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On Gender Perspective and SEL: Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Gender in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This study examines how the early childhood education system responds to gender and feminist shifts and whether Social–Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks in preschools address them. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 preschool teachers to investigate their perceptions of gender and feminism and explore how gender dynamics manifest within their educational practices. The central research question examines the preschool teachers' feminist perceptions as well as the role which gender occupies in their pedagogical work. The findings reveal a disconnect between an explicitly stated liberal feminist stance on gender equality and its practical translation into feminist pedagogy. Very few educators directly address gender issues, indicating a critical need for professional guidance to help them integrate feminist discourse into preschools and foster meaningful dialogue. Furthermore, given that early childhood education remains an exclusively female-dominated domain, a societal re-evaluation is necessary regarding both paternal involvement and the recruitment of male educators. The study concludes that to develop social–emotional learning that promotes in-depth gender perspectives, both teacher-training institutions and professional development frameworks must provide didactic tools to successfully implement this approach in early childhood settings.

Keywords: Social–Emotional Learning (SEL); early childhood education; gender perspective; feminist pedagogy; preschool teachers

1. Introduction

1.1. SEL and Gender in Early Childhood Education

Socio-emotional skills significantly facilitate early cognitive and academic development, rendering their acquisition essential during early childhood. Within the field of early childhood education, research indicates that enhancing children's socio-emotional competencies—such as effective emotional regulation, the recognition of others' emotions, and cognitive flexibility—requires prior targeted training of educational staff to improve their own socio-emotional capacities. This specialized professional development enables preschool teachers to actively integrate social–emotional experiences into daily classroom routines, ensuring that children engage with these practices on a continuous, structured basis. Furthermore, achieving the meaningful internalization of Social–Emotional Learning (SEL) skills depends on the active engagement of parents. When the discursive environment of the preschool aligns with that of the home, the efficacy of the intervention is maximized, yielding substantial improvements in child outcomes (McClelland et al., 2017). Finally, the implementation of SEL frameworks in early childhood settings demonstrates that these

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Academic Editor: Pearl Subban

Received: 16 September 2026
Revised: 1 November 2026
Accepted: 3 November 2026
Published: 5 November 2026

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programs must remain culturally relevant to the children's backgrounds. However, this alignment is often underrealized in practice, highlighting a critical need for teacher-training programs that equip educators to deliver culturally sensitive SEL interventions, particularly within multicultural classrooms (Mahfouz et al., 2025).

The examination of Social–Emotional Learning (SEL) within gendered contexts primarily focuses on students and the gender norms they internalize at school. Rather than being driven exclusively by formal curricula, this socialization occurs heavily through peer–group interactions. For instance, research demonstrates how boys label certain behavioral traits as feminine and consequently avoid exhibiting them within the school environment (Shah et al., 2026). Accordingly, contemporary frameworks suggest that transformative SEL must critically address identity, belonging, institutional power dynamics, and dominant social norms (Jagers et al., 2025). Within early childhood research, empirical evidence indicates that girls outperform boys in socio-emotional and language development between the ages of 4 and 7, whereas no significant gender disparities emerge in motor development (Bando et al., 2024). In longitudinal evaluations of socio-emotional competence—operationalized through emotional regulation, optimism, task performance, open-mindedness, prosocial behavior, and leadership—disparities between boys and girls appear minimal at age 10 but widen significantly by age 15 (Lee et al., 2025). During adolescence, boys report higher levels of emotional regulation and optimism, whereas girls demonstrate greater proficiency in task performance and interpersonal relationships—widening disparities that are structurally rooted in the surrounding cultural context (Lee et al., 2025).

To analyze this developmental variance, empirical data highlights how early educational environments condition these outcomes. For example, Meland and Kaltvedt (2019) illustrate how Norwegian preschool educators implicitly guide children toward stereotypical gender roles. While preschool staff evaluate boys based on physical size and strength—thereby emphasizing motor skills—girls receive reinforcement for behaviors associated with 'sweetness' and compliance. Furthermore, educators encourage girls to exhibit caregiving behaviors toward their peers and routinely task them with assisting teachers with classroom chores. This differential treatment demonstrates how disparate expectations held by educational staff foster accelerated socio-emotional development specifically among girls, effectively utilizing gender socialization to entrench behavioral differences. Focused intervention programs offer a viable corrective to these structural disparities, as targeted socio-emotional interventions have proven equally effective for both boys and girls (Cipriano et al., 2024). Complementing these findings, Liu et al. (2024) examined child–parent–teacher relationships within early childcare settings, noting that warm, close relationships with educators predominantly impact girls. When female toddlers establish a strong bond with educational staff, their social skills improve significantly. Conversely, relationships with childcare staff do not exert a direct impact on the socio-emotional metrics of boys, for whom parental relationships remain a more salient predictor of developmental outcomes (Liu et al., 2024).

Conversely, targeted preschool intervention programs demonstrate that gender equality can be effectively cultivated in early childhood settings through the utilization of narratives and children's creative works. This pedagogical approach reinforces the foundational principle that every individual possesses the autonomy to experience diverse emotional states and is inherently entitled to institutional dignity and social recognition (Segatto & Dal Ben, 2019).

1.2. Gender Education

Gender perceptions internalized within the family environment can be either reinforced or transformed by educators during early childhood. In this process, teachers play a

critical role in fostering egalitarian learning environments by supporting children as they question traditional gender roles. Research indicates that targeted pedagogical strategies can effectively reduce gender-based discrimination (Boateng et al., 2024). For instance, ensuring all children have equal access to toys and activities mitigates the long-term impact of gender stereotypes (Wolter et al., 2015).

In most countries around the world, gender education is deeply anchored in feminist pedagogy. According to Gur-Ziv (2013), the fundamental objective of this pedagogical approach is to establish gender equity by reconstructing educational practices and the mechanisms of knowledge transmission. Feminist pedagogy addresses the sociopolitical status of women within both education and broader society. It strives to transform how academic disciplines are taught, how values are instilled, and how specific curricular elements—such as holiday celebrations, the design of the learning environment, and spoken language—are structurally defined. A substantial gap persists between the foundational ethos of gender equality that accompanied the establishment of the state and contemporary school curricula, as evidenced by the systemic omission of historical struggles for equal rights. Furthermore, many teacher-training institutions tend to overlook the feminist revolution. Compounding this institutional neglect, opponents of the feminist movement have stigmatized the term "feminism", imbuing it with negative, stereotypical connotations. Consequently, many educators who align with the objectives of the movement remain reluctant to self-identify as feminists.

To establish a baseline for analyzing gender dynamics within early childhood kindergartens, it is essential to consider the structural bifurcation of the Israeli education system into distinct, autonomous sectors. The Ultra-Orthodox sector operates under strict gender segregation, thereby preserving a traditional patriarchal hierarchy. Within the State–Religious sector, approximately half of the institutions enforce gender segregation, while the remainder are co-educational. Similarly, the Arab state education sector employs gender segregation in a portion of its institutions. Consequently, the State–Secular sector serves as the primary framework in which male and female pupils consistently study together. Accordingly, Kush Zohar and Haruvi (2017) argue that principles of gender equality are fundamentally absent from traditional, religious–patriarchal worldviews. This leaves State–Secular schools and kindergartens as the primary arenas navigating the tension between transmitting traditional patriarchal values—primarily through biblical and historical studies—and integrating progressive feminist values. Kush Zohar and Haruvi (2017) identify key structural impediments to gender equality within Israeli society: the proximity of religion to state affairs, nationalism, the institutional prominence of the military, and the country's multicultural composition. This multiculturalism fosters friction between different cultural groups—ranging from highly liberal to deeply conservative—which remain reluctant to engage in cross-cultural dialogue. These structural factors profoundly shape educational environments.

Although the Israeli education system pioneered co-education during the Yeshuv (pre-state) era to establish an egalitarian landscape, it simultaneously communicates overt and covert messages that maintain traditional gender constructs and divisions of labor (Kush Zohar & Haruvi, 2017). This tension is empirically evidenced by the distinct gendering of children's play and attire in preschools, especially during Purim—a Jewish holiday where boys predominantly adopt superhero roles and girls assume princess costumes (Barak-Brandes, 2023). Furthermore, the foundational ideology of the Zionist movement modeled itself after European national movements rooted in patriarchal masculine norms. While Zionism defined itself as a secular movement, it heavily drew its foundational symbols from biblical heroic figures. Similarly, the military, despite projecting an egalitarian ethos, functions as a highly masculine institution. Its central role in Israeli society is directly

mirrored within the educational sphere. The education system frequently integrates former military personnel as administrative and pedagogical experts—a phenomenon described by Dahan-Kalev (2005) as "generals in education". Through this integration, the educational apparatus implicitly and explicitly operates as an ideological extension of militaristic values (Kush Zohar & Haruvi, 2017).

To evaluate its impact on gender education, it is critical to distinguish between the primary conceptual frameworks of feminism. While liberal feminism focuses primarily on achieving institutional equality between men and women, radical feminism theorizes the structural subjugation of the female sex and outlines pathways for systemic change. Proponents of this paradigm argue that women, as a distinct social cohort, are systematically oppressed through patriarchy. This systemic framework grants structural privileges to men in both the private and public spheres, intentionally preserving male hegemony and perpetuating institutionalized female subordination through law, religion, family structures, political ideologies, and sexual socialization (Rowland & Klein, 1996). Female oppression is further conceptualized by materialist feminism, which identifies socio-political and economic factors as the primary causes of gender discrimination. The materialist approach asserts that "women" do not constitute a natural biological cohort; rather, society constructs these definitions to maintain division of labor. According to Wittig (1997), "one is not born a woman". Instead, "man" and "woman" function as political categories generated through social constructs that assign specific roles to each classification. Materialist feminism claims that women must actively resist dominant male socio-political power and reject gender categories, asserting that the dissolution of the political category of "man" will inherently eliminate its structurally subordinate counterpart.

Regarding gender education in preschools, children are influenced by their social environment from a very young age, which shapes their attitudes, values, and behaviors. Beyond parental influence, preschool teachers heavily impact children's gender-role formation. Teachers act as catalysts for change by promoting classroom gender equality and challenging societal stereotypes to shape the mindset of the next generation. Because preschool represents a critical developmental stage where children internalize fundamental concepts that dictate their future trajectories, quality early education is essential. Consequently, educators significantly influence children's perceptions of gender relevance during this formative period (Gogoi & Begum, 2024). Similarly, Li (2023) demonstrated that even subtle gender biases in an educator's attitude can lead children toward stereotypical interpretations of gender, further altering their foundational gender knowledge. When preschool teachers transfer negative gender stereotypes to children, they risk restricting academic development and future career options by undermining preschoolers' self-esteem and enthusiasm within specific fields.

As Düzen (2026) demonstrated, early childhood educators utilize diverse strategies to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes, including drama, play, awareness activities, non-traditional preschool responsibilities, digital resources, and the introduction of egalitarian role models. Although preschool teachers deliberately construct pedagogical strategies to promote gender equality, they frequently encounter structural barriers rooted in society, family dynamics, culture, and the overarching education system (Düzen, 2026). These systemic tensions are particularly evident in countries with multicultural social fabrics. For instance, when a kindergarten operates within a predominantly conservative community, a notable absence of content promoting gender equality often occurs (Kush Zohar & Haruvi, 2017). One prominent method for examining these early childhood gender stereotypes is the analysis of holiday traditions and costume customs. Research evaluating parental purchasing patterns reveals a persistent binary, characterized by a distinct preference for superhero costumes among boys and princess costumes among girls (Barak-Brandes, 2023).

In the context of existing preschool curricula, various studies highlight a systemic chauvinistic bias within educational programs, alongside an ambivalence arising from the juxtaposition of patriarchal and feminist themes (Ziegelboim, 2019). For instance, Rudin (2021) examined this hybrid approach—which blends feminism and chauvinism—within the early childhood literature utilized by preschool teachers from the 1940s to the present day. Rudin (2024) further addressed the systemic absence of queer discourse in educational institutions, focusing specifically on the lack of representation for diverse family structures. Moreover, despite the formal inclusion of gender perspectives in teacher training curricula, a persistent gap remains between theoretical knowledge and its effective application in early childhood classrooms (Narváez-Prosser et al., 2025). This disconnect between theory and practice suggests that strategies aimed at promoting equality must comprehensively address both the didactic and conceptual dimensions of the educational process (Narváez-Prosser et al., 2025).

In addition to curricular content, institutional demographics reinforce traditional hierarchies, as most preschool teachers are female (OECD, 2020). Despite the academic qualifications required for these roles, the salaries of early childhood educators remain among the lowest within the public sector. Conversely, male professionals fill the majority of senior educational administrative and managerial positions, even within secular institutions. Compounding these disparities, there is a pervasive societal tendency to blame female educators for systemic educational deficiencies (Herzog & Walden, 2010). These dynamics are mirrored in media analysis research, which indicates that representations of teachers in media often project negative and reductionist caricatures. This creates a stark disconnect between the values educators are expected to embody—such as intellectual authority, altruism, and civic responsibility—and the narrow-mindedness, egotism, or militarism they are depicted as exhibiting in practice (Turin, 2014). Complementing this, Alezra (2022) discusses how this societal view affects the professional status of preschool teachers, identifying a significant discrepancy between the complex managerial and organizational expertise required of early childhood educators and their own professional self-perception, which often remains confined to caring duties. Similarly, parents tend to perceive these educators as caregivers rather than institutional managers. Within this sociocultural climate, preschool teachers frequently internalize a flawed professional identity. As a result, even veteran educators rarely describe their practice in terms of systemic expertise, conceptualizing it instead merely as a localized competency to guide and advise.

2. Methodology

The qualitative phenomenological paradigm was selected to address the core objectives of this study. This approach focuses on describing a specific phenomenon through the lived experiences of those who have encountered it, thereby enabling researchers to examine its underlying nature and essence in depth. In its advanced analytic stages, phenomenological inquiry explores the systemic mechanisms that influence why participants experience a phenomenon in a particular manner. Consequently, phenomenological researchers do not test empirical hypotheses. Rather, they investigate how participants subjectively construct meaning from their experiences. To achieve this, purposive sampling is employed to ensure that all selected participants have directly experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Within this framework, the semi-structured, in-depth interview serves as the primary instrument to illuminate the phenomenon by focusing on localized, daily experiences through open-ended questions (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews utilized in this study captured the subjective and narrative realities of the participants. The linguistic choices and specific vocabulary employed by the educators map how they locate and position themselves within their

broader socio-cultural environments. Selecting a semi-structured format facilitates the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and the participant (Josselson, 2013). The interview protocol was developed by the researcher to elicit the preschool teachers' gender perceptions while simultaneously exploring how these configurations are operationalized within the early childhood environment. This design evaluates the alignment between stated ideology and educational practice, building on established frameworks that examine discrepancies between educators' explicit belief systems and their field-level actions (Kasperski et al., 2022). Accordingly, the interview protocol included questions such as: How do you define the term "feminism"? Where did you acquire your knowledge on this subject? What characterizes the children's play dynamics in your preschool? In which designated spaces do boys and girls play? Which parent is more actively involved in preschool activities? How do you instill gender perceptions in children? How do you commemorate Family Day in preschool? Do you expose the preschool children to the contributions of prominent women?

The study sample comprised 30 preschool teachers aged 29 to 60, recruited from the northern, central, and southern regions of Israel (Table 1). The participants were distributed across three distinct educational tracks: the State–Secular, the State–Religious, and the Arab state sectors. 4 teachers work in special education preschools, 6 work in inclusive kindergartens and 20 in typical kindergartens. Purposive sampling was initially utilized to select participants meeting the study criteria. Following initial interviews with five preschool teachers, the study employed a snowball sampling technique, utilizing referrals from the initial participants to engage additional educators. Data gathered from these interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, which facilitates the extraction of recurring motifs that synthesize across narratives (Singer & Salovey, 1993). The interviews were conducted over a twelve-month period at local cafes situated near the participants' respective preschools, with each session lasting approximately one hour. Strict ethical protocols were maintained throughout the data collection process. Participants were briefed on the scope and overarching objectives of the study. Interview questions were framed broadly to prevent confirmation bias and cultivate an environment of openness, remaining sensitive to multicultural, gender, and multi-cultural dynamics, as well as the diverse personal values of the educators. Care was taken to ensure that all questions remained non-intrusive. To preserve confidentiality and protect participant identities, all names were pseudonymized. Furthermore, all participants provided written informed consent prior to their participation in the study.

The qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework, following the systematic stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and informed by Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach. The analysis began with data familiarization, which involved repeatedly reading the verbatim interview transcripts to achieve a deep immersion in the participants' lived experiences. Next, initial coding was performed through horizontalization, treating every statement with equal value to identify significant statements, recurring phrases, and psychological meanings relevant to the phenomenon under study (Moustakas, 1994). These initial codes were subsequently collated, compared, and clustered into broader clusters of meaning. Through an iterative and reflexive process of reviewing and refining candidate themes against the entire dataset, overarching themes and sub-themes were generated to construct the core textural and structural descriptions of the participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Moustakas, 1994).

Table 1. Participant Demographics (by Tenure).

Name	Sect/Community	Age	Tenure (Years)	Setting
Sofia	Jewish	29	5	Typical Education
Sapir	Jewish	34	5	Typical Education
Malaak	Arabic	29	5	Typical Education
Yara	Arabic	34	6	Typical Education
Linoy	Jewish	39	6	Special Education
Nur	Arabic	29	7	Inclusive Preschool
Nadia	Arabic	40	10	Typical Education
Avirama	Jewish	38	10	Typical Education
Dikla	Jewish	43	10	Typical Education
Rinat	Jewish	48	11	Inclusive Preschool
Michaela	Jewish	42	12	Typical Education
Maayan	Jewish	38	12	Special Education
Hilda	Arabic	40	14	Typical Education
Mina	Arabic	40	15	Typical Education
Orit	Jewish	45	15	Inclusive Preschool
Emily	Jewish	46	16	Typical Education
Smadar	Jewish	49	17	Typical Education
Naama	Jewish	49	18	Typical Education
Nofar	Jewish	43	19	Typical Education
Michal	Jewish	60	20	Inclusive Preschool
Doaa	Arabic	46	20	Typical Education
Dina	Jewish	50	21	Special Education
Nili	Jewish	47	21	Typical Education
Mirit	Jewish	46	25	Inclusive Preschool
Randa	Arabic	52	26	Typical Education
Anna	Jewish	51	28	Typical Education
Sarah	Jewish	60	35	Special Education
Tzila	Jewish	61	35	Typical Education
Sigal	Jewish	60	36	Typical Education
Wafa	Arabic	61	36	Inclusive Preschool

3. Findings

The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews yielded three central themes concerning how preschool teachers conceptualize feminism, the place of gender discourse within the kindergarten, and broader gender dynamics in early childhood education.

3.1. First Theme: Perceptions of Feminism and Gender Within Early Childhood Education

This theme encompasses the analysis of narrative segments addressing how preschool teachers define feminism and conceptualize early childhood education through the lens of gender. Specifically, participants evaluated why early childhood education remains a heavily gender-segregated, female-dominated domain and why male educators are fundamentally absent from the field.

The vast majority of the interviewed preschool teachers endorsed liberal feminist perception, emphasizing institutional equality and individual agency. This stance is illustrated by Michal, who noted, "In my view, feminism is the pursuit of equal rights." Throughout the interviews, a prominent consensus emerged that the feminist movement primarily functions to establish mutual respect and equity between men and women. Furthermore, the discourse surrounding feminism unveiled distinct constructions of femininity that manifest within daily professional practices, particularly regarding the management of preschool personnel. For example, Mirit stated, "I define feminism as choice—a woman's autonomy to choose whether to pursue a career, stay at home, pursue higher education, or be with a partner. I actively encourage my staff, which is predominantly female, to study and advance professionally." In a similar vein, Nur stated, "A feminist is a strong woman who is self-determined and acts in her own best interest. She does not necessarily have to be in the labor market, nor does she have to stay at home, as long as it fulfills her. That is what it means to me." Conversely, Yara distinguished between liberal and radical variants of feminism, expressing reservation toward structural critiques by stating, "I believe in feminism, but not in today's radical feminism; in my opinion, a woman should be a woman and a man should be a man." Surprisingly, two preschool teachers indicated that they were unfamiliar with the conceptual parameters of the term, while Sigal argued that there is no need in the Feminist Movement anymore: "We have an excellent team at the preschool; feminism does not factor in here because we are already a strong, cohesive staff."

The discourse on feminism values reflects the participants' domestic lives, revealing an internal conflict where preschool teachers acknowledged a lack of egalitarianism in their own households while maintaining a professional duty to promote gender equality in the kindergarten. Anna illustrated this discrepancy, noting that despite a clear gendered division of labor in her home, she consciously dialogued with the children about the non-gendered nature of social roles, stating: "We use dolls to dramatize how we cook together, clean the house, and set the Shabbat table as a team. We discuss who packs the bags and who organizes—showing that everyone contributes, it isn't just the mother's job. Yet, in my own family, when we travel abroad, I am the only one who packs the suitcases; my husband doesn't even know how. That is my role, while his role is to book the tours and so on."

When discussing the gendering of the early childhood educational space, the teachers addressed the near-total absence of male educators, attributing it to the societal construction of the profession as inherently feminine. Nadia explained that her community encourages women's professional development only to the extent that it does not impede their domestic duties, remarking: "We encounter a reality where women are socialized within a culture that holds them concurrently responsible for professional career advancement and maternal, domestic duties. This perception leads many women to choose the field of education, as it is a profession that permits them to reconcile employment outside the home with familial responsibilities." Consequently, early childhood education is widely perceived as an ideal field for mothers because its operating hours align with the schedules and needs of their own children, allowing women to achieve professional self-actualization without compromising their maternal roles. Another prominent explanation regarding the absence of male educators centered on parental suspicion toward male preschool teachers. Sofia suggested that men are deterred from entering the field due to parental resistance and apprehension surrounding a male presence in early childhood settings. Recalling the parental backlash faced by her male co-teacher, she stated: "Parents started raising eyebrows, asking, 'Who is he? What is this? Who is this man sitting next to you?' One mother was incredibly insolent; after our group meeting, she demanded to speak with me privately. She called me and asked, 'Tell me, do you trust this male teacher? Do you rely on him? Won't he sexually abuse my children? Is he a pedophile or something?'"

Beyond these factors, the experiential and emotional dimensions also play a significant role. The majority of the preschool teachers posit that because women bear children and embody the maternal experience from an early stage in life, they inherently experience a natural and meaningful connection to working with young children. In this sense, the transition from a female identity to a maternal experience often intersects with the decision to become an educator, driven by a desire to nurture, care for, and guide children through their developmental journey—traits they perceive as less prevalent in men. Yara views teaching as a profession that reflects women's essential attributes as mothers, stating: "Ultimately, women are the ones who give birth, and the bond between a woman and a child is exceptionally close. In the field of teaching, this connection is a vital component that cannot be undone. Teaching means to instruct and to lead, which inherently connects to parenthood itself. I believe this is partly why most practitioners in this field are women, as they possess a gentler and more personal approach to the child than a man would." Dua similarly considers the female sex to be better suited for childcare and early education, both emotionally and logistically, remarking: "We, as women, possess a maternal instinct, which influences us to feel like a mother first and an educator second… More women work in this field, and I support that. A female educator responds to and understands a child's needs much better than a male educator, especially with very young children. For example, changing a baby's diaper, teaching them about the digestive system, or accompanying them to the restroom. A male educator might have the technical capability to perform these tasks, but the quality and outcome will not match the efficacy of a female educator. I truly believe that male educators are unsuited to be preschool teachers for young children. It is preferable for men to teach older children in primary, middle, and high schools." This perspective regarding men's perceived lack of suitability for early childhood education was not exclusive to Arab educators. Tzila likewise noted: "Women represent a direct extension of a mother at home. They are sensitive, patient, and communicative, whereas men tend to favor instrumentalism—keeping things brief and to the point."

Beyond these functional and emotional dimensions, the preschool teachers noted that the absence of men from early childhood education is driven by low wages, which deter male candidates and render the income more suitable as a secondary household salary. Conversely, a minority view held by six preschool teachers asserted that men are no less suited for early childhood education than women. Malak, shared that her father is a teacher and argued that men make excellent educators and preschool instructors. Michal maintained that the structural gendering of the preschool teaching profession is fundamentally flawed, observing: "I believe that the teaching profession suits anyone who loves children, regardless of gender. Today, there are more women in the field, but I think men can also be excellent educators and serve as significant figures for the children."

Michaela criticized the occupational segregation of teaching roles, identifying it as the root cause of the low socio-economic status of preschool teachers, noting: "It's sad. It is truly, truly sad. There is a misconception regarding education—that it is a female domain simply because of the vacations, which supposedly makes it compatible with raising children when you are a school or preschool teacher, since your schedule aligns with the children's breaks. Historically, by the way, the education system was overwhelmingly male, and women only entered the field gradually. Unfortunately, that is why it looks the way it does today. That is why our salary is pathetic, our working conditions are pathetic, we are taken for granted, and people feel entitled to say whatever they want about us. This stems from it being a female-dominated field. If it were a male-dominated field, it wouldn't be this way." Dina highlighted the pedagogical importance of having male figures in preschools to serve as role models, while Sapir noted from her own professional experience that the male educators she encountered were highly effective, stating: "I think it's a shame there

aren't more men, because as educators and preschool teachers, men are amazing. From the little I've encountered during my years in the field, children naturally form a very strong connection with men. I can't quite explain it, but it's a bond that is more collaborative, playful. It really is an incredible connection, and the men in the system have a wonderful approach in my opinion. But yes, it is a profession that is perceived as less masculine, less 'alpha'."

3.2. Second Theme: Gender Dynamics in Preschool, Relative to Children and Parents

This theme uncovers the gendered dimensions within the preschool setting regarding parental involvement, which is overwhelmingly dominated by mothers, both in daily interactions and in response to the educational content delivered by the teachers. Additionally, this section examines children's play dynamics and their gender perceptions as manifested in interactions with the preschool teacher and their peer group.

The issue of parental involvement occupied a substantial portion of the discourse. The majority of the preschool teachers noted that mothers are primarily involved in the children's preschool lives. Mothers are typically the ones who directly inquire about various matters concerning the child, join class WhatsApp groups, and attend parent–teacher conferences and intake meetings. This pattern is occasionally disrupted in cases of divorce, which often prompts fathers to become more actively involved and collaborative. Some teachers indicated that this traditional dynamic has begun to shift in recent years due to the rise in remote work, which has facilitated greater paternal visibility in the preschool environment. Concurrently, however, the educators admitted that they find it more comfortable to approach mothers regarding various issues, thereby indicating that they do not actively seek to engage fathers in preschool affairs. Yara observed that mothers are more dominant, attributing this to a heightened maternal protective instinct and the ease of communication between women, stating: "Mothers are the more dominant ones. This connects back to the maternal need and instinct—the feeling of 'these are my children, I don't want them to get hurt.' This is a defense mechanism frequently observed in women, which explains the higher involvement of mothers in their children's lives. Furthermore, since most preschool teachers are women, it is often easier for one woman to speak with another woman about matters concerning the child."

Malak, a Muslim preschool teacher, attempts to disrupt the norm of exclusive maternal involvement but frequently encounters structural resistance, remarking: "There were several instances where fathers would pick up the child from preschool, and when I wanted to share something regarding the child, they would tell me, 'Send a message to the mother, to the mother.'" Conversely, Nadia notes that while mothers remain significantly more involved, subtle shifts toward paternal engagement are beginning to emerge, observing: "The mothers are the ones who send messages, express greater interest, and converse with me in the morning or at the end of the day. They also assume the educational role at home. When I need assistance or request items for the preschool, I automatically turn to the mothers first. At the same time, fathers are also involved, which is a very important and prominent element; I think this involvement is gradually rising, which is very exciting for me... We hosted a flower arrangement workshop, and a few mothers were unable to attend. In their place, four fathers came."

Michaela laments that despite the study taking place in 2026, societal perceptions remain largely unchanged from a century ago, noting: "When a father is highly involved, it is usually because the mother is out of the picture for one reason or another. For instance, I have a student in class where I communicate exclusively with the father, simply because the mother does not speak Hebrew. Alternatively, divorced fathers often want to be exceptionally involved, and that is when we observe greater paternal participation."

Sofia conceptualizes maternal involvement through an economic framework, illustrating that mothers of young children often prioritize child-rearing duties due to labor market positioning, explaining: "When I interview parents for the first time before they enroll in the preschool, I casually ask about their occupations… I usually hear that the father is employed while the mother is between jobs, currently raising the children, or caring for a small infant. Consequently, she has more flexibility and availability to come to the preschool than the father. Furthermore, since she functions as the primary caregiver most of the time, she feels a greater need for pedagogical tools and institutional involvement than the father, who arrives home from work at 8:00 PM. When he sees the child at that hour, what is he going to say to me? Why would he worry about a minor scratch at 8:00 PM? The mother would have already noticed it much earlier."

In addition to the gendered nature of parental involvement, the interviews revealed distinct gender dynamics regarding children's play within the preschool. The teachers explicitly noted that they encourage children to explore all classroom environments and routinely reinforce that no toy is inherently designated for boys or girls. In practice, however, specific spaces and activities continue to attract children based on their sex. This reality is detailed by Nadia, who stated: "Typically, boys gravitate more toward block play, toy cars, motor games, power play, and free outdoor activities like soccer. Girls are more drawn to the doll corner, the play kitchen, arts and crafts, or dressing up in formal dresses and costumes. However, I try not to restrict them at all. I make sure to allow them independent exploration. If I see a girl who wants to build or a boy who wants to play with dolls, I encourage it in a natural manner." This persistent self-segregation highlights a critical juncture for preschool social awareness and relationship skills within the SEL framework. When children restrict their play to gender-typical domains, they miss vital opportunities for cross-gender peer interactions. These diverse interactions are foundational for developing broad-based empathy, cooperative problem-solving, and the ability to understand perspectives outside their immediate gender in-group.

Regarding creative activities, differences in content emerged between boys and girls, aligning with gendered costume choices; for example, girls predominantly draw hearts and unicorns, whereas boys draw superheroes. Dikla observes differences primarily in temperament and behavioral disposition, noting: "There are boys who are much more occupied with creative work, but most boys are more focused on running and releasing energy compared to the girls. Arts and crafts tables will generally have more girls than boys, as will other work-tables." Dua links contemporary violence within Arab society to boys' play patterns, contrasting this with girls' behaviors, stating: "There is a prevalent phenomenon in our preschool related to what the children hear about the violence and homicides within our society. They mimic the perpetrators, going 'boom boom boom' and forming weapons with their hands. When we observe such a scenario, we immediately halt the play, guiding them that this is wrong, mistaken, and unacceptable behavior. We understand that societal influences compel them to behave this way. In contrast, the girls' style of play is highly serene; they take the baby doll, feed it, bathe it, put it to bed, and so forth." These stark behavioral dichotomies—characterizing boys by kinetic energy and externalized aggression, and girls by serenity and domestic nurturing—underscore how gender socialization can constrict a child's holistic development of self-awareness. When educators accept these dispositions as fixed innate realities rather than socialized patterns, they risk reinforcing a narrow emotional and behavioral repertoire. From an SEL perspective, expanding equity in the classroom requires actively encouraging boys to engage in quiet, reflective emotional expression at work-tables, while ensuring girls are empowered to occupy physical space and practice assertive agency in gross-motor play.

Some preschool teachers explain that they must navigate a fine line between respecting the patriarchal values of the children's community and their desire to broaden the children's cognitive horizons. However, two educators reported that when a boy exclusively engages in games traditionally associated with girls, they refer the case to a professional, viewing it as deviant behavior. Dua explained this intervention path, noting: "If we notice that he is constantly playing only with that doll and strictly within the domain of girls' games, it signals to me that we need to intervene and gradually steer him toward other games. If he does not respond and refuses, we then refer him to a social worker or another professional to examine the matter." Hilda similarly notes that a boy who plays exclusively with girls or focuses solely on dolls raises a red flag for her, representing a situation that warrants psychological intervention, remarking: "In certain cases, we comment and intervene. For instance, with boys who only want to play with girls and engage in girls' games; this is likely due to a lack of awareness among the parents, so we bring it to the parents' attention."

Nili, conversely, presents a different reality resulting from the disappearance of physical toys from children's homes in an era that sanctifies screen time, observing: "Socio-dramatic games, all the dolls and props, involve both boys and girls, because I think they no longer have the opportunity to play with them at home." According to her, boys know they face punishment at home if caught playing with dolls, and consequently, the preschool functions as the sole environment where they allow themselves to participate in doll play. Likewise, Nili points out that when a boy plays with or wears items perceived as female-designated, it causes greater societal discomfort than when a girl disrupts traditional gender norms, explaining: "I think it is much more conspicuous when a boy leans in a feminine direction than when a girl leans in a masculine direction. If a girl plays soccer or wears a soccer jersey, it appears less—I don't like the word 'weird'—but it looks less divergent. I don't know why it seems more difficult when a boy diverges from his designated track."

Half of the interviewed preschool teachers reported experiencing conflicts with parents resulting from children's gendered choices. These confrontations occurred primarily when a male child was photographed wearing a female-designated costume or was observed occupying a space perceived as feminine, as one educator recalled: "A father came to pick up his son from preschool and was shocked to see him wearing a dress in the costume corner. He became highly upset and told his child in front of all the other children: 'What are you doing, and why are you dressed like a girl? This is inappropriate for boys.' I immediately stepped in, asked him to step aside for a moment, and tried to speak with him calmly. I explained that at this age, children are simply playing, imagining, and exploring, and it does not imply anything beyond that." Throughout these conflicts, the teachers expressed a uniform professional stance: children should have the autonomy to select their own play activities. Consequently, they reject parental demands to keep children from disrupting gender norms.

Furthermore, these episodes demand a high degree of adult social–emotional competence from the educators themselves. De-escalating a highly charged, public confrontation requires sophisticated emotional regulation and conflict-management skills. By calmly separating the parent and reframing the behavior as normative developmental exploration, the teacher not only models effective relationship skills under pressure, but also establishes a firm boundary that prioritizes the child's emotional well-being over adult ideological discomfort.

Sara reported that while she has not faced overt confrontations regarding gender, parents frequently consult her throughout her career when their children do not conform to gender stereotypes, stating: "Over my years in the profession, there have been parents here and there who asked, 'Do you think he is okay? He plays in the doll corner all the time, he only plays with the girls—do you think he is developing normally?'" Furthermore, preschool children frequently share the domestic gender discourse they encounter at home

with their teachers. For example, Sara recalled: "A boy came up to me in the yard and said, 'Sara, you know, I am really angry with my mother.' I asked him why, and he replied, 'Because I want to be a girl and dress up like a girl, and she won't let me.' I then spoke with her and said, 'Give him this one opportunity for Purim; it's a holiday where he can be someone else. If he wants to be a girl, give him that chance.' She panicked and said, 'Absolutely not, why would he dress up as a girl? Do you think he has certain tendencies?'" According to the educators, children's gendered choices also impact parental dynamics. Malak noted a similar structural enforcement within the home, observing: "A mother requested that I prevent her son from playing with dolls. She wanted me to encourage him to play boys' games and associate exclusively with boys. She explained that when the child shares at home that he plays with dolls, the father becomes incredibly angry. It was actually the father who demanded that the mother make this request." One of the most prevalent rituals in Jewish preschools is the Shabbat reception ceremony. Some preschool teachers note that they conduct the ceremony using the gender-neutral plural title "Shabbat Welcomers" (Mekablei HaShabbat), which allows the pairing to occasionally consist of two girls or two boys. Conversely, other educators strictly maintain the traditional distinction between the female and male roles—the "Shabbat Mother" (Mekabelet HaShabbat) and "Shabbat Father" (Mekabel HaShabbat)—explicitly dividing the ritual based on adult gender roles.

Dikla detailed this traditional implementation alongside a minor allowance for individual expression, noting: "There will always be a female and a male Shabbat welcomer. However, I can say that I always ask them what they want to wear. That is to say, if a girl tells me she wants to wear a kippah, I won't say anything to her, and she will wear a kippah. She won't wear the headscarf, for example. I give them the choice of what they want to wear. The girls almost always choose the headscarf and the boys the kippah, but one year a girl told me, 'I want to wear a kippah.' I told her, 'Go ahead,' and she did indeed wear it."

3.3. Third Theme: Feminist Pedagogy

Preschool teachers develop their feminist pedagogy based on how they conceptualize feminism and the gendered climate within their classrooms. Because the vast majority did not receive formal training on gender dimensions in early childhood education, they anchor their feminist pedagogy in discourse and the encouragement of open-ended exploration rather than structured lesson plans. Furthermore, in response to parental criticism, many educators choose to downplay or minimize the subject.

The discourse opened with the teachers reflecting on the placement of gender issues within their professional training. Several educators noted that they received no training to address this domain—neither during their initial teacher-training programs nor through subsequent professional development courses, where the primary emphasis remains on managing challenging student behaviors. Yara attributes this instructional absence to a lack of pedagogical tools, stating: "To be honest, I was not provided with specific tools regarding gender. Most of my management of these issues stems from my personal worldview, my experience, and consultations with school counselors, supervisors, or other preschool teachers. I believe this is a field where educators severely lack actionable tools." Michaela shares that as a preschool teacher, she operates within a society that pressures her to "be pretty and stay quiet." She notes that she was never trained in this area across both of her academic degrees. However, because she was raised in an empowering household, she implements the principles of empowerment she received from her parents within her preschool classroom. Similarly, Sofia explains that she instills gender awareness as a corrective response to childhood trauma she experienced as an immigrant child, recalling: "When I arrived at preschool, I was completely excluded. They rejected my language, and they saw me as different. I still remember that feeling." Hence, she implements a

psychological correction that allows children to fully express themselves culturally and gender-wise.

This reliance on personal history underscores a critical tenet of adult social–emotional competence: when systemic, structural training on equity and gender is absent, educators must instinctively depend on their own internal self-awareness and emotional frameworks to navigate complex classroom dynamics. This lack of standardized pedagogical preparation forces teachers to operate as intuitive practitioners, translating their personal worldviews and reflective capacities into ad hoc SEL interventions. While this allows for deeply authentic teaching, it also creates an uneven landscape where children's socio-emotional support concerning identity depends entirely on the unique personal histories and emotional maturity of their teachers.

Those who did receive institutional guidance in the field note the value of inclusive pedagogical frameworks. For instance, Michal remarked: "We learned to use egalitarian language that encourages inclusion, creating an environment where every child feels secure and a sense of belonging." The linguistic dimension appeared prominently in several teachers' narratives. They describe a transition away from non-egalitarian framing—such as "ask your mother"—toward a lexicon adapted to all family configurations present in contemporary society. Maayan notes: "As my experience grew, I realized how critical it is to be sensitive to the unique reality from which each child arrives. In the beginning of my career, I automatically used phrases like 'show this to mom and dad.' Today, I am far more aware that this is not the reality for all children."

Conversely, an educator who received a designated topic course during her academic degree—where she studied a specific narrative or other didactic tools that promote gender perceptions with which she personally concurs—continues to utilize it. In an era where addressing gender in early childhood education is heavily downplayed, parents serve as a primary catalyst exposing preschool teachers to gender diversity. For instance, when Yara worked in a Jewish preschool, she was exposed for the first time to a family headed by two fathers, who explicitly assumed the responsibility of mediating their family structure to her, recalling: "I had a case involving a family with two fathers. One of them called me at the beginning of the year to provide background on the child and their family. He explained how the household was structured and what role each of them assumed at home." The operationalization of feminist pedagogy within early childhood settings may be mapped across several core dimensions: constructing an egalitarian environment (both physically and conceptually), pedagogical mediation, exploring diverse family models, and the direct transmission of gender concepts. Sofia underscores the design of the classroom layout as a primary mechanism for conveying progressive gender perceptions to the children, explaining: "This is a brand-new preschool. When I designed the classroom layout, I specifically focused on this topic; it preoccupied me because I wanted all learning spaces to be accessible to everyone. For example, in my previous preschool—which was an existing classroom I took over—there was a designated beauty parlor corner. In my current classroom, there is no beauty corner. Why is that? Because I did not want the girls to cluster exclusively there and prevent it from serving the entire class. When I built this preschool from scratch, I relied heavily on an evaluation manual—I cannot recall the exact name of the book—but it demonstrates quality metrics in classroom environmental design. When you construct a preschool from the ground up, you must intentionally plan for all these dimensions, and I specifically wanted to use neutral colors rather than gendered palettes."

Nadia does not explicitly include gender in her lesson planning; instead, she limits her educational role to real-time mediation when the issue organically arises, stating: "When stereotypical discourse surfaces among the children—such as statements like 'you are playing a girls' game' or 'that isn't a boys' toy'—I immediately mediate the scenario through

open dialogue. I explain and question them: 'Why do you believe this game is suited for boys and not for girls?' I attempt to bridge and mediate this in a way that articulates freedom of expression to each child, emphasizing that every child possesses the autonomy to choose what to play with and that no games are inherently segregated by sex." Nadia's reliance on real-time mediation illustrates a commitment to situational socio-emotional scaffolding. Her use of open dialogue to challenge stereotypical discourse fosters critical thinking and responsible decision-making in the exact moment a conflict occurs. However, SEL frameworks suggest that relying strictly on interventions can limit the internalization of these values. While immediate boundary-setting protects the psychological safety of the classroom ecosystem, pairing these reactive strategies with proactive, planned SEL lessons on diversity and self-expression is necessary to completely dismantle deeply ingrained gender biases before they manifest as peer exclusion.

For these educators, a clear intersection exists between feminist pedagogy and self-efficacy discourse. This is illustrated by Nili, who defines her role simply as telling them that they are capable, intelligent, and competent, and that every individual is uniquely talented. Finally, several preschool teachers reported that they intentionally allow children to portray cross-gender roles in holiday theatrical performances, resulting in girls playing King Ahasuerus or boys portraying Pharaoh's daughter.

The preschool teachers testify that a clash occasionally occurs between liberal discourse and stereotypical motifs within their practice. Nili notes that although she dialogues with the children about gender equality, she occasionally falls back into traditional patterns: "I admit that what I stumble on in the preschool is color association. For example, on their drawing albums, I write the boys' names in light blue and the girls' names in pink. There are deeply ingrained templates that are difficult to break free from." The singular theme addressed by all participating teachers was the concept of family. Every educator engages in this topic, particularly in view of the growing diversity of family structures—even within traditional communities. However, the pedagogical approach to this subject remains superficial, driven both by apprehension regarding parental backlash and the developmental belief that the children are too young to be exposed to the full spectrum of family models.

Sigal does not deal with alternative family structures, stating: "We do not have any father-father or mother-mother configurations in our class. By virtue of my role, I align myself with the parents' requests not to expose the children to diverse family models when there is no immediate necessity." She further notes that while one of the children in her class has a transgender sibling, the child is too young to comprehend the situation. In contrast, Maayan suggests that addressing family configurations requires structural sensitivity, which warrants a more generalized approach, explaining: "Some children have divorced parents, some live with a single parent, and others have more complex backgrounds. Therefore, I try to ensure that activities do not revolve strictly around a mother and a father, but rather around the significant figures in the child's life." Similarly, Michaela avoids direct instruction on family typologies, remarking: "I do not teach Family Day in the preschool. First of all, I am still furious that they took away Mother's Day and turned it into Family Day... My intention is not to make it artificial. I don't walk into the classroom and say, 'Hey, today we are learning about different family types,' because that yields no educational value. This entire pedagogical discourse needs to happen organically around specific incidents. That is the only way we learn. Have I ever explicitly spoken about different family types? No." In a similar vein, Linoy reads the children's book "The Rabbit Listened" on Family Day, to demonstrate that active listening is a vital component within a family.

Avirama notes that while the children in her classroom come from diverse family backgrounds—including heterosexual, same-sex, and single-parent households—she does

not directly mediate the subject due to their young age of 3 to 4 years old. Instead, she utilizes children's literature depicting family structures found in nature among animals and birds. On Family Day, each child presents photographs of their own family to their peers, effectively shifting the burden of explanation onto the child.

Some of the preschool teachers have children with same-sex parents in their classrooms. Dikla notes that this year, she has a child with two mothers. The discourse surrounding this topic typically arises from the children themselves, who point out that "she doesn't have a father," to which Dikla responds by explaining that this is perfectly fine. Similarly, other educators who report having same-sex family configurations in their classrooms delegate the responsibility of pedagogical mediation to the child of those same-sex parents. The child shares their family structure, navigates peer interactions, and answers questions from other students, while the teacher simply affirms that everything is fine. Sapir shares that she only addresses the diversity of family models during years when children with same-sex parents are actively enrolled in her classroom, explaining: "I focused on it when I had such families in my class—when it was a living part of our classroom environment, when I had children whose parents and families fit that structure. I would address it during our family-focused activities. I also modified our Shabbat ritual during those years; we would use the term 'Shabbat Welcomers' instead of 'Shabbat Mother' and 'Shabbat Father.' We would frame it as 'Mother and Mother' or 'Father and Father,' and refer to them collectively as the Shabbat Welcomers."

From an SEL perspective, this reactive and selective approach to family diversity directly impacts the development of social awareness and peer empathy. By treating non-traditional family structures as topics to be mediated only when 'actively enrolled', educators inadvertently treat marginalized identities as situational exceptions rather than normative variations. SEL literature demonstrates that an inclusive classroom climate requires proactive, ongoing representations of diversity. When representation is conditional, it can subtly signal to children that their family structures are peripheral, potentially undermining their foundational self-awareness and sense of structural belonging.

Regarding direct instruction, the teachers reported very minimal use of structured, premeditated lesson plans designed to cultivate gender equity among the children. Virtually all implemented lesson plans of this nature focus on introducing an inspiring woman. The curated roster of women includes literary creators such as Lea Goldberg, Datia Ben-Dror, Rinat Hoffer, Mirjam Roth, and Naomi Shemer; figures tied to a nationalist ethos such as Hannah Szenes and Golda Meir; and highly successful figures within traditional communities, such as Grandma Jamila and Rebbetzin Yemima Mizrachi. Occasionally, a teacher instructs children on the achievements of a woman she perceives as embodying feminist values, though the narrative framework remains complex in practice. Naama notes: "We focus extensively on the figure of Queen Esther, examining what she accomplished for the Jewish people and how she ultimately saved the Jewish nation."

Similarly, Dina shares: "I love to tell them about Ruth Handler, who invented the Barbie doll. I explain to them that in the past, dolls were predominantly babies, and she realized that children also want to imagine themselves as doctors, scientists, astronauts, or anything else. Through her story, I try to convey the message that anyone can dream and achieve, regardless of whether they are a boy or a girl." At times, dwelling on a feminist figure provokes parental backlash; Michaela recalls a formal complaint filed against her after she delivered a series of lesson plans on pioneering women, noting: "One of the mothers claimed that this was unacceptable, arguing that I am too feminist, that I am marginalizing boys, and that I want to elevate women at the expense of boys. She explicitly complained about it."

4. Discussion

The vast majority of the preschool teachers in this study do not self-identify as feminists. While they define feminism as equality between men and women—primarily within socio-economic dimensions—they omit other critical feminist concepts. This prevalent liberal feminist discourse among educators, distinct from a radical feminist paradigm (Rowland & Klein, 1996), mirrors the multiculturalism of preschool teachers, which is characterized by fragmented cultural groups—some highly conservative (Kush Zohar & Haruvi, 2017). Consequently, because the participating preschool teachers represent diverse sectors of the population, most internalize deeply conservative values. This discrepancy between teacher preparation and field demands may reflect a broader systemic disconnect between the theoretical study of gender and its practical application in kindergarten classrooms. Empirical evidence supports this misalignment, demonstrating that theoretical frameworks taught in training institutions frequently fail to translate into effective preschool pedagogy (Narváez-Prosser et al., 2025). Furthermore, a notable segment of preschool educators does not self-identify as feminist; consequently, they often perceive feminist pedagogy and gender discourse as outside the scope of their professional responsibilities.

In alignment with this training gap, the educators' accounts of their personal lives reveal highly traditional domestic environments. This exposes a notable cognitive dissonance. Although some of the teachers claim to actively promote gender equality between boys and girls within the preschool class, they simultaneously participate in a gendered division of labor at home, where they assume sole responsibility for domestic labor while their male partners function as the primary breadwinners. Ziegelboim (2019) previously identified an ambivalent narrative within early childhood educational programs that juxtaposes chauvinistic and feminist themes; however, this study reveals a correlation between curricular materials and the educators who deliver them. Although these preschool teachers explicitly endorse gender equality, several paradoxically assert that men are fundamentally unsuited for early childhood education, claiming that their own stereotypical feminine attributes render women superior educators.

Only a minority of the preschool teachers maintained that men could serve as successful early childhood educators, a view primarily anchored in personal familiarity with male role models, such as family members or male colleagues. Consequently, the preschool teaching profession—which remains female-dominated (OECD, 2020)—is subjectively experienced and structurally reinforced as an exclusively female domain. Notably, the educators attribute this gender compatibility to the caregiving and nurturing components of early childhood education while disregarding the complex administrative and managerial dimensions of their role. This pattern reinforces previous empirical research highlighting the low professional status and limited administrative self-perception among preschool teachers (Alezra, 2022). Furthermore, they note that low wage structures actively deter male candidates, who face persistent societal pressures to function as primary household earners. The participating educators confirm that maternal involvement overwhelmingly dominates interaction with the preschool. This pattern directly reflects the patriarchal norms, which relegate child-rearing to the female domestic sphere. However, the novel contribution of this study lies in unmasking the educators' agency in this dynamic: the preschool teachers themselves admit to feeling significantly more comfortable communicating with mothers rather than fathers. Through this practice, educators implicitly perpetuate an institutional cycle that systematically marginalizes fathers and reinforces their exclusion from their children's early educational frameworks and development.

In alignment with the aforementioned dynamics, the preschool teachers who maintain egalitarian perspectives actively clarify to early-childhood children that all learning spaces and toys are equally accessible to both boys and girls, as shown in previous research (Düzen,

2026). This practice occasionally triggers overt conflicts between educators and parents, predominantly regarding instances where boys choose to play with girls or engage in activities stereotypically designated as feminine (Wolter et al., 2015). The distinct gendering that characterizes children's toys and costumes demonstrates a deep-seated internalization of chauvinistic norms even during early childhood (Barak-Brandes, 2023). Consequently, these findings suggest that a portion of children who disrupt rigid gender norms perceive the preschool as a safe environment to do so, whereas their domestic environments remain restrictive. This dichotomy underscores how intentional pedagogical strategies can reduce gender stereotypes among children (Boateng et al., 2024; Gogoi & Begum, 2024; Li, 2023).

While prior research indicated that preschool teachers actively expect girls to exhibit stereotypical feminine behaviors (Meland & Kaltvedt, 2019), the current study uncovers a contrasting reality: most participating educators explicitly convey to children that no space or play activity is barred to them based on sex. The preschool teachers in this study are divided into two distinct ideological cohorts: those who maintain that boys should be barred from engaging with toys stereotypically associated with girls—such as dolls and domestic play sets—versus those who argue that they must intentionally steer boys away from hyper-masculine behaviors due to the chauvinistic and macho socialization which the children absorb from their environment.

These findings directly underscore the structural and cultural dimensions of Social–Emotional Learning (SEL). Preschool SEL frameworks must be structurally tailored to be culturally relevant to the children's backgrounds, highlighting an urgent need for professional teacher-training programs that equip educators to implement SEL within a multicultural approach (Mahfouz et al., 2025). These professional training frameworks must address the inherent tension between (part of) the educator's progressive stance and the traditional values of the child's broader community, while also integrating the children's parents into the process. Although preschool teachers frequently experience apprehension regarding parental conflict, failing to establish parents as partners in this pedagogical shift inherently hinders children's socio-emotional development (McClelland et al., 2017). This friction likely accounts for the systemic decision among educators to minimize the implementation of an explicit feminist pedagogy (Gur-Ziv, 2013). The persistent anxiety that parents will react defensively to messages contradicting their traditional worldviews renders the feminist pedagogy of preschool teachers highly fragmented. It routinely omits foundational discussions regarding women's contemporary societal roles and feminist history, limiting itself instead to using inclusive language, designing a physically enabling classroom layout, and making structured adjustments to holiday celebrations to ensure that both sexes achieve personal expression.

Training educational staff to mediate Social–Emotional Learning (SEL) concepts must precede the implementation of curricular content for children (McClelland et al., 2017). The gender dimension within preschools demonstrates that professional training for teachers is critical, both for providing them with the necessary tools to formulate a feminist pedagogy and for enabling them to navigate professional dialogues with parents who frequently hold conservative gender norms (Narváez-Prosser et al., 2025). As Jagers et al. (2025) argue, it is critical that SEL engage in identity, belonging, power dynamics, and social norms. Consequently, it is essential for early childhood settings to refine the meaning of identity, not only within a national context as is currently practiced (Ziegelboim, 2019), but also along gendered perspectives, specifically what it means to be a boy or a girl. This involves mediating concepts such as subversion of traditional gender roles, introducing pioneering women, and fostering self-awareness among educators regarding their own biases in how they interact with male and female children (Meland & Kaltvedt, 2019).

Contrary to prior research findings (Segatto & Dal Ben, 2019), the preschool teachers in this study do not utilize narratives or children's creative works as catalysts to address gender issues. Instead, they demonstrate a marked preference for reactive interventions during moments of crisis, relying on corrective statements asserting that no toys are restricted by sex. To deepen pedagogical impact, educators should actively utilize children's original artwork and creations. Structural transformations in hegemonic family configurations—such as the rising prevalence of divorce and the emergence of same-sex family structures—have not fundamentally altered the preschool discourse on this topic. Preschool teachers exhibit a clear preference for allowing children to narrate their own family backgrounds, effectively shifting the role of mediator onto the child. While this child-led mediation is valuable and generally well-received by the peer group, it is critical to reinforce it through structural pedagogical measures. These include displaying visual representations of diverse family models, integrating children's literature that portrays varied family structures, and introducing songs that reflect the lived experiences of children from non-traditional households (Rudin, 2024).

Moreover, gender diversity was not considered part of the original inclusiveness ideology. While children with special needs are at the center of inclusive discourse, children who subvert gender norms, or who belong to a family with a non-hegemonic structure, are perceived merely as different; they do not prompt preschool teachers to design a new pedagogy. This fact demonstrates the need for a new, deeper definition of inclusive education—one that will acknowledge gender as a meaningful factor when designing inclusive pedagogy.

In conclusion, a broader insight overshadows the entire study: preschool teachers generally lack a deeply internalized feminist consciousness. This absence may reflect the broader fragility of feminism and progressive values nowadays. Alternatively, it may stem from the educators' anxiety that an explicitly feminist identity would conflict with their professional mandate to transmit dominant, hegemonic societal values (Turin, 2014). This intersection underscores the critical role of Social–Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks for both educators and students. Prior to implementing a feminist pedagogy, teacher-training institutions must deepen engagement with the educators' own gender identities during their academic studies. This reflection should be positioned as a core component of their educational philosophy and their positioning as women operating within an exclusively female professional field. The findings reveal a distinct absence of pedagogical space for gender exploration and expression within the early childhood education system (as opposed to sex roles). The deeper constructs of 'boy' and 'girl' are seldom mentioned by teachers in order to reflect their diverse and complex realizations. Consequently, addressing gender identity within the curriculum emerges as a critical prerequisite for fostering children's identity development and socio-emotional competence.

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the empirical scope was confined to qualitative interviews with 30 Israeli kindergarten teachers, focusing specifically on their gender perceptions and the role of gender within the kindergarten environment. While this sample size offered rich, nuanced insights into the educators' articulated gendered views and pedagogical realities, it naturally limits the statistical generalizability of the findings across wider educational contexts. Second, the study's focus on a single national setting reflects specific socio-cultural, political, and institutional conditions unique to the Israeli early childhood education system. Consequently, future research would benefit from expanding this inquiry through cross-national and comparative designs, examining how kindergarten teachers' gender perceptions and gender-related educational practices manifest in other countries and under diverse educational policy frameworks.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of Gordon Academic College of Education (protocol code ETH–2026–0048, 1 November 2025).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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