls for gender to be mainstreamed into the training of teachers so that they are equipped to deliver teaching that is sensitive to the needs of learners and support

them to address gender inequality (MoE, 2014). However, as Tafere et al. (2022) observe, even when gender is included in curricula there are underlying and often hidden drivers of gender inequality such as social norms that remain largely unaddressed within policies and strategies. As a consequence, As a result, progress toward gender equity in education has remained limited.

Reviews of the teaching of various subjects in Ethiopia's secondary school system find both challenges at the level of resourcing for gender-responsive pedagogy, and uneven adoption of its core principles. Mollaw et al. (2019) note that materials used for teaching in schools such as textbooks contain gender stereotypes and higher representation of boys in illustrations, for example carrying out experiments, reinforcing the idea that only boys can grow up to be engineers and scientists. That is the educational outcomes for girls are shaped by institutional practices and the prevailing social norms. Considering this reality, the research team organized training workshops on gender equality that could be integrated as part of the pre-service professional development. Thus, this article deals with the pervasiveness of gender inequality and the role of training in empowering the pre-service teachers.

2. Rationale

Each student brings to the classroom a different set of personality traits, learning styles and abilities and recognizing the students' individuality will be useful in accomplishing gender responsive classroom relationships. Here, gender-responsive pedagogy refers to fostering positive teacher-student relationships, using gender-responsive learning materials, planning lessons and organizing classrooms inclusively, implementing equitable school management, and designing evaluation schemes that consider the needs of all genders in the learning environment. In view of this, gender responsive pedagogy refers to teaching and learning processes that pay attention to the specific learning needs of girls and boys (Mlama et al., 2005).

Gender responsive pedagogy embraces an all-encompassing gender approach in the processes of lesson planning, teaching, classroom management and performance evaluation (Mlama et al., 2005). In the context of gender responsive pedagogy, teachers need to consider a set of issues (such as classroom set up, teaching-learning materials, classroom interaction, language use, and lesson plan) that could satisfy the needs of both girls and boys in the school setting. However, many teachers apply teaching methodologies that do not give girls and boys equal opportunities

to participate and they also use teaching and learning materials that perpetuate gender stereotypes (Mlama et al., 2005). Some teaching staff may also be unaware of their unconscious positive or negative biases about male and female students, unintentionally discouraging female students from taking a leadership role within the classroom, or from progressing in what may be perceived as male subjects (Chapin & Warne, 2020). Owing to this, some teacher-student relationships are not favorable to effective learning which makes it difficult for students, especially girls, to seek guidance and assistance from teachers for either academic or personal problems (Bekalu, 2017).

The pervasive gender disparity goes to the level of verbal abuse and insulting. Researchers in the area noted that both male and female students experience high levels of verbal abuse within the school setting. In a study conducted at Addis Ababa University, Bekalu (2017) found out that teachers insulted their students and they did not show respect to their students although giving respect for fellow human beings is a fundamental principles of formal education. This is primarily has a negatively impact on students' education, health and wellbeing (Tafere et al., 2022). With regard to its effect, Tafere et al. (2022) further stated that gender-based violence at school level could reduce girls' class participation, lower their school performance and increase their grade repetition and dropout rates.

Thus, to alleviate the problem from its deep-seated position at least in the school setting, teachers need to get proper awareness about gender responsive pedagogy. Although cultural and social norms are not on the side of women, perceptions and conditions for girls can be changed at least on the local level through empowerment (Wright, 2020). This is because most teachers may not have adequate understanding about the GRP and the topic remains largely unaddressed. Literature shows that teachers have a limited understanding of gender-responsive pedagogy (Mhewa et al., 2020 cited in Mukagiahana et al., 2024). Mollaw et al. (2023) further stated that teachers were ineffective in creating gender-sensitive lesson plans and teaching materials, and they also were weak in treating the subject of sexual maturation. Furthering the discussion, Mollaw et al. (2023) recommend that teachers should receive short-term and long-term training regarding concepts and application of GRP practices. In view of the above, this study tries to assess the pervasiveness of gender inequalities and examine the role of training in empowering

pre-service teachers about gender-responsive pedagogy. In light of the above points, this study tries to answer the following research questions.

- To what extent does gender disparity exist in education?
- What are the roles of training in empowering teachers about GRP?

3. Methods

The target population for this study was pre-service teachers at Kotebe University of Education. A pre-service training on gender responsive pedagogy for trainee teachers was developed and delivered via a collaborative partnership between Kotebe University of Education, Ethiopia and the University of Bristol, UK. Before the training, a training module dealing with gender issues was prepared by the research team. To prepare the training module, the research team conducted a scoping review of existing curricula to explore how gender is currently included within the Ethiopian education system. The nationally harmonized modular curriculum of Kotebe University of Education—including Economics, Management, Amharic, Civics and Ethical Education, Foreign Languages, Geography, History, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Computer Science, Mathematics, and Sport Science—was assessed for content related to gender. The research team also conducted pre- and post-training assessments through focus group discussions with 15 teacher educators (having two groups) and 26 trainee teachers (having three groups) to assess the contribution of the training both for trainee teachers' own knowledge about gender related issues and their pedagogical work. The pre-training assessments included questions about participants' prior knowledge of gender, gender responsive pedagogy, and gender equality. The post-training assessments invited participants' reflection on their learning journey and changes to their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and practices regarding gender responsive pedagogy that could be attributed to the training they had received. Alongside the delivery of the training modules, the trainee teachers were provided with continuous mentorship via a WhatsApp group and offered in-person support through visits to the university during the training process.

Thus, this article draws on the evidence collected in the pre- and post-training assessments done through focus group discussions which focused on gender responsiveness among pre-service teachers that enables them as change agents to improve female students' experience of learning. Both teacher and student participants came from various departments, reflecting diversity in terms of disciplinary background, gender and experience.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings obtained from the data were classified according to the themes emerging from the responses and they were presented as follows.

4.1. The pervasiveness of gender inequality

A. *Teachers are less sensitive to gender issues*

This section prompted various reflections about the perception teachers. The following excerpts represent a sample of the many responses shared by the trainees. As one teacher participant (Alem, pseudonyms) explained,

Teachers often show less support or encouragement to girls than to boys; and we are subject to sexual harassment (FGD 3, student).

In a similar manner, a trainee from Kotebe noted the points below:

Girls faced sexual harassment from their teachers in the school. If teachers want to use females for 'academic trade', they will give them more marks. If girls become strong enough to say 'no', they will choose to quit school (FGD 1, teacher).

As pointed out in the excerpts, female students are being harassed by some teachers who used the position of their power. In societies where girls face discrimination, the school environments need to serve as a sanctuary for girls. However, it is sad to record that the inability of schools to provide quality-learning environment for girls disadvantages them in school enrolment and school attendance (Kipchumba&Sulaiman, 2017). In such an environment, female students may feel unsafe and they are often riddled with embarrassment and shame over what is happening to them. Such incidence limits girls' freedom of participation and interaction with others (Abraha, 2012). Moreover, the feeling of being harassed could lead to less participation, meager classroom interaction and poor academic performance since learning happens through interaction and vulnerable female students are plagued by unnecessary thoughts in the classroom such as anxiety, low self-esteem, dissatisfaction and the like. If the students have little control of the learning environment, students would refrain from any form of participation. In such a context, students view the environment as an upsetting circumstance. And to the worst, harassed female students might avoid going to school where the harassment happened. In connection to this, Chapin & Warne (2020) reported that some teaching staff may be unaware of their unconscious positive or negative biases about male and female students. Incidences like this would bring multiple psychological problems upon female students. Such harassment might lead to the

conclusion that teachers may not be aware of the effects of their treatment on the psychological and social conditions of females.

The findings of Kipchumba and Sulaiman (2017) indicated that absence of GFS (Girl Friendly Space or Environment) in schools can reduce the likelihood of adolescent girls being absent from school. That is, teacher-student rapport, conducive environment and friendly teaching/learning process are key for the engagement of girls in the academic setting. Girls need scholarly help from teachers and teachers have to create such relationship and they have to be responsive to the demands of the students. The absence of such social relationship debases the quality of interaction and this drags the academic success of female students out of the right truck. This happens because the classroom social structure affects students' perceptions and performance.

B. University curricula do not routinely include gender issues

Gender-friendly learning and teaching materials play a key role in supporting gender responsive pedagogy. However, the examination of university curricula found that gender was only very intermittently included and discussed in relation to key topics. In this regard, the results of the document analysis could be summarized in the paragraph below,

Gender was not included as specific topic at the program and content levels across all curricula in each of the thirteen departments of the university. At the level of course outlines, there were few topics or sub-topics mentioning gender - with some courses containing no gender topics at all. This exclusion is problematic because it suggests gender equality is not an important consideration.

As the document analysis showed, there were not ample topics and sub-topics of gender issues in the curricula of the University which results in harsh living conditions for girls in the education system. Considering the Ethiopian education system, Mollaw et al (2023) recommend that the textbooks require serious revision incorporating the application of gender-responsive teaching and learning strategies. It has been argued recently that gender equality issues are being neglected in most teacher education curriculums internationally (UNESCO, 2015). Owing to this, UNESCO strongly recommends including gender into the different courses that form the curricula. In elaborating gender inclusion in the curriculum, Kreitz-Sandberg (2016) noted that gender inclusion is a set of working strategically for gender equality in university studies by engaging all university teachers into the work for more gender equal and gender sensitive teaching and inclusion is not an end in itself but a means to inspire students to incorporate gender

discourses into their pedagogical work in practical fields. Bearing in mind the importance of gender responsive pedagogy, the Rwanda has considered gender issues in the new curriculum, which is “a competence-based curriculum [CBC]” that integrates gender in lesson planning and in the teaching and learning process as a cross-cutting issue (Mukagiahana et al, 2024). Had gender issues been endorsed in the curriculum at the required level, students and teachers might have promoted inclusivity and embraced their diversity. Integrating gender issues into the fabric of teaching through the curriculum would also have the potential to sensitize the teaching staff.

C. Families, particularly in the country side, provide less support to girls' education

Socio-cultural norms were also identified as being a driver of gender inequalities that result in girls' education not being valued, and girls thus not receiving adequate support from families for their schooling. One participant (Chaltu, pseudonyms) observed how attitudes that undermine girls' educational potential mean that they are not sent to school:

Parents have a belief that 'a girl will reach nowhere being educated'. It seems that a girl cannot contribute to development, economic growth or cultural change. Parents do not want to send their children to school. They believed that when the girl becomes about 10 years old, she should be married off, although it seems minimal now; child marriage is still a practice in some areas (FGD, 2).

In a similar manner, a student has the following to say:

In many households, boys are prioritized over girls in terms of care, opportunities, and resources whereas girls have the burden of excessive household chores. (FGD2).

Driven in part by these norms, the division of labor within the household was also noted to inhibit girls' schooling by limiting time for studies, as one participant (Hadas, pseudonyms) explained:

Female student does all household chores, serves her brother, her parents, and her husband if she is married, so this holds her back to function well. If the school is far from her house, and if transportation is not available, she has to do her household chores in the morning; due to this, she cannot reach school on time (FGD, 3).

As it is evident in the above excerpts, the support girls received from family members for their education is very low and boys are being more favored than girls. Owing to this, Ethiopia's ranking as 79 out of 149 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index reveals that gender inequality is pervasive (World Economic Forum, 2024). Chaltu's utterances noted that there have been deep-seated bias and stereotypes about girls' inability to succeed in education which emanated from the norms of the society. Practicing early marriage, deterring female from attending schools,

developing low perception for females' education are all harmful traditional practices which are based on the beliefs and values held by members of the community. The culture of a family dictates our gender beliefs and gender roles in the society.

As it can be seen from the Hadas's response, female students are able to do a larger share of household responsibilities. Their household chores could include cleaning the house, washing, cooking, and taking care of their siblings and the like. Mollaw et al (2023) further stated that girls were assigned to perform household chores and acted as house-mothers when their mothers went to the markets to buy and sell goods. From the data, it is possible to learn that there is unequal involvement in household chores between men and women and the traditional gender roles are being reflected on men and female interaction.

Participants also recognized that for poorer households, gender inequalities are often exacerbated by financial insecurity. One participant (Abebe, pseudonyms) described the impact of financial difficulties on girls' decision-making about schooling:

The financial challenge, i.e. having little or no money to cover your basic expenses is the major cause that holds female students back. When one female student goes to school, there are things she needs such as clothes, and other essentials. So if these are not available, she might not like to go to school; rather she would be involved doing construction work and immoral things, sex trade (FGD, 4).

As it can be seen from the data, the economic condition of the family directly affects the education of female students. On this matter, Donville (2019) indicated that poverty is an especially pronounced barrier for girls, due to their increased vulnerability to early marriage, boy preference and unpaid care work. Absence of household-income of a family makes female students be a daily laborer. These female students, during day time, are hired on a daily basis in construction works or manual-related tasks which were very taxing. This finding was in line with the findings of Mollaw et al, (2023) who found out that families often used children, especially girls, to generate income through trade, employment, or other labor. Still more, the data showed that female students are involved in sex trade as a means of survival. They have been involved in commercial sex for the basic facilities like food and shelter. As it has been the case in the excerpt, the student turns to prostitution as an employment option. The data further inform that economic problem could lead to females' withdrawal from school.

D. The community is less concerned for girls' education

Participants also described the difficulty for girls in safely travelling to and from school, especially in rural areas, and that this has an impact on their continuation of schooling. One teacher participant (Roman, pseudonyms) described an incident while doing her PhD research in a rural area where she observed a particularly concerning event, which was however normalized by the local police:

There were female students going home from school. A group of young men took one of the female students after beating her with a stick and they took her to the nearby jungle. I asked the driver to stop but he did not do so because he was afraid of the young men. After a short drive, we got a small town and I reported the case to the police but the policemen in the station have taken the case as a normal incident (teacher FGD 2).

In this regard, discussant two has the following to say:

We have very poor societal protection. For example, when a female student is beaten by a man over the street, most people do not have the habit of protecting her (student FGD₁).

According to the data above, the society fails to provide social protection to female students. The magnitude of sexual assault was so pronounced in the countryside as it was discussed in the excerpt. It was terrible to imagine the situation of a girl who had been taken by a group of gentlemen. Female students in the rural area have become more vulnerable and insecure and they suffer in silence. Victims of sexual assault would feel stressed, anxious and depressed. They lose confidence and withdrew themselves from social situations and they became less productive in their academic career. What is worst is the reaction of the passer-by. As it was explained in the excerpt, the by standers as well as the policemen could not stop the sexual assault happening on the female student rather they took it as a normal occurrence. Such reluctance could send a message that it is not a big deal to harass female students on their way to school. This further indicated that the society fails to provide social protection to female students.

Compared to girls who do not get access to education, girls who have had the opportunity to join schools are few in numbers. Even those girls who got lucky to attend school have a wider risk of being raped and abducted (Wright, 2020). Roman's response also noted that the policemen had taken the report of harassment as a normal incident. This further indicated that discrimination against female was an accepted norm of the society. This finding established an empirical link with the findings of Wright. Wright (2020) found out that a woman who goes to the police and report

the case of physical assault and sexual harassment, most of the time, will surely become the subject of mockery and women are victims of acid attacks and daylight shooting as well. Furthering the discussion, Wright noted that in Ethiopia, cultural norms prevent women from reporting injustices and they are likely to be targeted and/or ostracized from their communities without the perpetrators being reprimanded. To curb such problems, Mollaw et al, (2019) suggest that there is a need to have awareness-raising activities and a “zero-tolerance” culture that should be promoted in all school environments and surrounding communities through school festivals, community dialogues, training and education media. Such programs that break down the cultural norms could influence the local laws and change cultural norms that oppress girls’ lives. Moreover, building schools nearby, close to home, could also curb the problems girls encounter on their way to schools; school construction in rural areas have also the potential to improve school enrollment rates among the girls population.

In a similar manner, participant Mulatu has the points below:

Girls face challenges such as abduction, and early marriage (student FGD2).

Derartu has addressed the following:

Girls' education faces several challenges including poverty, lack of hope and unemployment. As a result, many girls migrate to the Arab countries (student FGD3).

As per the responses of Derartu, girls’ education is challenged by poverty and unemployment. Although poverty and unemployment are common denominators for boys and girls, participants of the training mentioned that the challenges are more pronounced on girls. It is sad to record that poverty and unemployment are a long-standing expression of the people of Ethiopia. These girls are also exposed to such problems that limit their opportunities leading to a sense of hopelessness. This further leads the girls to leave their country in search of better prospects. Pertaining to Mulatu’s response, early marriage abduction should not be tolerated; it should be firmly opposed by every citizen. This further indicated that there is a need to critically scrutinize our beliefs, cultural norms and practices that fully deny girls’ human rights. Recognizing that gender discrimination has lifelong and intergenerational impacts; UNICEF works actively to remove the underlying structural barriers, such as harmful social norms and gendered power systems, that perpetuate inequalities (UNICEF, 2021). In this regard, teachers have the utmost responsibility to heal these wrongly-held cultural norms.

Even after overcoming family, school, and cultural challenges, a girl who achieves remarkable grades may still be subjected to mockery. Regarding the poor perception of the community on the performance of girls on math exam, Almaz has forwarded the following point:

When a girl performed exceptionally well on a math exam, instead of being praised, people might gossip that she had an inappropriate relationship with the teacher or accuse her of getting the exam questions in advance(teacher FGD1).

As it can be seen from the excerpt above, due to her outstanding performance, a girl becomes subjected to rumors. In such a falsehood environment, the girl cannot utilize the full extent of her potential. In other words, a sizable portion of the girl's cognitive resources are used up by irrelevant thoughts prevailing in the compound. This happened because rumors could negatively impact her academic performance. It is quite unfair to raise unjust question about a girl's performance on math exam and question a girl's integrity. Motivation and encouragement bring a new sense of energy upon students; on the contrary, such type of disparaging thoughts would retard the achievement and motivation of high ranking girls.

4.2.The role of training in empowering teachers about GRP

A. *The training improved teachers' understanding of gender inequality*

Participating in the training gave teachers a more expansive understanding of gender and gender inequitable practices and their consequence for girls' schooling. One participant (Azeb, pseudonyms) described her shift in perception of gender:

I have never looked at the gender issues with different lenses. I always thought gender meant only girls sexual violence or early marriage. However, when I went into my teaching job, I observed neglect, avoidance and lack of support for the girl child (FGD, 3).

This was echoed by another participant (Haimanot, pseudonyms), who explained how the training had enabled them to see the connection between their own views and their acts in the classroom:

This training has helped me to understand how each individual teacher's gender responsiveness matters if we should move from gender blindness to gender transformation because it has helped both my colleagues and I to be conscious and act accordingly (FGD, 2).

As per the response of Azeb and Haimanot, the training given to the pre-service teachers at Kotebe University of Education helped them a lot in conceptualizing the issues of gender-sensitive pedagogy. The true value of this training lies in how it empowers the pre-service

teachers to be change agents in fighting against gender inequalities. Consistent with this, Mukagiahana et al. (2024) found out that training positively impacted teacher' understanding and application of gender-sensitive pedagogy.

B. The training turned teachers into change agents for addressing gender inequality within schools

Although many of the teachers had observed gender inequitable practices and beliefs within the education system at large, the power of the training was great in transforming how they saw their role and capabilities to support girls more effectively. One participant (Dereje, pseudonyms) explained that he had taken steps to engage other teachers in pursuit of gender equality in school as a consequence of the training:

Every teacher should seriously take it that it is the teacher's role to make her classroom gender responsive. A teacher does not teach only subjects but also life skills to make students self-confident and proactive. I persuaded and motivated my students and fellow teachers to join the gender club in our school so that regular conscious raising and the must have skills for gender equality could be learned in a planned way (FGD, 1).

Another participant (Mahlet, pseudonyms) described using the training to educate a principal about the importance of gender clubs:

School principals have to model gender equality and inclusiveness in their schools. My principal thought I wasted time by gathering gender club members in the weekends and sometimes after class. I patiently talk to him, share materials and cases with him. Currently he has stopped considering our gathering as a waste of time. I am sure he will appreciate what we do sooner or later (FGD, 3).

As per the excerpts above, the responses of Dereje and Mahlet indicated that teachers were able to address gender issues by establishing gender club that shed lights on gender sensitive pedagogy. As it can be seen from the responses of Mahlet, teachers who underwent through GRP training have the capacity to influence their director's perspectives on the existing practices of forming gender club, thereby positioning themselves as agents of change. This indicated that the training made the pre-service teachers be key agents of transformation in the fight against gender inequality in the school setting. In the countless interactions that teachers make with students, teachers could expand the comfort zone of the students. A supportive and constructive classroom environment can bring a new sense of energy upon female students.

C. The training empowered teachers to advocate for girls beyond the school

The training also made the teachers feel motivated and empowered to tackle interconnected forms of discrimination and violence against girls, with one participant (Yodit, pseudonyms) describing intervening with the justice system to advocate for a student who was a victim of sexual violence:

School leaders and people from the ministry, community, judiciary, and police should take this training, even parents. After reporting a rape case of one grade 8 student in my school, the rapists was still on loose for many weeks. Nobody seemed to care about the psychosocial trauma which could inflict lifelong damage to the girl. Thank God my empowerment from the GRP training and the constant encouragement from my trainers and colleagues on our telegram page helped me to push harder and get the offender detained (FGD, 2).

Another participant (Worku, pseudonyms) described the training as giving him the motivation to keep pushing for justice for a student who he knew was being harmed by her stepfather:

In the past I have attended gender trainings multiple times, this one is unique and well planned. It has helped me to be confident to the extent of confronting those who were totally gender blind. There was one girl who was harassed by her step father and when I reported this, I was told to keep quiet, but after long struggle, I managed to get justice for the girl (FGD, 3).

According to the excerpts above, Yodit and Worku reported that they have advocated for girls beyond the school compound. These teachers have developed mind set ups of righteousness, equitableness, and moral rightness that stand against patriarchal norms which disregard the lives and rights of girls. This further indicated that adopting gender-inclusiveness and sensitive teaching techniques in early teacher education and in-service teacher training is crucial to teacher development by alleviating gender disparity (Mollaw et al., 2023). It has been proven empirically that a well-organized training can impact pre-service teachers and make them be organic thinkers and not mere reflectors of wrongly held societal thoughts. The training equipped pre-service teachers to drive meaningful change and they can be change agents, advocates, and human right defenders.

Conclusion

The primary objective of the study was to review the pervasiveness of gender disparity in the academic setting and to assess the importance of giving training on GRP. The study found out that sexual violence within schools, including by teachers, is a problem for girls. Girls also encounter sexual harassment en route to school that is often not taken seriously. Girls' burden of

domestic labor inhibits girls' schooling. It was reported that gender inequalities are often exacerbated by financial insecurity and the social norms drive gender inequalities as well. The document analysis also revealed that the University curricula do not routinely include gender issues. The training improved the pre-service teachers' understanding of gender inequality and empowered them to advocate for girls beyond the school compound. Teachers clearly describe being able to actually apply the knowledge and information from the training to real-life situations they encountered in the course of their work in schools, from ensuring that girls are included in learning processes to advocating for girls within school management and even the justice system. It was noted that the training turned teachers into change agents for addressing gender inequality within and out of schools.

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