



## Assessing Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Gender Equality and Inclusive Education in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** A major problem globally across education is gender inequality, as approximately 119 million girls are out of school worldwide. Structural factors like poverty, child marriage, and gender-based violence limit opportunities for female education. Despite this, there is a research gap in the persistent presence of gendered norms across schooling systems and society.

**Objective:** This study assessed pre-service teachers' perceptions of gender inequality and inclusion across educational contexts, in relation to school participation and learning environments.

**Method:** A qualitative descriptive study was conducted among pre-service teachers across three colleges of education in Enugu State and Taraba State, and in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Using semi-structured interviews, the study explored pre-service teachers' perceptions of gender inequality and inclusion. Data analysis was done using both content and sentiment analysis.

**Result:** The results show that pre-service teachers in the selected Colleges of Education in Nigeria perceive the existence of gender discrimination within the educational environments. Another finding of the study was that conventional gender norms influence students' participation in classroom activities and their opportunities for leadership within the classroom environment. Study respondents also reported cases of discrimination based on gender and status, with privilege often attached to socioeconomic background. Even though there was an observable girl-centred empowerment, the structural disparities based on stereotypes and social class existed.

**Conclusion:** Although the efforts to empower women are evident, there are still educational experiences that are influenced by existing gender and socioeconomic inequalities, which is why the detailed, inclusive, and gender-responsive approach of teacher education is necessary.

**Unique Contribution:** This study provides context-specific baseline evidence on Nigerian pre-service teachers' perceptions of gender bias and discrimination, in classroom participation and leadership opportunities, and inclusion within the educational environment across several states.

**Key Recommendation:** Teacher education programmes should incorporate gender-specific work and practicum activities that are explicitly aimed at breaking stereotypes and demonstrating inclusive classroom practices that are continually reflected on and evaluated.

**Keywords:** Education, Gender-bias, Discrimination, Privilege, Pre-service, Teachers



## INTRODUCTION

Educational gender inequality is one of the key challenges in the international arena; as of 2023a, UNICEF (2023a) estimates that there are around 119 million girls who are not enrolled in schools all over the world. Although the world has agreed on gender equity, 49 countries have not become gender-balanced in primary education (Dessy et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to observe that structural issues such as poverty, child marriage, and gender-based violence (GBV) still restrict access to female education. In some low-income environments, it happens that the family experiencing financial difficulties invests more in boys' education than in the education of girls. According to UNICEF (2023b), in certain locations, schools do not take into consideration the safety and sanitation requirements of “girl-child”, and Kihwele et al. (2025) believed that the teaching practice is not gender-responsive, leading to gender gaps in education. Therefore, these patterns show that gender inequality in education extends beyond enrollment, encompassing broader issues such as participation, safety, and inclusion.

Gender inequality is evident in classrooms through everyday interactions, instructional practices, and established norms. Taraszow et al. (2023) note that schools act as a place of academic instruction and socialisation where gender roles and expectations are reinforced. In addition, Pautu et al. (2025) note that teachers often hold different expectations for boys and girls, which affects their pattern of participation, leadership opportunities, and disciplinary practices. As boys are encouraged to study science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects, while girls are guided to traditional “feminine” courses. In addition, Andersen and Smith (2022) note that classroom demonstrating that gender inequality in education is structural, relational, and interactive, as it is embedded in daily pedagogical processes.

Since teachers are in the middle of enforcing or breaking gender norms, the focus should be on individuals joining the teaching profession. According to Liu (2024), the academic involvement of students and their self-concept are largely affected by the expectations and interactions of teachers. The pre-service educators in the course of professional training form the crucial category in ensuring gender equity and inclusion in institutions of learning. In addition, Boyle et al. (2023) also claimed that beliefs and attitudes of pre-service teachers are also influenced by schooling experiences and sociocultural norms. Therefore, shaping future pedagogical procedures. Teacher education programmes are thus strategic spaces that enable critical awareness and inclusive pedagogies before professional habits become entrenched.

Although scholarships have examined gender disparities in access, participation, and learning outcomes, prior research focuses more on students and not the belief systems of those who facilitate learning (Kong, 2021; Cosentino et al., 2019). The conceptualisation of gender inequality and inclusion by pre-service teachers in their initial professional training has received little attention. According to Martinez et al. (2024), early beliefs, which are formed during the process of professional preparation, have a significant effect on future instructional choices and classroom relations. In several settings, mostly across low-and middle-income countries, the curriculum of teachers does not systematically integrate gender equity frameworks on inclusive practice. This research gap remains significant due to the continued persistence of gendered



norms across schooling systems and society in general. Thus, this study seeks to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions of gender inequality and inclusion.

For this study, an intersectionality theory, which was formulated by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. This theory posited that systems of inequality operate using interconnected social categories like gender, class, and social status rather than isolated dimensions of identity. Intersectionality states that the systems of power and marginalisation intersect and interrelate to create lived experiences and institutional practices (Crenshaw, 1991). It is a framework that has been extensively utilised in the field of education to study the interaction between gender inequalities and socioeconomic status, cultural values and ability status in generating multiple patterns of inclusion and exclusion. The intersectional lens has an important role to play because the perception of gender inequality by pre-service teachers can be shaped by the gendered expectations, as well as by larger structures of privilege and disadvantage. The adoption of this framework enables the study to explore how overlapping systems of inequality shape pre-service teachers' interpretations of gender inequality and inclusion in educational environments.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do pre-service teachers perceive the presence and nature of gender bias within the learning environment in selected states in Nigeria?
2. What are pre-service teachers' perceptions of discrimination, privilege, and status-based inequalities in educational settings in Nigeria?
3. How do pre-service teachers perceive inclusion and empowerment efforts in addressing gender inequalities?

## **METHODOLOGY**

**Study Design:** This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design to establish a baseline understanding of pre-service teachers' perspectives on gender and inclusion in Nigeria educational setting. The design focuses on documenting the pre-intervention state of participants across Taraba State, Enugu State, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), providing a factual, low-inference summary of participants' existing awareness and conceptualisation before receiving any specialised gender and inclusion training. These locations were selected for practical considerations and accessibility, rather than to represent all regions of Nigeria. The qualitative data were analysed using content and sentiment analysis, and the results were quantified as percentages to enable cross-state comparison.

**Setting:** The study was conducted in three states: Taraba State (North-East), the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja (North-Central), and Enugu State (South-East). These states were selected purposively based on institutional accessibility, the availability of publicly funded Colleges of Education meeting the study's inclusion criteria, and their representation of distinct socio-cultural and educational contexts across Nigeria's Northern, North-central, and southern



regions. The selection of three states was guided by the study's purposive criteria rather than an intent to represent all six geopolitical zones, with broader geographic coverage recommended for future studies.

**Study Population:** The population comprised pre-service teachers enrolled in the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) programme at College of Education, Zing, Taraba State, FCT College of Education, Zuba, and Enugu State College of Education. The participants were introduced to the research objectives but had not yet undergone formal training or deployment for field practice and observation, representing a baseline cohort whose naturalistic perceptions and attitudes were captured before the inception of the programme intervention.

**Sampling technique and sample size:** Three Colleges of Education (COEs) were selected using purposive sampling, based on the following inclusion criteria: public funding (federal or state) institutions, geographic spread across distinct socio-cultural regions of Nigeria, and representation of different institutional models of COE. The College of Education in Nigeria operates under three models: normal, technical, and special. To ensure institutional inclusiveness, one technical COE was included among the three selected institutions.

Within each institution, 50 participants were selected using stratified random sampling, stratified by gender to ensure equal representation of males and females. The sample size of 50 per institution was considered adequate for a qualitative descriptive study of this nature, providing sufficient data for meaningful thematic comparison across the three states. This yielded a total of 150 participants (50 × 3 institutions), as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Sample Distribution Across Study Site

State	Institution Name	Institution Type	Participants	Gender
Taraba State	College of Education, Zing	Normal	50	25M / 25F
Enugu State	Enugu State College of Education (Technical)	Technical	50	25M / 25F
FCT, Abuja	FCT College of Education, Zuba	Normal	50	25M / 25F
<b>Total</b>	3 COEs		150	75M / 75F

**Data Collection:** The instrument for data collection was a guided reflective writing task. Participants were provided with seven sensitising categories and asked to write a reflective summary of half to one page based on their experiences and awareness of the following:



- Gender Bias: Differential treatment based on gender (e.g., boys being called upon more than girls in class)
- Gender Norms: Beliefs about roles considered appropriate for men or women
- Privileges: Being treated better due to gender, background, or social status
- Discrimination: Unfair treatment of a student or colleague
- Stereotypes: Generalised assumptions based on gender (e.g., girls are not good at mathematics)
- Empowerment: Individuals confidently occupy roles that challenge gender expectations
- Inclusion or Exclusion: Being included or marginalised due to gender, disability, or social status

Participants responded to three reflection prompts: (1) What have you learned from your observations and experiences? (2) How have these experiences shaped your understanding of gender and inclusion? (3) How will this influence the way you teach when you become a teacher?

The completed responses were collected and prepared for analysis. Data collection was conducted across all three states within the same timeframe.

**Data Analysis:** The data were analysed using a combination of content and sentiment analysis, and the results were quantified. Google Collaboratory (Google Colab) platform is used, which is a cloud-based service or workbench developed by Google that allows the writing and execution of Python code through its browser.

**Content Analysis:** The written reflections were reviewed and coded according to the seven pre-defined thematic indicators. Coded entries were classified into three broad categories: Gender Dynamics (gender bias, norms, stereotypes, privilege), Social Justice (discrimination and exclusion), and Positive Deviance (empowerment and inclusion).

**Sentiment Analysis:** is the process that identifies and categorizes the emotions or sentiments in a written text. Text extraction in Python was adopted to read text in the Word document file. The raw text data underwent several phases, which include preprocessing (deploying a Python library to remove the stop-word, noise, or any other specific words), extracting important features for the data analysis, and sentiment classification. Furthermore, a word cloud was generated to show the prominent themes/emotions, while the chart was created to show the magnitude of the sentiments in terms of word count and percentages.

## RESULTS

### **RQ1: How do pre-service teachers perceive the presence and nature of gender bias within the learning environment?**

Table 2 notes that in the three study areas, the result indicates a high perception that there is gender bias, and it is skewed in favour of boys. In Taraba, 67% of the respondents thought that gender bias is to favour boys, with only 22% perceiving that gender bias favours girls, and 11% having gender balance in the learning environment. This implies that over two-thirds of the



respondents felt that there is a classroom culture that is male-favoured. Also, in FCT, Zuba, 66.7% of gender bias was observed towards boys, 16.7% was towards girls, and 16.7% of gender bias was not recorded. Across the different places, the similarity in the perception of bias towards boys by about two-thirds of the respondents supports the idea that bias based on gender is not specific but rather endemic. The results determine that the issue of gender inequality is highly acknowledged among pre-service educators, specifically when it comes to classroom involvement, stereotypes presented in subject preferences, and leadership possibilities.

In addition, there are also gender norms that support this bias. There were 41.7% lopsided gender norms that favoured boys and 33.3% evenly matched in Zuba. In Enugu, 80% of the respondents noted that gender norms were biased towards boys, and this is a clear indication of a strong prescriptive environment that provides a benefit to male students. The findings show that classical gender norms still influence the patterns of responsibilities and participation in classroom.

**Table 2: Distribution of Respondents' Perceptions on Gender Bias and Observed Gender Norms across Selected States**

Variables	Taraba		FCT		Enugu	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender Bias</b>						
Bias towards girls	11	22.0	8	16.7	5	11.1
Bias towards boys	33	67.0	34	66.6	34	66.7
Not bias	5	11.0	8	16.7	11	22.2
<b>Gender Norms</b>						
Girls	7	14.0	12	25.0	5	10.0
Boys	43	86.0	21	41.7	5	10.0
Balanced	0	0	17	33.3	40	80.0

**RQ2: What are pre-service teachers' perceptions of discrimination, privilege, and status-based inequalities in educational settings?**

The results of this analysis revealed that discrimination, privilege, and inequality are major issues in the study areas. In Taraba, almost half of the respondents (48.0%) perceived discrimination as gender-related, where the females were believed to be the main victims of inappropriate treatment (Figure 1). The respondents narrated how females who were good at their job and had been qualified to be promoted before, but were not, due to the stereotypes that preferred boys over girls. Girls were also avoided in group activities based on stereotypes. In Zuba, 61.5% reported no discrimination (equal treatment), 23.1% were reported to have gender-based discrimination, and 15.4% were reported to have social or economic status discrimination



(Figure 2). This implies that even though a lot of people see equality, a considerable percentage still know about gender and status-based inequalities.

In Taraba, 47% of the surveyed respondents viewed privilege as status-related (wealth, family background, influence, or social class), 30% viewed privilege as gender-related, and almost a quarter of respondents saw privilege as balanced treatment. The findings from this study, obtained from Zuba is also similar, as it found that 41.7% of the respondents noted privilege based on social or economic status, whereas 25.0% noted privilege on gender, while 33.3% perceived equal treatment. Thus, the study findings note hierarchies in society which are reflected in educational settings, where gender and socioeconomic status determine access to and recognition of opportunities.

**Table 3: Perception of Gender- and Status-Based Discrimination and Socioeconomic Privilege across Selected States**

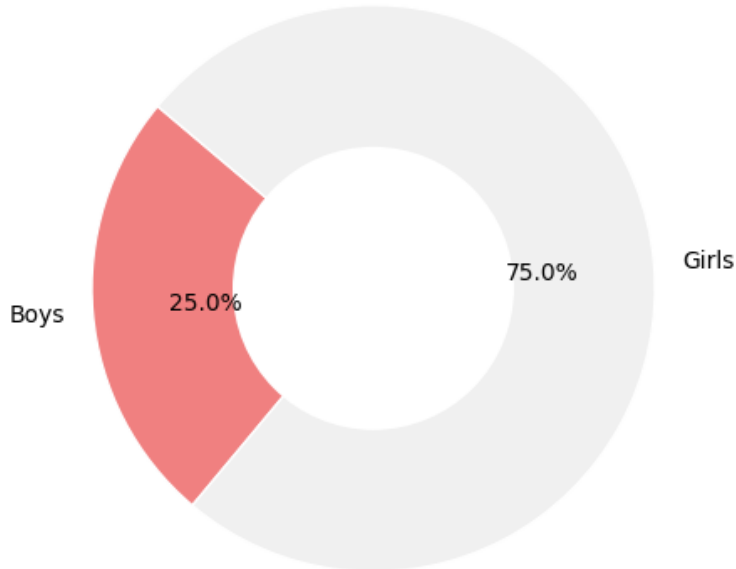
Variables	Taraba		FCT		Enugu	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Discrimination</b>						
Gender-based	24	48.0	11	23.1	11	23.1
Status-based	14	28.0	8	15.4	8	15.4
Equal treatment	12	24.0	31	61.5	31	61.5
<b>Privilege</b>						
Gender-based	15	30.0	12	25.0	12	25.0
Status-based	24	47.0	21	41.7	21	41.7
Equal treatment	11	23.0	17	33.3	17	33.3

**RQ3: How do pre-service teachers perceive inclusion and empowerment efforts in addressing gender inequalities?**

The results show a varied scenario of inclusion and empowerment initiatives. In Taraba, the respondents stated instances of empowerment, such as girls taking leadership roles, the creation of STEM study teams, and female-led meetings with confidence. These observations indicate that empowerment efforts are in existence and are visible. Nonetheless, it is not that inclusive as it still excludes individuals with disabilities, and those with less rich or poor academic backgrounds, and students.

In Zuba, 75.0% of perceived empowerment activities were focused on girls, and 25.0% focused on boys (Figure 1). This is a sign of trying to balance the apparent bias towards males. In Enugu, it was found that the girls were highly targeted by the empowerment efforts (87.5%), unlike the boys (12.5%) (Figure 2). There are visible empowerment efforts that are usually girl-oriented, but systemic discrimination associated with traditional norms, stereotypes, disability, and social class still manifests in participation and opportunity.

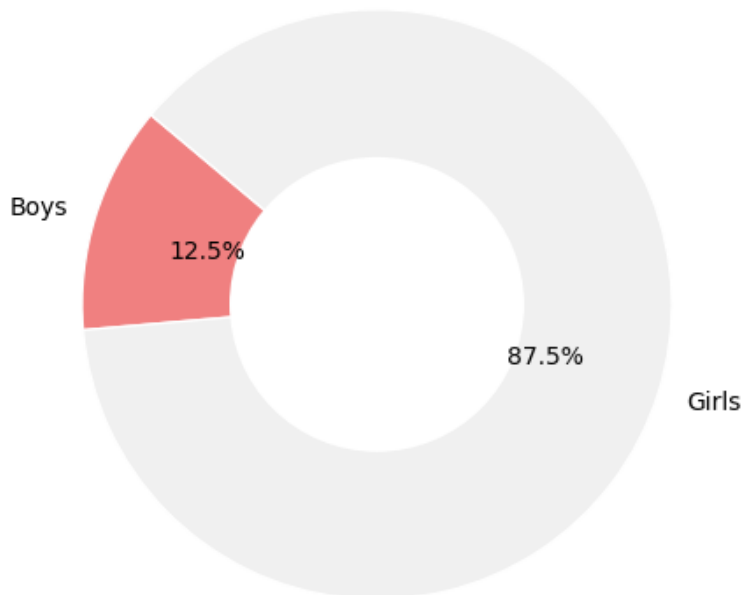
### Empowerment (Zuba)



PRE\_STEP 2025

*Figure 1: Gender Focus of Empowerment Efforts in Zuba*

### Empowerment (Enugu)



PRE\_STEP 2025

*Figure 2: Gender Focus of Empowerment Efforts in Enugu*



## **DISCUSSION**

This baseline study provides a clear picture of how pre-service teachers understand and experience gender inequality, discrimination, and inclusion, and it directly addresses the three guiding research questions. In addition to comparing the study findings with previous studies, possible explanations for these patterns were explored. Regarding the first question: How do pre-service teachers perceive the presence and nature of gender bias within the learning environment? Across Taraba, FCT Zuba, and Enugu, pre-service teachers overwhelmingly perceive that gender bias exists and is systematically skewed in favour of boys. Roughly two-thirds in Taraba and FCT Zuba reported bias favouring boys, while Enugu respondents noted that 80% of prevailing gender norms also advantage boys. This aligns with other research studies showing that pre-service teachers commonly observe unequal expectations and opportunities, with boys often positioned as more active, vocal, or suited for leadership or technical subjects, and girls steered towards more compliant or softer roles (Acar-Erdol et al, 2022; Mewborn & Gober, 2024).

These perceptions reflect the sociocultural context of Nigeria, where gender norms and expectations are reinforced both in school and in society. A possible explanation is that these pre-service teachers are themselves products of the same educational system they are observing, meaning their recognition of bias is rooted in personal experience rather than professional training. This insider familiarity may account for the high rates of recognition but also suggests that awareness alone does not translate into readiness to challenge bias, as normalisation through lived experience can make inequitable practices appear unremarkable. Our study adds to existing knowledge by showing that these patterns are already recognised at the pre-service stage, highlighting a critical window in teacher education to address bias before it becomes entrenched in classroom practice.

Distinctively, this study captures such awareness before any formal sensitisation, confirming that pre-service teachers enter training with pre-informed, culturally shaped perceptions of gender bias. This has direct implications for curriculum design as intervention may need to first surface and interrogate existing beliefs before introducing new frameworks. Also, our findings on how gender norms influence classroom roles, participation, and leadership opportunities align with existing research indicating that teachers' behaviours, resources, and curricula frequently reinforce, rather than challenge, gender stereotypes (Mercan, 2024; Dönertaş, 2023). The fact that these biases are recognised at the pre-service stage is critical, as it shows that teacher education has a window of opportunity to confront these patterns before they become embedded in classroom practice.

Regarding the second question: What are pre-service teachers' perceptions of discrimination, privilege, and status-based inequalities in educational settings? Here, pre-service teachers also perceive that discrimination and privilege are structured along both gender and socioeconomic lines. In Taraba, discrimination is described as largely gender-based and often directed at females, with examples such as overlooking qualified women for promotion and excluding girls from group work. This is consistent with evidence that pre-service teachers carry gendered stereotypes into their understanding of who is suited for certain roles and positions and may view men as more legitimate leaders or providers (Cabrero et al., 2023; Acar-Erdol et al., 2022).



At the same time, many respondents in Taraba and FCT Zuba emphasised status-based privilege (wealth, family background, social influence). These parallel studies showed pre-service teachers hold more negative attitudes and lower expectations toward low-SES (socioeconomic status) students, while associating competence and good work habits with a high-SES background (Glock & Kleen, 2020; Doyle et al., 2022). Our study highlights a gender- and status-based inequality that aligns with Jacob and Pillay's (2022) findings on intersectional hierarchies in educational contexts, where male and higher-status individuals gain compounded advantages, while females and those of lower status face increased disadvantages. This study extends that intersectional framework by situating it within the Nigerian pre-service teacher context, where compounding of gender and socioeconomic disadvantage is directly named by participants in their own reflective accounts. The geographic variation across the three states further suggests that intersectional disadvantage is not uniform across Nigeria's regions, pointing to the need for contextually calibrated teacher education interventions rather than a single nationally standardised approach

Notably, some respondents in FCT Zuba reported no discrimination or perceived equal treatment, which mirrors findings that many pre-service teachers initially minimise or individualise equity issues, believing they simply need to treat everyone the same, thereby overlooking structural inequalities (Primativa, 2021; Breese et al., 2023). This may reflect the urban, cosmopolitan character of the FCT, where exposure to policy-driven equality discourse can create the impression that formal equality equals actual equity, where there is a surface level optimism that risks masking the structural inequities that participants in less privileged or more rural contexts experience more acutely.

Furthermore, for the third question: How do pre-service teachers perceive inclusion and empowerment efforts in addressing gender inequalities? Regarding inclusion and empowerment, our findings show visible but uneven efforts. Pre-service teachers recognise girl-focused initiatives; girls in leadership roles, STEM groups, and targeted empowerment activities in FCT Zuba and Enugu, which are in line with current interventions that promote girls' leadership, participation, and confidence in male-dominated domains (Sukamto et al., 2024). A study on gender-responsive pedagogy similarly finds that some pre-service teachers are beginning to use inclusive materials, mixed-gender groupings, and equal leadership opportunities, even when they lack formal training in gender responsive approaches (Sukamto et al., 2024).

However, our findings also highlighted groups that remain at the margins, such as those with disabilities and students from less affluent or lower academic backgrounds, who are still frequently excluded. This is consistent with studies of pre-service teachers' attitudes to inclusion, which show that many gender initiatives focus narrowly on girls as a homogeneous group, without adequately addressing intersecting axes of disadvantage such as disability, poverty, or rurality (Ojong, 2025; 2022; Eldred et al., 2022). A plausible explanation is that participants' understanding of inclusion has largely been shaped by Nigeria's dominant policy discourse, which frames gender equity primarily around girl-child education and access, without adequately integrating disability or socioeconomic inclusion. Consequently, pre-service teachers can affirm empowerment efforts for girls while remaining blind to other forms of exclusion, not out of indifference, but because their conceptual framework for inclusion has not been broadened



beyond gender. In practice, this can mean that inclusion is narrowed to gender alone, without fully addressing disability and class, despite their powerful role in shaping educational access and outcomes (Singh et al., 2025).

Additionally, pre-service teachers in our study see that empowerment efforts exist and tend to support them, but they also perceive that traditional norms, stereotypes, disability, and social class continue to constrain who is fully included. This mirrors broader evidence that, without deliberate, structured preparation in gender and inclusive education, pre-service teachers may reproduce the very inequities they recognise (Mewborn & Gober, 2024; Kucukakin, 2024; Breese et al., 2023). This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that pre-service teachers enter training with a gender awareness that is real but partial, only sufficient to recognise girl-focused empowerment, yet not deep enough to encompass intersecting dimensions of exclusion. This partial awareness is itself a significant finding, as it suggests the challenge is not a lack of concern but a conceptual narrowness that structured, gender responsive teacher training could systematically address.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings, the study concludes that gender bias and inequality based on status are still rooted in educational contexts across the study areas. The evidence demonstrates that classroom dynamics, patterns of participation, and access to leadership are predominantly seen to be biased towards boys, indicating the continuation of the traditional gender norms, and discrimination and privilege are influenced by socioeconomic background and social status. Despite the apparent visibility and purposefulness of inclusion and empowerment programs, especially those that target girls, it seems that they are not enough to eradicate more structural inequalities that relate to stereotypes, exclusion of people with disabilities, and disparities based on class. Therefore, this study concludes that teacher education programmes need a clear and thorough intervention on how to bring about gender-responsive and socially inclusive pedagogy; otherwise, educational settings will continue to support inequities in education as opposed to changing them.

## **Ethical Clearance**

Ethical approval with NHREC/01/01/2007-31/10/2024 was gotten from the National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) of the Federal Ministry of Health (FMoH) in Abuja. Informed consent was received from the respondents after the aim of the study was explained to them, and their rights were fully explained. All study respondents were informed of their voluntary participation in the study, and the confidentiality and anonymity of all data collected were maintained by avoiding the inclusion of possible identifiers, such as names and contact details. Participants' responses were anonymised using identification codes throughout the analysis

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

### **Authors' Contribution**

All authors contributed substantially to the conception and design of the study. Literature search, data extraction, synthesis, and manuscript drafting were collaboratively undertaken. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

### **Availability of data and materials**

The data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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