



| Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi |

## Promoting Gender Equity through Teacher Education: A Comparison of Turkish and American Preservice Teachers' Perspectives

### Öğretmen Eğitimi Yoluyla Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliğinin Desteklenmesi: Türk ve Amerikan Öğretmen Adaylarının Bakış Açılarının Bir Karşılaştırması<sup>1</sup>

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1. Gender awareness of teachers
2. Gender equity in education
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#### Anahtar Kelimeler

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#### Abstract

Gender perception and beliefs of teachers constitute a significant dimension of gender inequities in education. Even in societies that have made significant progress in achieving gender equity, the structure and content of teacher education remains insufficient to create gender awareness among teacher trainees and to develop an egalitarian understanding of education. Utilizing a multiple case study design, the present study examines the extent to which the teacher education programs in two different countries, Türkiye and the USA, prepare pre-service teachers to be gender sensitive in their practices as teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 22 student teachers from two countries. Student teachers talked about their experiences inside the teacher education programs and their views regarding how issues surrounding gender were embedded into the teacher education curriculum. Interviews revealed the nature and quality of teacher education, social mechanisms and relations within the teacher education programs in shaping the gender norms of prospective teachers. The study has important implications for educational policies, school practices, and teacher education programs.

#### Öz

Öğretmenlerin toplumsal cinsiyet algısı ve inançları eğitimdeki cinsiyet eşitsizliklerinin önemli bir boyutunu oluşturmaktadır. Cinsiyet eşitliği konusunda önemli ilerlemeler kaydeden toplumlarda bile öğretmen eğitiminin yapısı ve içeriği, öğretmen adaylarında cinsiyet farkındalığı oluşturma ve eşitlikçi bir eğitim anlayışı geliştirme noktasında yetersiz kalmaktadır. Bu çalışma, çoklu durum çalışması deseni kullanılarak, iki farklı ülkedeki (Türkiye ve ABD) öğretmen eğitimi programlarının öğretmen adaylarını öğretmenlik uygulamalarında toplumsal cinsiyete duyarlı olmaya ne ölçüde hazırladığını incelemektedir. Veriler, iki ülkeden 22 öğretmen adayı ile gerçekleştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmıştır. Görüşmelere katılan öğretmen adayları, öğretmen eğitimi programlarındaki deneyimlerini ve toplumsal cinsiyetle ilgili konuların öğretmen eğitimi programlarına nasıl dahil edildiğine ilişkin görüşlerini sunmuştur. Görüşmeler, öğretmen eğitiminin niteliği ve kalitesinin, öğretmen yetiştirme programlarındaki sosyal mekanizma ve sosyal ilişkilerin öğretmen adaylarının cinsiyet normlarını şekillendirdiğini göstermiştir. Araştırmanın eğitim politikaları, okul uygulamaları ve öğretmen yetiştirme programları açısından önemli çıkarımları bulunmaktadır.

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender perception and beliefs of teachers constitute a significant dimension of gender inequities in education. Teachers may have stereotyped assumptions about the intellectual, emotional, and physical abilities of boys and girls, which results in differential treatment and sexist practices in classrooms (Chapman, 2002; Pollock et. al, 2021). In order to achieve gender equality in education and to create a gender-sensitive school environment, it is important to develop the practices of gender awareness and sensitivity among teachers. Even in societies that have made significant progress in achieving gender equality, the structure and content of teacher education can be insufficient to create gender awareness among teacher trainees and to develop an egalitarian understanding of education (Sanders, 2001; Sanders, 2003; Lumadi & Shangwe, 2010; Zittleman & Sadker, 2002; Lahelma, 2011; Esen, 2013). Engebretson (2016) asserted that the issue of gender is often neglected in teacher training in many countries, where gender sensitization courses are often not provided for pre-service teachers. Often, there is limited classroom time for discussions about gender in teacher education programs, and pre-service teachers are not prepared to challenge inequitable educational practices and to confront gender stereotypes (Engebretson, 2016). The purpose of this study, then, is to explore the role and effects of teacher education in relation to raising gender awareness of prospective teachers. The study examines and compares how teacher education programs in Türkiye and the USA prepare prospective teachers to be gender sensitive in their practices as teachers. The investigation contributes to national and international literature by providing a qualitative analysis of the experiences and perspectives of prospective teachers at different teacher education programs. The study provides a basis for policy discussions concerning the inclusion of gender equality in the design and implementation of pre-service curricula by identifying prospective teachers' needs with respect to equitable classroom practices aimed at improving the quality of education for all.

## Gender and Education

Gender can be broadly defined as socially and culturally constituted roles and expectations attributed to men and women based on assumptions about the characteristics, behaviors, and emotions of men and women (Anselmi and Law, 1998). Basic differences between men and women are shaped by socialization processes and upbringing experienced by individuals (Rollins, 1996). Because gender roles are not of biological origin, but are socially constructed, they are simultaneously productive of discursive practices that shape how individuals naturalize differences between men and women and reproductive of patriarchal power relations that institutionally normalize advantages for men. For this reason, gender roles vary by society and time, and they are learned in the socialization process of individuals (Allan, 2008). The ideas, actions, and feelings defining gender identities are context specific, and must be learned before they can be performed. While the meanings assigned to a girl, or a boy, can change over time and in relation to different cultural contexts (MacNaughton, 2006), gender role assignments involve a process of essentialization and differentiation that defines the meaning of "womanhood" versus "manhood." As Cameron (1997) argued, "becoming a woman" is something one continuously reaffirms and displays publicly by behaving in line with the cultural norms defining masculinity and femininity. Again, these essentialized notions about gender roles are shaped by social norms that perpetuate patriarchal power and subordinate women to men (Stromquist, 1990).

Family and school are important social institutions where the concept of gender is learned and reinforced (Dahal et al., 2023). Gender socialization in the family can impact gender differences in learning. For example, a child's intellectual and social development are linked to parental attitudes and behaviors and the acceptance or rejection of gender stereotypes (Sadker & Zittleman, 2016). Pierre Bourdieu argued that education is an ideological site that sustains a male dominant social order and reproduces gender inequities (Bourdieu, 1998). Scholars have identified the role schools play in the reproduction of social classes and gender relations based upon the cultural hegemony of patriarchy (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). According to Marchbank and Letherby (2014), the organization of schools, official and hidden curricula, and social relations in the classroom contribute to gender discrimination. Colclough (2004) and Dillabough (2006) confirm that gender stereotypes are communicated to students through hidden and implicit messages. Other studies point to unequal attention and treatment given to girls in the organization of schools, including classroom and school culture that cause girls' low self-esteem, gender stereotyping in classroom content and curriculum, stereotyped assumptions in relation to sexes and assumed difference in physical and cognitive abilities (Colclough, 2004; Gunderson et. al, 2012; Pollock et. al, 2021; Valley & Graber, 2017).

While gender intersects with other categories of one's identity, gender role expectations differ across different cultures, and across different social classes within the same society (Banks, 2016). Prior research showed that gender intersects with other statuses in complex ways that influence educational experiences of students from different cultural and social groups (Asher, 2007; Grant & Zwier, 2011; Pollard, 2016). According to Pollard (2016), intersections of gender and race were associated with differential school experiences and had implications for educational outcomes of girls and boys of color in the USA. More specifically, students from minority groups were directed to gendered occupations and rarely recommended for non-traditional career options. Minority students internalized the low expectations and accepted those orientations as their own aspirations (Pollard, 2016). Similarly, Sayilan and Özkazanç (2009) asserted that gender intersects with social class in the ways that shape schooling experiences of girls and gendered relations in Turkish schools. Patriarchal values and toxic masculinity at schools put

greater pressure and control over the girls who belonged to lower social classes. The secondary status imposed on them was normalized and internalized by girls due to a lack of alternative and oppositional gender discourses (Sayılan & Özkazanç, 2009).

### Training Gender-Sensitive Teachers

Setting the right teacher training curriculum that facilitates engagement with gender-awareness is a demanding, but extremely important, process. An inclusive curriculum allows teachers to receive and interpret content that can influence how they will perform as teachers (Sadker & Zittleman, 2016). Transformations in school practices to make schools egalitarian institutions cannot be achieved without challenging normative gender perceptions and beliefs of teachers, as they are the crucial agents of change (Bourn, 2016). It is important to raise teachers' gender awareness for effective implementation of gender equity policies and improving the quality of education (Esen, 2013). Teachers with sound knowledge of gender issues in education can create a democratic and equal learning environment for all students, resulting in greater participation of girls in the classroom and improved gender relations in educational settings (Sadker & Zittleman, 2016). Despite this, certain studies have found that teachers believe girls to be less intelligent than boys, and that girls are normalized to settle for less well-paid jobs especially in patriarchal societies (Colclough, 2004; Mahlase, 1997). This problem is worsened by the fact that gender issues are not sufficiently addressed in teacher education programs in many countries, as knowledge and skills necessary to gain gender sensitivity and awareness are not adequately provided to prospective teachers (Colclough et al., 2003; Esen, 2013). Similarly, there are also studies showing that gender-biased attitudes and expectations of teachers cause gender inequities in the classroom environment (Colclough, 2004; Sayılan, 2012; Tan, 2010; Valley & Graber, 2017). Valley and Graber (2017) asserted that when the teachers lack gender awareness and knowledge about gender issues, they cannot create a gender inclusive environment in their classrooms. Within this context, many studies have been conducted around the world to investigate the awareness of teacher candidates on gender issues (Esen, 2013; Hoffman et al., 2018). Prior research indicates that teachers often lack knowledge and skills to ensure gender equality in education due to limited or no coverage of the topic in the pre-service curriculum (Esen, 2013; Engebretson, 2016).

In the United States, courses that discuss gender inclusion and equity are often embedded within pre-service teacher multicultural education curricula that also address issues relating to race, class, and ableness (Banks, 2016). The units on gender focus on the historical development of the concept of gender, (with gender understood as a socially constructed male/female oppositional binary), that discuss differences and inequalities between men and women's pay, unequal access to education and healthcare, et cetera (Pollard, 2016). In the last decade, the issues of sexuality and heteronormativity, (as a medical practice of naming and ordering based upon physiological differences), are now included within the discussions concerning gender inequities, and emphasize training teachers to be sensitive and accommodating to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ) concerns in the classroom (Hanson & Richards, 2019; Page, 2017). In the United States, to teach gender inequities in pre-service education is to simultaneously bring issues of sexuality and heterosexism into a larger multidimensional conversation that discusses multicultural education in relation to human rights, democracy, and social justice (Smith, 2009; Sirota, 2019). In-class discussions often use the theoretical framework of intersectionality to provide additional insight into the complex and uneven processes of identity formation and performance (Mayo, 2013; Grant & Zweir, 2011; Pennell, 2017).

In Türkiye, the need to include "gender equality" as a subject matter in undergraduate and graduate education for prospective teachers was emphasized in the National Action Plan on Gender Equality published by the Directorate General on the Status of Women (KSGM, 2008). Despite this, teacher education programs in Türkiye still do not have a compulsory course on gender (Esen, 2013). Today, in Türkiye, there are educational policies that compromise the social status of women and disadvantage girls, making the need for equipping prospective teachers with an egalitarian perspective and the skills to resist sexism in education even more important (Merçan Küçükakın & Engin Demir, 2022a). Studies conducted to examine the awareness of teacher candidates on gender in different countries around the world and in Türkiye have found that teacher candidates hold gender stereotypic views. Even so, it is also known that receiving education about gender issues can have positive results in developing gender awareness and an egalitarian perspective in teachers (Esen, 2013; Mistry & Sood, 2013; Schwartz & Siniscope, 2013). In more recent research, Pollock et.al (2021) found that taking a gender course as part of a teacher education program changed the implicit and explicit biases of pre-service and in-service teachers regarding the physical abilities of girls and enhanced their awareness and skills to address gender equity in their classrooms. Pollock et. al (2021) concluded that teachers need training on gender equity to become aware of their own biases and sexist educational practices and to become gender equity advocates. As such, the current study analyzes the ways in which pre-service teachers think about the interrelationships between gender, equity, and education as an intersectional field of relations that have direct effects on their lives as teachers and as students.

### METHOD

The study made use of multiple case study design, and qualitative research methods were utilized since this type of research examines the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials in-depth to obtain a complete picture of a particular context (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Utilizing a multiple case study design, the present study examined how two different teacher

education programs (in the USA and in Türkiye) shaped student teachers' perspectives of gender issues in education and prepared them to be gender sensitive in their practices as teachers.

### Participants

Türkiye and the USA exhibit differences in both culture and policies related to the training of prospective teachers. Recognizing that the gender perceptions of preservice teachers are socially constructed and influenced by their experiences in teacher education programs, this study aims to explore the role and effects of teacher education programs in relation to raising gender awareness of prospective teachers. The research specifically investigates and compares the strategies employed by teacher education programs in Türkiye and the USA, with a focus on how these programs equip student teachers with the essential skills to be gender-sensitive in their roles as educators. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 22 student teachers. A total of 11 interviews were conducted with voluntary student teachers enrolled in elementary education, with a social studies minor, available to the students enrolled in Elementary Education teacher certification program at a Midwestern University in the USA. Completing a minor is not mandatory for the K-9 certification program, but students may choose to pursue one. In addition to their coursework in elementary education, the students pursuing the Social Studies minor acquire an in-depth understanding of social studies by completing a 24-credit coursework. This includes two courses in History and Civilizations, one course in Lands and People, along with a course focusing on Global Comparative or Non-Western Cultures. Students also have the option to select elective courses from other departments to fulfill the program's coursework requirements. In Türkiye, participants were recruited from the faculty of education in a public university in Central Anatolia and 11 student teachers enrolled in the social studies education program were interviewed. The Social Studies Education program is a Bachelor of Arts (BA) program operating within the Department of Turkish and Social Sciences Education. In Türkiye, higher education has a centralized system where the curriculum and content of undergraduate programs are established by The Higher Education Council (HEC), the governing body overseeing higher education institutions in the country. The Social Studies Education program provides both theoretical and practical courses utilizing an interdisciplinary approach. The coursework encompasses obligatory and elective courses covering pedagogical knowledge, subject area knowledge, general knowledge as well as practical experience in the field. Courses in subject area knowledge include the topics in social studies such as history, geography and civics (HEC, 2023). Purposeful sampling strategy was utilized for the selection of participants. This strategy employs a snowball sampling method to provide "information-rich" cases for an in-depth analysis of the topic in question (Merriam, 2009). In the first stage, researchers announced the study and asked for volunteers during classes at the faculty of education and interviewed the volunteer student teachers. Interviewed student teachers advised their friends who were information-rich and who had the potential to contribute to the study. Table 1 & 2 summarize the background information of the participants.

**Table 1. Background Information of American Student Teachers**

| Participants | Age | Gender | Educational Background  |
|--------------|-----|--------|---|
| Ben          | 21  | Male   | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Lily         | 21  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Sarah        | 20  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Kate         | 21  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Sofia        | 21  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Emma         | 22  | Female | Public (Grades 3-4 & 7-8)<br>Private (Grades 6-7 & 9-12)<br>Religious & Mixed Gender (K-12) |
| Olivia       | 20  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Julia        | 22  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Hazel        | 21  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| David        | 21  | Male   | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Layla        | 21  | Female | Private, Religious & Mixed Gender (K-12)  |

**Table 2. Background Information of Turkish Student Teachers**

| Participants | Age | Gender | Educational Background  |
|--------------|-----|--------|---|
| Selin        | 19  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Mert         | 19  | Male   | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-8)<br>Public, Religious & Boys Only (Grades 9-12)   |
| Defne        | 19  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Ege          | 20  | Male   | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Azra         | 20  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Ece          | 20  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-8)<br>Private, Secular & Mixed Gender (9-12)  |
| Batu         | 21  | Male   | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-11)<br>Private, Secular & Mixed Gender (Grade-12)   |
| Kerem        | 19  | Male   | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-4)<br>Public, Religious & Boys Only (4-8)<br>Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (9-10)<br>Public, Religious & Boys Only (11-12) |
| Arda         | 20  | Male   | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Nil          | 21  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender (K-12)   |
| Merve        | 20  | Female | Public, Secular & Mixed Gender(K-5)<br>Private, Secular & Mixed Gender (6-12)   |

### Data Collection

Data on student teachers' perspectives of gender issues in education were collected through semi-structured interviews with prospective teachers. In the USA, all the interviews were conducted in a private room at the teacher education building. Interviews with Turkish student teachers were conducted online because of Covid-19 restrictions. Online interviews proceeded smoothly, and the researcher did not encounter challenges due to the nature of the interviews. The interviews lasted 30-40 minutes. Responses of the interviewees were recorded and then transcribed by the researchers. To ensure anonymity, names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms. The interview questions were developed by the researchers based on an extensive literature review of research on gender and education. The interview protocol included questions in domains "*Perceptions Regarding Gender and Gender Issues in Education*" and "*Addressing Gender in Teacher Education*." During the interviews student teachers talked about their experiences inside the teacher education programs and their views regarding how issues surrounding gender were embedded into the teacher education curriculum. Sample questions from the interview protocol included: *Do you think gender equity in education has been achieved in your country? How do you think your experiences at the teacher education program shaped your perceptions of gender equity? Do you think you have gained the necessary skills and knowledge to challenge gender stereotypes in the classroom?*

### Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed and interpreted the collected data using content analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Before coding the whole data set, two interviews were coded by two different researchers. The intercoder consistency was calculated, and reliability was ensured with a consistency rate over 90%. At the initial stage of the analysis, each interview was coded using an open coding method and categories and themes were generated in line with the emerging codes. In the second stage, researchers compared codes and categories to check commonalities and differences across the data set, and then themes were refined. Naming of categorizations came from the interview questions, which were developed based on the related literature, and participant responses or the researcher's interpretations, as suggested by Merriam (2009). Following the coding procedures, themes suggested by the whole data set were combined and the findings were written up.

## FINDINGS

### Defining the problem: The Roots of Gender Inequalities

Interviews with pre-service teachers showed that in both countries, social norms, upbringing, and the patriarchal socio-cultural structure work together to reproduce the cultural hegemony of male superiority. Student teachers from Türkiye mentioned persisting patriarchal values which subjugate women in public and private spheres. As an example, Mert explained that treating girls with traditional attitudes created gender discrimination: *"Inequality dates to old times. Even if we deny it, the Turkish Muslim community is still patriarchal."* Kerem, while discussing the low status of women in Türkiye, linked the oppression of girls in the family to a religiously conservative social structure: *"Gender inequalities in our country mostly stem from the family. It is due to family pressure and religious concerns."* Defne pointed to the social determinants of gender inequities in education as an underlying cause for male superiority in the society, including the preference for male children in Turkish families and gender imbalance in working life. It was clear in her explanation that it was more challenging for girls to enjoy material benefits of education due to patriarchal social structure limiting their life choices:

*"Men are always superior in society. They are the ones who can always achieve something. Even if they are not educated, they can find a job. And for this reason, they show a lower level of educational success. They trust their families and do not bother themselves with studying. Girls can only find a job if they are well educated..." (Defne)*

American pre-service teachers talked about gender stereotyping in society. For example, Emma explained that *"If you were to tell someone a story about a nurse, they would assume it's a woman... People usually assume teachers are female. Some of them think that women are better with younger children because of the motherly aspect of it."* Student teachers also referred to hierarchical gender relations in their communities and described how parents favored boys over girls. Stating that *"I felt like I wasn't always as independent growing up as my brothers were,"* Julia provided an example of differential treatment girls in American families experience. Similarly, Emma referred to different treatments of girls and boys in her family and cited examples of gender stereotyping in her family:

*"I have two little brothers and a little sister. And my dad's expectations are very much boys will do the sports and build things. And not that I can't do those things. He also wants me to be able to do those things, but it's not as enforced. I'm telling him if he's enforcing those on my brothers, he should also enforce them on me... he wants me to be able to write well and read well, the more academic things as opposed to the physical things, he should hold that for my brothers as well." (Emma)*

Julia further explained that *"In some way, maybe I have broken the gender norms a little bit by being more independent, despite the gender norms my dad might have put upon me."* Julia's emphasis on her dad imposing gender norms is an indicator of patriarchal social structure in the USA. Her description below highlights how gender biases manifest in subtle and unconscious ways and create gendered hierarchies even in progressivist families:

*"My mom is very independent as well. It's interesting in my household. My mom was always the person who made more money than my dad. So that was kind of a switch of a gender norm. So, she's always very independent, very successful. She's an educator as well. She was an elementary school principal and she's a teacher consultant. So, I think I learned a lot from her, but also understanding like, yeah, I think there's a lot of places where I wish I would have learned things growing up that I was never taught that my brothers were taught. I wasn't taught how to change the oil. Why didn't my father let me mow the lawn? Or think I'm a terrible driver?" (Julia)*

### Sexism in Education

In the present study, the interviews with the student teachers highlighted how gender norms and traditional gender roles are reproduced inside the field of Turkish education. Selin exemplified how her family's gender norms shaped her educational choices. She also referred to gender biases in educational practices:

*"To me, there is no equality yet because men and women are not considered equal in our country... I wanted to study to become a paramedic at the university but my family did not approve of it. Our society thinks it is not suitable for women. All the time, boys did experiments at school. I never saw a girl doing the experiments. Boys were more active in math's classes; girls were in the secondary position. There are definitely more rules for girls. Vice principals are strict about girls' hair or clothing. Here, we have inequality and injustice. Our society is just like that. When women wear short skirts they are criticized." (Selin)*

The conversations with the student teachers showed that discriminatory educational practices were normalized through stereotypical assumptions of students' abilities and talents. For instance, Arda explained gender specific division of labor among student teachers like this *"When we are assigned to a group project, boys do the research, girls do the artistic work such as designing the materials. Girls think they are more talented in those kinds of activities too."* Gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles also limit girls' opportunities to take part in physical activities in physical education classes. In the excerpts below, Ece first provides an example of gender based expectations of student performances in physical education classes, while Azra speaks to gender based orientations and sexist practices that privilege boys in both academic and sports activities by referring to stereotypical beliefs about students' abilities:

*"Female and male students take on different tasks. In physical education, the activities of girls and boys are different. The topics we are responsible for are different, for example, while girls are expected to know the measurements of the basketball court, boys are graded for their shooting performance for instance." (Ece)*

*"In sports, men were being selected. This applies to competitions and technology-related things. Knowledge quizzes were also like that. In physical education, men are more inclined towards activities that require physical strength. I think it was the reason." (Azra)*

Descriptions of the Turkish student teachers also showed that educational policies and practices perpetuate gender stereotypes about appropriate appearance and behavior. Arda explained that oppressive patriarchal power was enforced through sexist dress-codes, saying that *"they interfere with girls' hair style and color. Dressing appropriately, being neat."* Student teachers also spoke to how schools reproduce differential standards for men and women. According to Azra, school rules and procedures mirrored the sexist nature of Turkish society. She mentioned the similarities between her family's and the school's treatment of girls in terms of dress and codes of conduct in mixed gender settings:

*"There was more pressure on girls. Dress code, rules about hair style and make up. They did not tell the boys. We could not even wear tights. Maybe it was because we were in a mixed-gender environment but we were supposed to be careful. My family tells me, for example, not to take attention in mixed gender settings." (Azra)*

Sofia also brought up discriminatory educational policies and practices, such as sexist dress codes and teaching behaviors in American schools.

*"The high school dress code for females was a lot more restrictive. And it was like body parts that, you know, like dressing in normal clothes weren't supposed to be shown. So I would say that, you know, just code that's definitely sexist, because it's like, sexualizing, younger women's bodies. I had this economics class, and the teacher, he was a white male, but he would really only call on white males to participate. I noticed that like when females tried to participate, I mean, they had to raise their hand for a lot longer before he called on them (Sofia)*

American student teachers also questioned the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields and administrative positions, which showed that prospective teachers supported gender equity as a pedagogical principle. Both Olivia and Julia referred to social norms and stereotypical mindsets about students' cognitive and intellectual abilities at American schools. Olivia described how cultural stereotypes effectively transport implicit bias in educational settings and shaped academic choices of boys and girls.

*"Most stereotyping is really subconscious and as a result of societal norms. I mean, you look at enrollment in STEM classes. And I know that there were definitely not as many girls in the AP science classes that I took. Especially when it was like a hard science like AP chemistry versus like, a softer science, like AP environmental studies." (Olivia)*

Layla connected the underrepresentation of women in the STEM field to discriminatory practices at school, which influence one's self-perceptions of their abilities and educational prospects:

*"If there is a project, male students are expected to be the leader. I see it mostly in science, math and like the hands on. Like, you're supposed to build a statue. But when it's like, a literature project. For example, the guys say, "well, I don't know how to do this. So they, by default, give that responsibility to the girls... boys automatically think, oh, since it is literature, that's a feminine subject, I can't lead it. In the STEM majors there's almost 1 80% guys 20% girls. That can be correlated to what happens in the lower levels, how girls can continuously be told they can't do this because they're a girl. I think that's a huge difference." (Layla)*

Similarly, Hazel commented on the sexist and racist norms reflected in curricula and educational practices, and said she supported equal representation of all genders:

*"I think a lot of the time, it's gender stereotypes and behaviors. So boys being picked out of the group for acting a certain way. Girls doing the same behaviors, but not being picked out by a teacher. I know a lot of that happens quite often. I think representation of all genders in the curriculum is still not where it should be. We need to see more of a woman's perspective from it, especially in social studies, like history wise, you can read a textbook and all they'll talk about are our white men." (Hazel)*

Julia argued that gender stereotypical beliefs about the characteristics and abilities of students were biased and said *"Often we think girls are more well behaved. They are more manageable or girls as being less defiant... I definitely think there was a little bit more of a bias."* She said that boys were discouraged when the classroom activities required abilities traditionally attributed to girls. The following quote from Julia showed that unless classroom teaching addresses diversity and different needs and interests of all students, it is impossible to challenge gender stereotypes through education:

*"I had a social studies teacher in high school. Well, he was often known as being like... giving better grades to girls. Because his curriculum was mostly projects and a lot of the boys didn't enjoy doing the projects. He knew girls liked being in his class because they got good grades, and they enjoyed his type of teaching, boys did not. He was sexist." (Julia)*

Similarly, David stated that the American school system is not designed to reflect diversity and adheres strictly to gender stereotypes. Emphasizing the role of the teachers' gender perspective, he explained that gender non-binary students were not adequately represented in educational materials:

*"I think looking at the school system right now, a large majority of schools still stick really hard to gender stereotypes... I think about some of the students I have, who are transgender, and just the lack of knowledge teachers have about what that means, and really being able to think ahead and give support to those students, as well as in preparing texts. One of the biggest things that's pretty apparent, is the lack of culturally relevant and age appropriate texts, but also gender appropriate texts. ... They don't incorporate other people except for the two binary kinds of genders." (David)*

### **Addressing Gender in Teacher Education**

#### **Socio-cultural Environment of Universities**

Participating student teachers from both countries drew attention to the role of the socio-cultural environment of the universities and the experiences gained through higher education in forming the views and perspectives of the students. Julia exemplified how the liberal and democratic environment at her American university helped her gain a critical gender perspective. She specifically emphasized that the sociocultural environment and academic activities were mutually reinforcing in changing traditional gender norms towards a more equitable and inclusive understanding of identity differences. She also acknowledged the role of diversity at her campus and said:

*"I see a very liberal culture within the university, where they're very focused on exposing us to all different types of genders. And I think it's part of the culture and also put into all different classes. And so that's been, I noticed a huge change within even the people who've come here from other parts of the state that don't get this kind of education." (Julia)*

Turkish student teachers also mentioned the changes in gender perceptions and attitudes of individuals once a democratic environment is created in educational institutions. Mert explained how the conservative and oppressive atmosphere in K-12 schools he attended limited female students and said that the university had a more liberal environment.

*"My female friends who could not speak at middle school are different here. They are even more active than men. It is because of societal pressure. There was extreme conservatism among teachers, they would shout at you. The atmosphere of the university is not like that; you can speak as you like." (Mert)*

Arda also underlined the positive impact of the university environment on girls and said *"At the university, there is a more democratic environment in the classrooms. Girls can also freely express their opinions on any subject."* It was noteworthy in both Arda's and Mert's narratives that being in a more democratic environment free from societal pressures liberated girls and helped them express their ideas, thoughts and beliefs freely.

The interviews with the student teachers point to the role of interaction between faculty members and the student teachers in shaping beliefs and gender norms of prospective teachers. Ece explained how the women faculty members at the university influenced her as role models. She emphasized the importance of women professors in developing girls' confidence and overcoming gender-based barriers and boundaries.

*"When I observed our professors, I admired them. Their success is admirable. Their talks, the way that they showed that we can do as well as, even better than men, was very nice." (Ece)*

On the other hand, Ege explained that sexist attitudes and behaviors of faculty members discouraged girls to set high educational and professional goals for themselves. The dialogue between a male faculty member and a female student teacher showed that the professor put rigid limitations on girls through negative messages about their abilities based on gender and social status:

*"These topics were not covered in classes, but the attitudes of the faculty members are decisive. There is a professor who looks at a student teacher and says, "You can't be a teacher" and looks at another girl and asks "Where are you from?" The girl says, "I'm from Ismail Ağa (a disadvantaged region)," and the professor says, "You can't do it either. Your hometown is obvious, too." (Ege)*

The liberal environment of the university had a positive impact not only on female students but also on male students. Kerem, who spent most of his education at single-sex schools, expressed the positive effect of being in a mixed gender setting like this: *"The environment of the university had a positive effect on me. Even being in the same class with girls, at least you learn to empathize effectively."* In another interview, Ege talked about how he was negatively affected by the sexist environment in the high school he attended. He was often criticized for his interest in literature, which was traditionally considered as an area reserved for women. He further explained that the diverse and liberal environment of the university made him feel at ease as he was no longer under the pressure of gender stereotypical expectations:

*"The high school I attended was secular. Most of the male students were interested in volleyball. I don't like sports, though; I've wanted to be a soldier for years. I always served as the library club president, and people would look at me and say, "You hang out with girls, so what are you going to do with reading?" They were surprised that my goal was to become a soldier rather than a sports club member. The university has a more diverse environment. There are people from everywhere, and there is no discrimination between genders. I have not heard any negative comments from anyone." (Ege)*

### Teacher Education Curriculum

In the present study, American student teachers expressed that gender issues in education were also addressed through the framework of intersectionality. As an example, Sarah explained that issues of race, culture, diversity and gender were interwoven and that they focused on all aspects of equity in their department:

*"The teacher education program made me think more about how we have an unconscious bias towards certain genders, or cultural backgrounds of people. I feel like mostly what our program is focusing on is race and diversity, equality. So we're mainly focusing on including different races, and cultures, more than just genders. But I feel like you have to; you can't do one without the other" (Sarah)*

On the other hand, Ben referred to the needs of gender non-binary students and emphasized the insufficiency of the teacher education program in equipping the prospective teachers with skills and competencies to accommodate non-binary individuals:

*"I think it has helped, but I think the program could help me a lot more by just providing more specific ways of how to help students who are non-gender binary. Um, yeah, I think it's laid some groundwork, but I think there could always be room for improvement. And I think that addressing gender equity issues is something that I have a lot to learn about, like, there's a lot I don't know, that I would like to learn." (Ben)*

Most of the Turkish student teachers said that gender issues in education were discussed as isolated topics in some courses such as Anthropology of Education and Educational Sociology. There were also student teachers who said they did not address gender issues in any of the courses within the teacher education program. Defne stated that the issue of discrimination was discussed in their classes, but it was not approached from a gender perspective: *"We talked about teachers' discrimination, but not about gender. We only discussed high and low achievers, and social status of students."* On the other hand, Merve mentioned that they discussed the social determinants of gender inequalities: *"We talked about issues related to equal treatment and equal opportunities in education. We discussed the social norms that form the basis of inequalities."*

Both Batu and Selin explained that they discussed the topics of gender and equity, but she did not gain insights into becoming gender sensitive or had practical ideas to implement in the classroom:

*"We talked about gender in the Introduction to Education course. For example, we said that everyone should have an equal right to speak. But we did not talk about methods and techniques. I think I'm an egalitarian person but I don't have practical ideas that I can apply in class." (Selin)*

*"We didn't discuss practical matters. The discussions remained at a theoretical level. Everyone knows that equality is necessary, but not everyone knows how to implement it in practice. We are a bit lacking in that aspect." (Batu)*

### Need for a Critical Lens of Gender

Student teachers believed that teacher education programs should assist them to further develop a broader and deeper understanding of gender sensitive pedagogy. They believed that genuine discussions about equity, social justice and diversity within teacher education programs were needed. Turkish student teachers thought there should be more room for gender issues in education in the teacher education program. As an example, Defne underlined the need for a gender course in the teacher education program, saying *"There should definitely be a gender course. It is an area of need. The course should cover inequalities and their causes. There are many false beliefs, they should be challenged to improve things."* According to her, teacher education programs should equip prospective teachers with the skills and tools to challenge gender norms in their future classrooms.

Both Nil and Kerem pointed to the critical role teachers play in challenging gender norms and they mentioned areas of need to become gender sensitive teachers. Kerem specifically acknowledged the role of teachers in raising parents' gender consciousness. He was motivated to learn strategies to gain parental cooperation in his efforts to address gender discrimination.

*"It is proper to categorize them as ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys, we need to see them as equal partners. It is also very important to guide parents for the equal treatment of children. As a teacher candidate, I would like to learn how we can overcome the pressures of parents on children. How can we solve this social problem? I would like to learn how we can empower children by interacting with the family." (Kerem)*

Nil criticized her teacher education program for failing to address gender issues in education, stating that she needed a more comprehensive and practice oriented education to challenge gender norms in her future classrooms.

*"It is important to teach students that girls and boys are equal. For example, one should teach that men can also wear pink. In this sense, our lessons at the teacher education program are insufficient. We did not learn anything practical to be used in the classroom, especially about gender. If the department provided me with a more comprehensive education on gender, I would be a more effective teacher. Ideologically, I am an egalitarian person. However, I consider myself academically incapable when it is necessary to challenge gender stereotypes." (Nil)*

The present study showed that supporting gender equity among diverse populations is a challenge for many pre-service teachers. For instance, Ege emphasized the importance of becoming more aware of socio-cultural factors leading to gender

inequities in different communities, including the different social roles imposed on women and varying inequities experienced across different regions of Türkiye. He specifically shared his concerns about working in Eastern Türkiye, as he was not familiar with the socio-cultural structure and gender norms shaping the social relations in the region. He referred to gender disparities which are noticeably prevalent in rural areas and the Eastern provinces:

*"For example, if they were to assign me as a teacher to the East, where new teachers are usually assigned anyway, I don't know the socio-economic status or culture of the people there. I don't know how they treat girls. I don't know the relationships between the students. They'll just send me there haphazardly. They probably just want me to collect my salary and sit there, since they're not providing any education. "* (Ege)

American student teachers also pointed out the need for developing a critical understanding of gender issues through teacher education. Olivia asserted that it is necessary for the curriculum to incorporate a critical gender perspective so that student teachers can question the ways sexist norms shape teachers' gender beliefs.

*"An understanding of gender and how stereotypes and social norms play into our decisions and play into society at large. And the systems that we interact with and are part of, I think, just a general awareness and understanding of how those things come into play is important. I think, just like the knowledge of being able to weave those ideas into just the general content that you're given, as part of a textbook, or part of a curriculum, you have to teach something that you have to develop on your own as part of your own ideas."* (Olivia)

Similarly, Ben underlined the importance of improving student teachers' capacities to examine educational materials from a critical perspective for an equal representation of individuals with identity differences:

*"I think one skill that's needed is just to be willing to go, to seek out things like history that aren't usually covered.... there's so many people of color and non-binary people who, you know, are doing great things being pioneers and revolutionaries, and I think those people deserve coverage in our schools and deserve to be studied."* (Ben)

Kate, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of thinking beyond binary terms and being conscious of social privileges when perceiving gender issues in education from a critical perspective:

*"Again, with the idea of things being on a spectrum. Where you were just knowing where you hold points of privilege and knowing where you hold points of oppression and knowing that you can hold both of them at the same time. It made me see gender issues just from a very different perspective."* (Kate)

## DISCUSSION

Rosa and Clavero (2022) argued that gender binary systems are now being challenged leading to the disruption of traditional gender patterns, yet gender norms placed on men and women continue to create gender-based inequities. According to Dahal et al. (2023), both patriarchal social structures and the ideology of male superiority disadvantage women in many areas of social life. In the present study, it was also revealed that in both countries, social norms, and the pervasive patriarchal socio-cultural framework collaboratively contribute to the perpetuation of cultural hegemony, reinforcing the prevailing narrative of male superiority. All of the teacher candidates interviewed for the present study defined gender equity by referring to their upbringing, social inequalities, and patriarchal social structures. Consistent with the prior research (Mercan Küçükakın & Engin Demir, 2022a; Aydagül, 2019), descriptions of Turkish student teachers revealed that traditional practices of Turkish patriarchy devalued women and limited their life choices in public and private spheres. Banks (2016) argued that although women's social status have improved in the USA since the civil rights movements of 1960s and 1970s, gender discrimination remains as a prominent educational and social problem. The present study showed that pre-service teachers in the United States also identified hierarchical gender relations within their communities, elucidating instances where parents exhibited a preference for boys over girls. It was revealed that subtle and unconscious manifestations of gender biases give rise to gendered hierarchies, even within families that identify as progressive. Based on these findings it can be argued gender inequities in education is a part of a bigger social problem which requires a more holistic and integrated approach analyzing complex relationships that exist between socio-cultural, economic and political systems in the society (Lynch & Baker, 2005).

As for the sexism in education, prior research has shown that educational practices work to reinforce male domination, and patriarchal socio-cultural structures work to create gender inequities in education (Dahal et al., 2023; Sayılan & Özkazanç, 2009). The gendered nature of the teacher's authority, different forms of pedagogical practices at different levels of education disadvantage females and reproduce gender norms in the society (Arnot, 2002). In the Turkish context, gender discrimination in the social realm is reinforced in schools through the structure of the curriculum and sexist practices of gender discrimination in classroom settings (Mercan Küçükakın & Engin Demir, 2022b). Studies conducted to examine the awareness of teacher candidates on gender in Türkiye found that teacher candidates hold gender stereotypic views (Aslan, 2015; Esen, 2013). Consistent with prior research, the present study pointed to the normalization of discriminatory educational practices, facilitated by stereotypical assumptions regarding students' abilities and talents. Interviews with Turkish student teachers showed how educational policies and practices perpetuate gender stereotypes concerning acceptable appearance and behavior. Participating American student teachers also provided examples of gender stereotyping in school settings. They criticized both implicit and explicit ways education

perpetuated gender norms. Based on their descriptions, we understood that teachers' implicit biases regarding identity differences continue to create sexist expectations, attitudes and classroom practices. More specifically, student teachers expressed inquiries about the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields and administrative positions. In a similar vein, Sadker and Zittleman (2016) pointed out male domination in the STEM fields in the USA. They reported that despite their increased enrollment in math and science, girls showed lower interest in pursuing a career in STEM (Sadker & Zittleman, 2016).

According to Rosa and Clavero (2022), higher education can play a significant role in empowering individuals and initiating societal transformation. With respect to gender equity, diversity, and inclusion, universities can serve as influential institutions that positively impact not only the realm of higher education but the society at large (Rosa & Clavero 2022). The present study also highlighted the role that universities' can play in providing a social environment where gender stereotypes can be challenged. The present study further revealed the nature and quality of teacher education, social mechanisms and relations within the teacher education programs in shaping the gender norms of prospective teachers in two different countries. The main difference between the two countries was that American student teachers perceived gender beyond the binary definitions and referred to multidimensional identities. American student teachers' interpretation of gender equity also reflected the intersectionality of race and gender. They pointed out the importance of appreciating difference, and the positive effects of racial and gender inclusivity. The interviews with Turkish student teachers pointed to sexist ideologies which subconsciously shape attitudes and behaviors of individuals. Integrating gender and gender issues into teacher education and identifying prospective teachers' needs with respect to equitable classroom practices is the first step in policy efforts aimed at improving the quality of education for all. The study, then, questioned the extent to which the teacher education program helped them gain gender awareness and sensitivity.

Participating student teachers acknowledged the importance of raising gender awareness through teacher education so that they can create a difference-friendly classroom environment. In line with the prior research (Smith, 2009; Sirota, 2019; Mayo, 2013; Grant & Zweir, 2011; Pennell 2017), the present study showed that gender issues in American education are addressed within a multidimensional conversation linking multicultural education to human rights, democracy, and social justice. Within this context, Tetreault (2016) argued that teachers need to recognize the complexities of identity formation, as an unfolding process, in order to create a safe and equitable classroom where all forms of difference are respected and normalized. Interviews with participating student teachers outlined the need for the inclusion of gender in the curriculum if the goal is to establish gender equitable classroom practices. Pollard (2016) noted that generalizations about gender and gender equity might be misleading and fail to address the experiences of girls from diverse populations. In order to appreciate the nuances of gender in multicultural societies, teachers need to go beyond simplistic notions of gender and reflect on the gender related experiences of students with different cultural backgrounds.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study was able to analyze the ways in which pre-service teachers think about the interrelationships between gender, and education as an intersectional field of relations that have direct effects on their lives as teachers and as students. Educational practices continue to reinforce sexism, discrimination and patriarchal ideology whether it is intended or not. Participating student teachers explained the ways patriarchal norms shaped educational practices in complicated ways. Based on the related literature (Aslan, 2015; Lumadi & Shangwe, 2010; Lahelma, 2011; Sirota, 2019) and the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that increasing teachers' level of gender awareness is an issue of great importance for the effective implementation of gender equity, social justice and human rights policies. To ensure gender equity and to improve the social status of women, it is necessary to start with changing the mindset of the new generation of teachers, who have the potential to further change the patriarchal social structure with their progressivist ideas, thoughts and innovative practices. Gender equitable classroom practices can be constrained or derailed by contextual factors, political atmosphere and social norms. It is important to interrogate the sociocultural and political conditions that perpetuate institutional inequalities in teacher education programs. When addressing gender issues in education, teacher candidates should be provided with safe and supportive opportunities to question the social norms and cultural values that oppress women and assign them to a secondary social status. Without the ability to learn how to approach these social issues critically, a new teacher will not be able to create an egalitarian environment in their classroom.

The present study showed that gender was not an explicit element of teacher education programs in the USA or Türkiye. Considering the complexity of addressing differences through and within education, this analysis points to the critical role of teacher education in facilitating an intersectional and multicultural awareness of identity differences encompassing race, gender, religion and sexuality. As gender is intertwined with other aspects of social identities, teacher education programs need to address issues around gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and culture in an integrated manner so that teachers can have a chance to reflect on their own biases and become more competent when confronting stereotypes and discrimination in their classrooms (Asher, 2007). While teacher education plays an important role in developing teacher agency, teacher agency can be expanded by forming new perceptions and subject positions through conflicting and resistant discourses. Creating this discursive space will create new possibilities for prospective teachers to construct new meanings and critical perceptions to challenge sexism in education. As Engebretson, (2016) wrote, an ability to identify gendered discourses that shape their subjectivities and those of their students

will empower student teachers to eliminate gender inequities. By linking their and their students' lives to gender discourses that circulate throughout the larger society, teachers can create a safe discursive space in their classrooms that can challenge the cultural hegemony of gender stereotyping and associated inequities (Engebretson, 2016).

The present study also showed that universities provided a dynamic place where different opinions, beliefs, culture, and traditions interact and campus culture can promote equity and diversity in many different ways. It points to the importance of changing gender, racial and cultural imbalances in the teaching profession through policies and practices that support equity within and through education (Heinz et al., 2021). Increasing the number of female faculty in administrative positions and enhancing the diversity at universities must continue to occur while further research works to deconstruct the limiting discourses that sustain stereotypical assumptions about male and female teachers and their students. In this sense, teacher education is uniquely positioned to better equip prospective teachers with the perspectives and tools to combat sexism and inequities in education.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### Statements of publication ethics

I/We hereby declare that the study has not unethical issues and that research and publication ethics have been observed carefully.

### Ethics Committee Approval Information

All stages of the study were carried out in accordance with ethical principles. Ethics Committee Approval for this research was received from University of Wisconsin-Madison, Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB (dated 03.12.2019, numbered 2019-0244)

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