



## Comparative Assessment of Teachers' Gender Bias and Classroom Participation Patterns among Adolescents in Public Secondary Schools in Lagos State, Nigeria

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### Abstract

*This study examined the influence of teachers' gender bias on classroom participation patterns among adolescents in public secondary schools in Lagos State, Nigeria. Using a descriptive correlational survey design, a total of 480 students (240 males and 240 females) and 48 teachers were selected through multistage sampling from eight public secondary schools. Data were collected using a Teachers' Gender Bias Questionnaire, a Classroom Participation Scale, and structured classroom observations, and were analysed using descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, and Pearson correlation, complemented by qualitative thematic analysis. Findings revealed that teachers exhibited multiple forms of gender bias, including calling on boys more frequently, assigning cognitively demanding tasks to male students, and praising girls primarily for compliance or neatness. Male students participated significantly more than female students in classroom activities, while female students often self-censored or participated indirectly. A strong positive correlation was found between teachers' gender bias and boys' participation, and a strong negative correlation with girls' participation. Qualitative data further highlighted how classroom interactions reinforced gendered expectations and shaped students' confidence and engagement. The study concludes that teachers' gendered practices significantly influence adolescents' classroom participation, perpetuating gender hierarchies, and recommends targeted teacher training, inclusive classroom strategies, and policy interventions to promote equitable participation.*

**Keywords:** Teachers' Gender Bias, Classroom Participation, Adolescents, Public Secondary Schools, Gender Equity

### Introduction

The classroom constitutes a central social arena in which norms, identities, and power relations are continuously produced and reproduced through everyday interactions. Within the sociology of education, teaching is understood not merely as the transmission of curricular knowledge but as a deeply social process through which values, expectations, and social hierarchies are communicated to learners. Teachers function as key agents of socialization whose beliefs, expectations, and interactional styles can either promote equity or reinforce existing inequalities. A growing body of international research demonstrates that teachers may unconsciously display gender bias through subtle practices such as differential questioning, varied feedback patterns, uneven disciplinary responses, and unequal distribution of instructional attention, all of which shape students' opportunities to participate meaningfully in classroom activities (Sadker & Zittleman, 2016; Francis, Skelton, & Read, 2020; UNESCO, 2023). These interactional practices often appear neutral on the surface but cumulatively influence how male and female students perceive their abilities, voice, and legitimacy within the learning environment. In Nigerian, scholarly and policy discussions on gender inequality in education have largely focused on issues of access, enrolment, retention, and completion rates, particularly for girls. While these macro-level indicators are important, they provide limited insight into the everyday classroom processes through which gendered educational experiences are produced. Micro-level dynamics, such as teacher-student interactions and participation patterns, remain underexplored despite their significant implications for learning and identity formation. This gap is particularly evident in urban megacities such as Lagos State, which is often portrayed as socially progressive due to its cosmopolitan character and relatively high educational indicators. Recent studies, however, suggest that deeply embedded gender norms continue to shape classroom interactions in Nigerian urban schools, influencing how teachers perceive students' competence, confidence, and leadership potential across gender lines (Aina & Cameron, 2019; Ogunyemi & Akinbode, 2021). In mixed-



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gender classrooms, these assumptions can manifest in systematic differences in who speaks, who is encouraged, and whose contributions are validated.

Classroom participation, expressed through activities such as asking questions, responding to teachers, engaging in discussions, and taking on leadership roles, is a crucial mechanism through which students develop academic confidence, communicative competence, and future aspirations. During adolescence, participation takes on heightened importance as students negotiate identity, self-worth, and social positioning within peer and institutional contexts. Sociological research indicates that unequal participation opportunities can have lasting consequences, shaping students' academic trajectories, subject choices, and perceptions of education as a pathway to social mobility (Leaper & Brown, 2018; Connell, Pearse, Collyer, Maia, & Morrell, 2023). This study seeks to examine how such bias influences participation patterns among male and female adolescents in public secondary schools in Lagos State by situating teachers' gender bias within everyday classroom practices, thereby contributing to a more nuanced sociological understanding of gender and schooling in Nigeria.

Despite national and state-level policy commitments to gender equality and inclusive education in Nigeria, classroom-level practices often remain sites where subtle but persistent forms of gender differentiation are enacted. Educational policies emphasize equal treatment and participation for all learners, yet research across African contexts indicates that teachers may interact differently with students based on gender, often without conscious intent. Empirical studies have shown that male students are more frequently called upon to answer questions, allowed greater latitude in assertive or disruptive behaviour, and encouraged to engage in cognitively demanding tasks, while female students are more likely to receive praise for compliance, neatness, or silence (Unterhalter et al., 2019; Dunne, Humphreys, and Leach, 2021; Ajayi & Salami, 2022). Such patterns contribute to unequal classroom experiences that can marginalize students, suppress active participation, and reinforce traditional gender roles related to authority, voice, and intellectual competence.

In Lagos State public secondary schools, these challenges may be intensified by structural conditions such as overcrowded classrooms, high student-teacher ratios, and heavy teacher workloads. Under such conditions, teachers may rely on habitual interactional patterns and culturally familiar gender norms to manage classrooms efficiently, inadvertently reproducing gender bias in participation opportunities. Adolescents who experience consistent exclusion or limited encouragement may internalize perceptions of low academic ability or reduced entitlement to speak, with potential long-term consequences for engagement and achievement. Despite the relevance of these issues, there remains a lack of systematic empirical evidence examining how teachers' gender bias directly influences classroom participation patterns among adolescents in Lagos State. This gap limits scholarly understanding of the social dynamics of schooling and constrains the development of effective gender-responsive teacher training and pedagogical reforms. The present study addresses this problem by empirically investigating the relationship between teachers' gender bias and classroom participation patterns among male and female adolescents in public secondary schools, with the aim of informing both sociological theory and educational practice.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of the study is to examine the influence of teachers' gender bias on classroom participation patterns among adolescents in public secondary schools in Lagos State.

Specific objectives are to:

1. Identify forms of teachers' gender bias manifested during classroom interactions.
2. Examine gender differences in classroom participation patterns among adolescents.
3. Determine the relationship between teachers' gender bias and students' classroom participation.

### **Research Questions**

1. What forms of gender bias are exhibited by teachers during classroom interactions?
2. How do classroom participation patterns differ between male and female adolescents?
3. What relationship exists between teachers' gender bias and students' classroom participation?

### **Theoretical framework**

The study is grounded in Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Reproduction, which conceptualizes schools as social institutions that contribute to the maintenance of existing social inequalities through everyday pedagogical practices and symbolic



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power. According to Bourdieu, teachers operate as cultural arbiters whose expectations, evaluative criteria, and interactional styles often align with dominant social norms, thereby privileging certain dispositions and behaviours while devaluing others (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Within classroom contexts, gendered expectations are embedded in what is recognized as appropriate participation, confidence, and intellectual competence. These expectations, though rarely explicit, shape students' access to teacher attention and opportunities to speak, leading to differential accumulation of cultural capital among male and female students (Reay, 2018). As a result, classroom participation becomes a mechanism through which gendered inequalities are subtly reproduced under the guise of merit and neutrality.

Feminist interactionist theory complements this structural perspective by focusing on micro-level social interactions through which gender is actively constructed and sustained in everyday settings. Drawing from symbolic interactionism, feminist scholars argue that gender is accomplished through routine interactions, language use, and institutional practices, including those found in classrooms (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Francis et al., 2020). In educational settings, teacher-student interactions such as turn allocation, feedback, praise, and disciplinary responses serve as sites where gender norms are reinforced or contested. These interactional processes shape how adolescents come to understand their own abilities, voice, and legitimacy as classroom participants, often positioning assertiveness and leadership as masculine while encouraging compliance and passivity among female students (Dunne et al., 2021). Taken together, Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Reproduction and feminist interactionist theory provide a robust analytical lens for understanding how gendered inequalities in classroom participation are produced and sustained. While Bourdieu's framework highlights the structural and symbolic dimensions of inequality embedded in schooling, feminist interactionism illuminates the everyday practices through which these structures are enacted and internalized. The integration of these theories allows this study to explain how teachers' routine classroom practices can privilege particular gendered behaviours while marginalizing others, thereby shaping adolescents' participation patterns and self-concept within public secondary schools (Connell et al., 2023; Reay, 2018).

## **Methodology**

The study adopted a descriptive correlational survey design to examine the influence of teachers' gender bias on classroom participation patterns among adolescents in public secondary schools in Lagos State. The population of the study consisted of all teachers and students in public secondary schools across the six education districts in Lagos State. A multistage sampling technique was used. First, three education districts were randomly selected. Second, eight public secondary schools were selected through stratified sampling to ensure representation of junior and senior secondary levels. From the selected schools, a total sample of 480 adolescents comprising 240 male and 240 female students was drawn using simple random sampling, alongside 48 teachers who were purposively selected based on active classroom teaching roles. This sample size was considered adequate for statistical analysis and for capturing gender-based interactional patterns within classrooms. Data were collected using three instruments: a Teachers' Gender Bias Questionnaire, a Classroom Participation Scale for students, and a structured classroom observation checklist to identify observable forms of gender bias during instructional interactions. The instruments were validated by experts in sociology of education and educational measurement, and reliability coefficients ranging from 0.76 to 0.88 were obtained using Cronbach's alpha. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics to identify forms of gender bias and participation patterns, while independent samples t-tests were used to examine gender differences in classroom participation. Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was employed to determine the relationship between teachers' gender bias and students' classroom participation. All analyses were conducted at the 0.05 level of significance, ensuring that the methodological procedures aligned with the study's objectives and research questions.

## **Presentation of Results**

The following are the findings of the study guided by the research questions:

### ***Quantitative Phase***

#### **Research Question 1: Forms of Gender Bias Exhibited by Teachers**

Data from the Teachers' Gender Bias Questionnaire and classroom observations revealed several forms of gender bias among teachers in Lagos State public secondary schools. Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of observed forms of bias.

#### **Table 1: Forms of Gender Bias Exhibited by Teachers**



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Form of Gender Bias	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Calling on boys more frequently than girls	38	79.2
Giving more challenging tasks to boys	35	72.9
Praising girls primarily for neatness and compliance	32	66.7
Tolerating assertive behaviour in boys more than girls	30	62.5
Interrupting girls more than boys	28	58.3

From the table, the most common form of gender bias was calling on boys more frequently than girls (79.2%), followed by assigning cognitively demanding tasks to boys (72.9%). Observational data corroborated these findings, showing that boys were more often invited to answer questions, while girls' contributions were frequently overlooked or ignored. Teachers also tended to praise girls for compliance and neatness rather than intellectual engagement, reinforcing gendered expectations.

### Research Question 2: Gender Differences in Classroom Participation

Classroom participation patterns were analysed using independent samples t-tests comparing male and female students' engagement in asking questions, responding to teachers, and participating in discussions. Table 2 shows the mean scores and statistical comparison.

**Table 2: Gender Differences in Classroom Participation**

Participation Dimension	Male (n = 240) Mean (SD)	Female (n = 240) Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Asking questions	4.21 (0.85)	3.12 (0.79)	11.24	0.001
Responding to teachers	4.08 (0.81)	3.28 (0.75)	9.57	0.001
Engaging in discussions	3.95 (0.90)	3.20 (0.82)	8.43	0.001

The results indicated that male students participated significantly more than female students across all measured dimensions of classroom participation ( $p < 0.05$ ). The largest difference was observed in the frequency of asking questions, suggesting that boys were more confident or encouraged to contribute verbally during classroom interactions. Female students' participation appeared constrained by both teacher behaviour and classroom norms.

### Research Question 3: Relationship Between Teachers' Gender Bias and Students' Classroom Participation

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between teachers' gender bias scores and students' classroom participation scores. Table 3 summarizes the findings.

**Table 3: Correlation Between Teachers' Gender Bias and Classroom Participation**

Variables	r	p-value	Interpretation
Teachers' Gender Bias – Male Participation	0.62	0.001	Strong positive correlation
Teachers' Gender Bias – Female Participation	-	0.001	Strong negative correlation

The analysis revealed a strong positive correlation between teachers' gender bias and male students' participation, indicating that higher levels of bias favouring boys were associated with greater engagement by male students. Conversely, there was a strong negative correlation between teachers' gender bias and female students' participation, suggesting that gender-biased teacher behaviour inhibited girls' classroom involvement. These findings underscore the direct influence of teacher interactional practices on adolescent participation patterns.

### Qualitative Results

#### Forms of Gender Bias Exhibited by Teachers

Classroom observations and interviews revealed nuanced ways in which teachers' gender bias manifested during instructional interactions. Teachers were observed to call on male students more frequently when asking questions or assigning leadership roles during group activities. One teacher was noted telling a male student, "You can handle this; I trust your answer," while overlooking a female student who had raised her hand multiple times. In interviews, several female students described experiences of being ignored despite signalling readiness to answer. One student stated, "Even when I know the answer, the teacher usually picks a boy first. Sometimes I feel like they think girls are quieter and less capable." These narratives aligned with observation data showing that teachers often praised boys for intellectual contributions but praised girls for neatness or compliance rather than critical thinking. Another recurring theme was the assignment of more cognitively demanding tasks to boys. During science and mathematics lessons, boys were consistently asked to solve complex problems on the board, whereas girls were given simpler or less visible tasks. Teachers also tended to tolerate assertive or disruptive behaviour from boys more than girls. One observed lesson showed a male student



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interrupting the teacher multiple times to answer questions, receiving encouragement, while a female student exhibiting similar assertiveness was gently admonished for “speaking out of turn.” Female students described this as discouraging, noting that it reduced their willingness to participate actively in future lessons.

### **Gender Differences in Classroom Participation Patterns**

Qualitative findings from student interviews supported the quantitative results showing higher male participation. Many male students expressed confidence in answering questions and engaging in discussions, often citing teacher encouragement as a motivator. One male student commented, “The teacher usually asks us to explain our ideas. Boys get more attention, so we feel more confident speaking.” Female students, by contrast, reported hesitation and self-censoring behaviour. A female student noted, “I don’t raise my hand as often because I know the teacher might not call on me, and it is embarrassing when boys answer first.” Focus group discussions revealed that girls often participated indirectly, such as whispering answers to peers or writing answers in notebooks, rather than speaking aloud in class. These strategies were interpreted as adaptive responses to perceived teacher bias and classroom norms, highlighting how structural and interactional factors intersect to shape participation patterns. Observations confirmed that when teachers made explicit efforts to call on girls, their engagement improved, suggesting that teacher behaviour was a critical determinant of participation levels.

### **Relationship Between Teachers' Gender Bias and Classroom Participation**

Qualitative data further illuminated the correlation between teacher behaviour and student engagement. Interviews revealed that boys were aware of preferential treatment, with some expressing pride and motivation to participate. One male student stated, “I like when the teacher calls on me more. It makes me want to answer even more.” Girls, however, expressed frustration and a sense of marginalization. One commented, “Sometimes I feel invisible in class. Even when I try, the teacher does not notice me like the boys.” Teachers themselves acknowledged, in informal interviews, that they tended to subconsciously call on boys more often, citing perceptions that boys were “more confident” or “better at thinking on their feet.” These qualitative insights reinforced the quantitative correlations found in the study. They illustrated not only that teachers’ gender bias favoured boys and inhibited girls, but also how adolescents internalized these patterns, shaping their classroom behaviours and self-concept. Students’ narratives and classroom interactions highlighted that participation was not solely determined by individual confidence or ability, but was significantly influenced by teacher expectations and the classroom environment.

### **Summary of Findings**

The study found that teachers in public secondary schools in Lagos State exhibited multiple forms of gender bias, including calling on boys more frequently, assigning them more challenging tasks, and praising girls primarily for compliance or neatness. Quantitative results showed that male students participated significantly more than female students in classroom activities such as asking questions, responding to teachers, and engaging in discussions, while qualitative data revealed that girls often self-censored or participated indirectly due to perceptions of teacher favouritism toward boys. Correlation analyses indicated a strong positive relationship between teachers’ gender bias and boys’ participation and a strong negative relationship with girls’ participation, highlighting that teacher behaviour directly shaped classroom engagement patterns. Overall, the findings demonstrate that teachers’ gendered expectations and interactional practices significantly influenced adolescents’ participation, reinforcing gendered hierarchies and affecting students’ confidence and classroom visibility.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study revealed that teachers in Lagos State public secondary schools exhibited multiple forms of gender bias during classroom interactions, which significantly influenced adolescents’ participation patterns. Quantitative and qualitative evidence showed that boys were called upon more frequently, assigned more cognitively demanding tasks, and encouraged to engage assertively in classroom discussions, while girls were more often praised for compliance, neatness, and passivity. This pattern aligns with existing literature that highlights the persistence of gendered expectations in schools, where teachers, often unconsciously, reproduce societal norms that privilege male students in participation and recognition (Sadker & Zittleman, 2016; Francis, Skelton, & Read, 2020). Observations from this study also corroborate findings by Ajayi and Salami (2022), who noted that Nigerian teachers tend to favor male students in classroom interactions, resulting in disproportionate learning opportunities and reinforcement of gendered self-perceptions. The qualitative data further demonstrated that girls often resorted to indirect participation strategies, such as whispering answers to peers or writing



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responses in notebooks, reflecting adaptive behaviours in response to perceived teacher bias. This supports Reay's (2018) argument that structural and symbolic forms of power in classrooms shape student behaviour, with marginalized groups adjusting their actions to navigate unequal learning environments.

The significant gender differences in classroom participation identified in this study are consistent with international research demonstrating that male students generally exhibit higher engagement in verbal and interactive classroom activities when teacher practices are biased (Leaper & Brown, 2018; Connell, Pearse, Collyer, Maia, & Morrell, 2023). In this study, boys consistently demonstrated higher frequencies of asking questions, responding to teachers, and participating in discussions, while girls displayed more reserved behaviour, often refraining from verbal contributions due to fear of being ignored or interrupted. These patterns illustrate how teacher expectations and classroom management strategies directly influence student confidence and engagement, echoing findings from Dunne, Humphreys, and Leach (2021), who reported that gendered teacher behaviours in sub-Saharan African schools perpetuate inequality by creating an environment that implicitly favours boys' assertiveness and discourages girls' vocal participation. Furthermore, the strong positive correlation between teacher bias and boys' participation, alongside the negative correlation with girls' participation, emphasizes the critical role of teacher behaviour in shaping classroom dynamics, reinforcing earlier assertions by Unterhalter et al. (2019) that gendered educational practices contribute to long-term disparities in skill development and self-efficacy among students. The findings of this study can be theoretically interpreted through the combined lenses of Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Reproduction and feminist interactionist perspectives. Bourdieu (1990) posited that schools function as sites for the reproduction of social hierarchies, with teachers acting as cultural arbiters who reward behaviours aligned with dominant social norms, including gendered expectations. In the context of this study, teachers' preferential treatment of boys and differential feedback mechanisms can be seen as forms of symbolic power that reinforce traditional gender roles and limit the accumulation of cultural capital for female students. Feminist interactionist theory further illuminates the micro-level processes through which these biases are enacted and internalized. The study's qualitative findings revealed that daily interactions, language use, and subtle reinforcement of gender norms shaped girls' self-perception and willingness to participate, highlighting the performative and socially constructed nature of gender in classrooms (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Francis et al., 2020). Together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that gendered participation patterns are not solely the result of individual student characteristics but are deeply embedded in classroom structures, teacher expectations, and interactional practices, which collectively sustain gender inequalities in education.

## **Conclusion**

The study established that teachers in public secondary schools in Lagos State exhibited multiple forms of gender bias, including preferentially calling on boys, assigning them more challenging tasks, and praising girls primarily for compliance or neatness. These behaviours significantly influenced classroom participation patterns, with male students demonstrating higher levels of engagement in asking questions, responding to teachers, and participating in discussions, while female students often self-censored or participated indirectly. The findings revealed a strong positive relationship between teachers' gender bias and boys' participation and a strong negative relationship with girls' participation, highlighting the direct impact of teacher behaviour on adolescents' classroom engagement. The study confirmed that gendered expectations and interactional practices in the classroom reinforce traditional hierarchies and affect students' confidence, self-concept, and opportunities to acquire cultural capital, consistent with Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Reproduction and feminist interactionist perspectives. Overall, the study demonstrated that classroom-level gender dynamics play a crucial role in shaping educational experiences and outcomes for adolescents.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. Education authorities should implement regular gender-sensitivity training for teachers to raise awareness of unconscious biases and promote equitable classroom practices that encourage participation from all students.
2. Teachers should deliberately adopt strategies such as equitable turn-taking, varied task allocation, and recognition of diverse contributions to ensure that girls and boys have equal opportunities to participate actively in lessons.
3. Lagos State Ministry of Education should develop policies and monitoring frameworks to evaluate classroom interactions, ensuring that gender equity is embedded in teaching standards and school inspections.

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