

Book Review

Gendered and Sexual Norms in Global South Early Childhood Education: Understanding Normative Discourses in Post-Colonial Contexts

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The anthology *Gendered and Sexual Norms in Global South Early Childhood Education: Understanding Normative Discourses in Post-Colonial Contexts* is aimed at researchers in education, sociology, anthropology, gender studies, as well as those interested in post-colonial studies and comparative education. The publication makes a significant contribution to understanding the processes of formation, reproduction, and negotiation of gender and sexual norms within early childhood education in post-colonial contexts of selected Global South countries. It reveals the complexity of local practices, challenges, and possibilities for their disruption, providing an interdisciplinary analysis that integrates pedagogical, sociological, cultural, and anthropological perspectives. The book offers a critical examination of colonial legacy in shaping contemporary educational norms across diverse cultural and social settings. Case studies from educational settings from Brazil, China, Pakistan, South Africa, and Vietnam deepen the understanding of the processes involved in the creation and maintenance of rules regarding gender and sexuality, rendering this work valuable to scholars, students, and other audiences interested in post-colonial and feminist discourse (Bhana et al., 2023).

Prof. Deevia Bhana (University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa), Dr. Yuwei Xu (University of Nottingham, UK), and Prof. Vina Adrian (Universitas Pendidikan, Indonesia) are scholars whose research foregrounds gender, sexuality, and early childhood education in postcolonial and Global South contexts. Their diverse backgrounds and international experiences bring critical, intersectional, and decolonial perspectives to the volume's focus on normative discourses in early education. The editorial team's expertise ensures that the book makes a significant contribution to raising scholars' awareness of the critical need to nurture and support research within the diverse landscape of the Global South.

The theoretical framework of the book is grounded in colonial and post-colonial theories, as well as approaches emphasising the complex interrelations between gender, sexuality, and colonial heritage, while considering social and cultural dynamics of the places. The authors highlight the role of individuals and communities in combating gender-related inequalities and injustices. The book also illustrates the interconnectedness of categories such as gender, culture, education, religion, masculinity, and politics, which reinforce norms concerning gender and sexuality and the processes of decolonising these phenomena within early childhood education.

The contributions of the scholars, who are researchers of the discussed contexts, explore everyday practices, memories, and experiences, analysing how constructions of gender and sexuality emerge from dominant discourses within complex socio-cultural and political frameworks. Their local and global expertise breaks the taboo of silence surrounding these topics in the early childhood education in the Global South. The book elucidates mechanisms

of reproduction and redefinition of sexual and gender norms, as well as their institutionalisation in early childhood education, emphasising the roles of power, history, and discourse. The publication problematises the ways and approaches in which gender and sexuality are revealed and regulated within post-colonial early childhood education, serving as a starting point for a critical analysis of the mechanisms that reproduce inequality. These norms are deeply embedded in historical colonial structures and are influenced by factors such as race, social status, colonial experiences, and contemporary economic inequalities and global challenges alongside the generation and reproduction of knowledge within the field under consideration (Abdi et al., 2024). While early childhood education often reinforces stereotypical gender roles, it simultaneously constitutes a space of negotiation and conflict surrounding socially constructed meanings of gender and sexuality (Warin, 2023). The authors emphasise the diversity of local conditions in the maintenance or disruption of these norms through grassroots initiatives, institutional practices, and the experiences of adults and children in and via education.

The academic work consists of an introduction and ten thematic chapters that can be examined separately, each within its specific context, or together as a collective study of the Global South. I consider them as ten individual case studies drawn from various contexts, and accordingly, will outline their key themes and academic foundations in the subsequent sections.

The first chapter by Emmanuel Mayeza, titled “‘He Calls me Babe, he says I’m Sexy’: Girls, Boys, and Sexualities in the Early Years”, analyses the formation of gender and sexuality in the early years of children’s lives in South Africa. Drawing on school ethnography, the author deconstructs the myth of childhood ‘sexual innocence’ and highlights the reinforcement of heteronormative and patriarchal patterns through school practices, referencing Judith Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity. The researcher posits that the school environment at the early stages of education constitutes a complex site for the construction of gender and sexuality, wherein both mechanisms of dominant norm reproduction and spaces of resistance and transformation coexist.

Raksha Janak, in the chapter titled “‘No! We Definitely Don’t Teach That Sort of Thing’: Teachers and the Childhood-Sexuality Assemblage in South Africa”, examines the approaches of early childhood educators towards childhood sexuality. The taboo surrounding the topic and the dominance of the concept of protecting innocence result in the exclusion of open dialogue about sexuality. Drawing on assemblage theory, this work highlights the multifaceted tensions emerging at the intersection of social constraints and pedagogical cultures, emphasising the need for critical reflection and transformation of educational practices. The researcher underlines that, despite official curricula, teachers often avoid the topic of childhood sexuality due to social and cultural constraints as well as personal beliefs. Consequently, the author advocates for the deconstruction of approaches to sexuality education by incorporating post-colonial contexts and establishing safe spaces for dialogue and learning about sexuality from early childhood onwards.

Audrey D’Souzy Juma, in the chapter ‘Beauty in Kainat (the Universe): Discourses of Heterosexuality in Pakistan’s Early Childhood Classrooms’, investigates how religious and patriarchal discourses uphold heteronormative norms within early childhood education in Pakistan. Despite teachers’ efforts involved in participatory action research to promote gender equality, cultural and religious barriers impede progress. The author notes that during participatory action research, teachers endeavoured to promote gender equality and disrupt dominant gender norms; however, their efforts encountered barriers stemming from deeply entrenched binary gender divisions and heteronormative pressures closely linked to local religious discourses. The study employs feminist poststructuralism and intersectionality frameworks to reveal the potentials and limitations of local actions within a context deeply dominated by traditional norms.

Ricardo Gonçalves de Sousa and Natania Aparecida da Silva Nogueira, in their chapter ‘Gender and Sexuality in Brazilian Early Childhood Education’, present the impact of decolonialism on the formation of gender and sexuality norms within early childhood education in Brazil. Based on qualitative research with teachers, they underscore the influence of cultural beliefs, lack of political strategies, and insufficient institutional support. Teachers struggle to balance maintaining traditional norms with attempts to promote equality-oriented attitudes. The identified research gap highlighted in this study pertains to the insufficient understanding of how the lack of political support and cultural barriers hinder the effective implementation of gender and sexuality-related topics in early childhood education, as well as how teachers navigate these challenges in Brazil.

In the chapter “‘The Pole is Sacred’: Disciplining Sexuality in Teaching Pole Dance to Brazilian Children’, Mariana Ghignatti Fagundes, Ariane Corrêa Pacheco, and André Luiza dos Santos Silvia analyse how childhood sexuality is disciplined through the teaching of pole dance. The concept of the ‘childhood universe’ (Cohn, 2005) is employed to describe a space where norms of corporeality and sexuality are shaped and regulated. The ‘sacredness of the pole’ symbolises the ambivalent position of pole dance within physical education, requiring disciplinary frameworks that enable children’s bodily expression while simultaneously safeguarding social expectations regarding innocence and propriety. The pole becomes a metaphorical site of negotiation between bodily expression and social expectations, demanding careful and responsible educational work from teachers.

Diloshini Govender's ethnographic analysis in 'Macho Males and Puppy Crushes' reveals how primary school teachers in South Africa operate with essentialist constructions of masculinity, leading to the naturalisation of aggressive behaviours among boys and the perpetuation of violence and gender inequalities embedded within the local context of male hegemony. The study highlights the urgent need for teacher education addressing the diversity of masculinities and gender hierarchies to promote inclusive and critical gender education that acknowledges the historical and social conditions of colonialism and apartheid.

In his chapter 'When Nature Calls: How Male Teachers Negotiate Gender and Care Work in Early Childhood Education', Vusi Msiza analyses the challenges confronted by male early childhood educators in the northeastern region of South Africa in relation to gender stereotypes. Based on masculinities theory (Connell, 2005) and employing narrative inquiry methodology, the author demonstrates that childcare is socially perceived as a 'feminine' occupation, leading men to avoid certain caregiving duties due to fear of false accusations, while paradoxically some assert superiority in childcare roles, thereby reinforcing sexist narratives.

Shaaisty Moosy, in the chapter 'Females Are Still the King: Men Can't Handle Teaching Young Children', focuses on the socio-cultural discourses that assign early childhood teaching predominantly to women. In the South African context, women dominate this sphere, generating specific forms of power that marginalise men and manifest in gender-related tensions and inequalities. According to the conducted research, in the South African context, women in early childhood education are perceived as better suited to working with young children, a perception rooted in entrenched gender ideologies and societal expectations related to gender roles.

The penultimate chapter, authored by Giang Nguyen Hoang Le, Fiona Blaikie, and Long Hoang Vu, presents an autoethnographic reflection on the influence of cultural and gender norms shaping childhood in Vietnam and South Africa. Drawing on the ethics of care (Noddings, 1988, 2013) and Bourdieu's theory of habitus, they describe personal experiences and the tensions between individual gender expression and social conventions. The main findings emphasise that childhood and gender identities are culturally and socially conditioned, with autoethnography serving as a valuable method for reflecting on these complex processes, enabling an understanding of the tensions and negotiations between individuality and social expectations.

The final chapter is 'Heteronormativity in a Chinese Sexuality Education Textbook Series. The Case of Cherish Lives' examines heteronormativity in Chinese sexuality education textbooks for children. The researchers argue that these textbook series perpetuate heteronormative norms by presenting heterosexuality as the only acceptable model of marital relationships, thereby marginalising sexual minorities. Employing feminist discourse critique and Foucault's concepts of power, they analyse how ideological and institutional control constrains the comprehensiveness of sexuality education within the Chinese context.

In such an interesting publication, it would be useful to include a final section with conclusion in which the editors could summarise the contributions to international research and discuss the recommendations arising from the explorations presented in the individual chapters. Regardless of this, it should be emphasised that the entire collection is unified by a theoretical framework grounded in gender and sexuality theories, post-colonial and intersectional perspectives, embedded within the specific contexts of the Global South. This interdisciplinary approach, integrating pedagogy, sociology, cultural studies, and anthropology, enables an in-depth analysis of the construction, maintenance, and transformation of gender and sexuality norms in early childhood education, especially within post-colonial and socioeconomically diverse settings.

As a field researcher engaged in childhood studies within sensitive contexts, I would have expected a broader and more thorough presentation of the ethical issues and research dilemmas associated with investigating such fragile areas. A discussion of limitations and dilemmas, with particular emphasis on gender-related issues and sensitive topics – which, as the authors themselves note, are often taboo and challenging – would also have been valuable. Alternatively, this might form the basis for a separate anthology, in which researchers might explore the ethical challenges of studying gendered and sexual norms in ECE in diverse contexts through reflective approaches.

In closing, it is essential to highlight once more that the publication exemplifies a feminist research paradigm, critically analysing the construction, regulation, and contestation of gender and sexuality in early childhood education from a post-colonial viewpoint (Krishnamurthy et al., 2024). It emphasises interdisciplinarity and intersectionality, highlighting the connections between gender, colonial histories, cultural norms, religion, and power dynamics, thereby challenging universalist and Western-centric feminist frameworks (Deiri, 2025).. This approach contributes to strengthening the position of groups (scholars, teachers, children) from the Global South as active agents in shaping and disrupting normative discourses, contributing to the achievement of social justice goals and the transformation of patriarchal and heteronormative structures. The book poses critical questions regarding the mechanisms through which gender and sexuality are revealed and constructed in early childhood education within post-colonial contexts, taking into account the influence of dominant socio-cultural norms. The authors consistently emphasise that these norms are deeply rooted in colonial legacies that sustain binary gender constructs and heteronormative ideologies, further influenced by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, class, colonial heritage, and present-day economic disparities. Although early childhood education (dependent on

context) often reproduces stereotypical and traditional gender roles, it simultaneously represents a complex space of negotiation concerning the meanings of gender and sexuality, where both reproduction and disruption of norms occur through grassroots initiatives, institutional practices, and the lived experiences of teachers in collaboration with children (MacNaughton, 2006).

Throughout the publication, detailed analyses interrogate the intersections of gender, religion, culture, masculinity, sport, and conservative political influences in shaping and resisting gendered and sexual norms within early years education. The publication highlights not only the colonial heritage that entrenches binary divisions and hegemonic heteronormative patterns but also perspectives that problematise and seek to transform these paradigms. The book underscores the collective responsibility to develop knowledge and practices that counteract gender-related inequalities and injustices, particularly within the realms of education and the protection of the rights of the youngest children. The research gaps identified within all the chapters provide a lens through which to engage with the processes of implementing and negotiating gender and sexual norms in varied, diverse local and cultural post-colonial contexts of primary education. Engagement with contemporary critical childhood studies offers promising avenues for understanding how educators, learners, and institutions collaboratively respond to and co-construct these norms, thereby influencing established narratives. This field demands further interdisciplinary, in-depth research, with focused attention on the intersectional complexities and unique characteristics of both the Global South and Global North.

In conclusion, having read and analysed the content of the volume, I have come to the view that this area of research represents a niche within many countries and diverse contexts. This insight further enhances my appreciation of the editors' and authors' contributions.

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