

Breaking Barriers: Investigating Male Educators' Participation in ECD Education in Bulawayo Province

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the intertwined cultural, economic and intersectional factors that constrain men's participation in Early Childhood Development (ECD) teaching across Bulawayo Province, Zimbabwe. Grounded in Gender Role Theory and an interpretivist paradigm, an exploratory qualitative design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with thirty male ECD teachers and twenty school administrators drawn from urban and peri-urban centres. Teachers were selected via purposive and snowball sampling to reflect diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities and institutional contexts, while administrators were stratified by district and governance type. Participants reported that hegemonic masculinity, entrenched gender stereotypes, low ECD salaries and community scepticism (especially among working-class, Ndebele-speaking populations) deter men from entering or remaining in the field. Many male educators nevertheless described profound vocational fulfilment and innovative pedagogical practices, yet felt professionally isolated and overlooked for leadership or training opportunities. Administrators recognised recruitment and retention challenges but lamented the absence of clear policy mandates, systematic outreach and sustained mentorship structures. The study recommends embedding explicit male-recruitment targets within national and provincial ECD policies, introducing teacher-training modules on positive masculinity and cultural competence, establishing formal mentorship networks with evaluation mechanisms and aligning ECD remuneration with local economic realities. Future research should adopt longitudinal and comparative designs to track male educators' career trajectories over time and assess the impact of tailored interventions across Zimbabwe's provinces and neighbouring countries.

Keywords: Barriers; Male Participation; Intersectionality; Early Childhood Education

INTRODUCTION

Gender diversity in Early Childhood Development (ECD) teaching has gained prominence in international and African policy discussions as a means to promote equity and enrich children's learning experiences (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). Empirical research demonstrates that male educators introduce distinct interaction styles and disciplinary approaches (such as play-based and kinetic learning) that can strengthen socio-emotional development and challenge entrenched gender norms (Peeters, Mörsoy and Vandenbroeck, 2019; Sinclair and Maher, 2021). Despite these advantages, ECD classrooms in Bulawayo Province remain almost entirely staffed by women, limiting learners' exposure to a full spectrum of adult role-models (Chikoko, Mncube and Reddy, 2022).

Across Africa, sociocultural expectations pathologise men who assume nurturing responsibilities, labelling such work as insufficiently masculine (Agyekum and Sackey, 2023; Uwizeye, Nzabonimpa and Mukadasi, 2021). These barriers are further compounded by socioeconomic divisions and ethnic identities; Ndebele-speaking, working-class men in peri-urban and rural districts encounter more intense community scepticism compared with English-medium, middle-class teachers in central Bulawayo. Institutional recruitment processes and national policy frameworks seldom include targeted incentives to attract men into ECD roles, leaving local leaders without tools to counter these intersecting biases (UNICEF, 2021; Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2022).

In Zimbabwe, fewer than 5 percent of ECD teachers are male (Maphosa, Chimbundika and Makone, 2020). Colonial-era schooling channelled men into technical or administrative posts while women filled nurturing roles (Chabaya, Mtetwa and Rembe, 2020) and post-independence reforms have largely ignored workforce composition at the ECD level (Moyo, 2021). Urban surveys reveal that early childhood teaching is widely viewed as an extension of maternal care, producing stigma and social disapproval for men who enter the field (Maphosa et al., 2020; Ncube and Gumbo, 2023). In Bulawayo's five districts (urban and peri-urban alike) these cultural scripts intersect with local economic pressures and ethnic dynamics, reinforcing gendered occupational segregation.

This study explores (a) the cultural, economic and intersectional barriers discouraging men from ECD teaching in Bulawayo; (b) the lived experiences of thirty male ECD teachers (selected through purposive, snowball and stratified sampling to reflect diversity of income, ethnicity and location) and their motivations, challenges and coping strategies; and (c) the perspectives of twenty school administrators on recruitment and retention across urban and peri-urban centres. Insights derived from this research aim to inform targeted policy adjustments, teacher-training enhancements and institutional practices capable of fostering a more diverse and inclusive ECD workforce.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Barriers Preventing Male Participation in ECD Education

Global studies repeatedly demonstrate that prevailing gender norms frame early childhood education as a predominantly feminine domain, casting men as ill-suited to the nurturing work it entails. In the United Kingdom and Australia, qualitative research finds that male candidates are often labelled “outsiders,” their commitment and competence questioned by parents and colleagues (Raynauld and Larose, 2019; Sinclair and Maher, 2021). In the United States, male educators report undergoing more stringent vetting processes (including frequent background checks) and enduring persistent doubts about their capacity for socio-emotional engagement (Peeters, Mörsoy and Vandenbroeck, 2019; Sumsion and Wong, 2020). Such dynamics may discourage men from entering ECD altogether and contribute to the field's skewed gender balance. These findings suggest the need to investigate whether similar “outsider” narratives and heightened scrutiny affect male ECD aspirants in Bulawayo. No existing research has examined how these global stereotypes materialise in Zimbabwean early years settings.

In Scandinavia, governments have introduced financial incentives and targeted recruitment campaigns to attract men into ECD roles, yet male representation remains below 10 percent (OECD, 2019; Johansson and Gustafsson, 2022). Even in Iceland (where gender equity ranks high on policy agendas) deeply rooted expectations about masculinity persist, with parents and communities expressing reservations about men in caregiving positions (Einarsdóttir and Wagner, 2020). These studies reveal that policy alone cannot overcome cultural resistance; shifts in public attitudes are also necessary. There is no analysis of Zimbabwe's policy environment vis-à-vis male recruitment, nor of the cultural levers that might bolster or undermine such policies. Understanding how policy frameworks and cultural attitudes interact in Bulawayo will clarify why past initiatives may have failed to draw men into ECD.

Within Africa, socio-cultural constructions of gender roles similarly marginalise men in early education. Research from Kenya and Rwanda shows that men who pursue ECD careers risk community ridicule, being accused of deviating from accepted masculine norms or harbouring inappropriate motives (Uwizeye et al., 2021; Agyekum and Sackey, 2023). Hiring committees (often predominantly female) tend to favour women for positions perceived as extensions of maternal care, further entrenching gender imbalance (Chikoko, Mncube and Reddy, 2022). Bulawayo's diverse communities may exhibit analogous patterns of social sanction and institutional bias. Exploring local attitudes and recruitment practices will help pinpoint the socio-cultural barriers in this specific context.

In Zimbabwe, less than 5 percent of ECD teachers are male; a figure shaped by both colonial-era labour divisions and contemporary stigma (Maphosa, Chimbundika and Makone, 2020; Chabaya, Mtetwa and Rembe, 2020). Although post-independence reforms have improved access and infrastructure, they have seldom

addressed workforce composition and the 2022 National ECD Policy Framework omits any measures to recruit men (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2022; Moyo, 2021). Surveys in urban centres report that male applicants face discouragement from family and community members who regard early years teaching as women's work (Mathwasa and Sibanda, 2020; Ncube and Gumbo, 2023). There is a lack of Bulawayo-specific research on administrators' attitudes toward male recruitment and the support needs of male ECD educators. Investigating how these historical legacies and policy omissions play out in Bulawayo schools will identify institutional levers for change.

Experiences of Male ECD Teachers

In Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, male early childhood practitioners frequently describe a sense of professional marginalisation rooted in gendered expectations. Australian research reports that men often lack access to mentoring relationships and informal peer support, leaving them feeling "on the outside" of collegial decision-making and pedagogical dialogue (Sumsion and Wong, 2020; Sinclair and Maher, 2021). In Canada, Raynald and Larose (2019) found that male teachers withdraw from collaborative planning, perceiving that their perspectives are undervalued amidst a predominantly female workforce. A UK study by Donaldson and Young (2022) corroborates these findings, showing that male educators there endure questions about their motivations and face limited opportunities to engage in professional development specifically tailored to their needs. In the United States, Peeters, Mörsoy and Vandenbroeck (2019) documented that men in ECD settings often confront heightened scrutiny (from both colleagues and parents) regarding their suitability for nurturing roles. These patterns suggest that Bulawayo's male ECD teachers may similarly experience exclusion from professional networks and bespoke training, undermining their sense of belonging and career progression.

In South Africa, men in ECD roles face comparable challenges, compounded by pervasive stereotypes about masculinity and caregiving. Bhana and Nkani (2020) describe male teachers as "anomalies" whose commitment is routinely questioned by female colleagues and community members alike. Chikoko, Mncube and Reddy (2022) demonstrate that male practitioners are under-represented in leadership roles and rarely invited to participate in curriculum design committees, reinforcing a cycle of professional invisibility. Moyo and Chikoko (2022) further highlight that male ECD educators report fewer opportunities for continuous professional learning and often lack access to gender-sensitive induction programmes. Uncovering whether Bulawayo's ECD institutions mirror these exclusionary practices will clarify key institutional levers that impede male teacher retention.

In Zimbabwe, although systematic studies on male ECD teachers' lived experiences remain scarce, the available evidence points to pronounced professional isolation. Maphosa, Chimbundika and Makone (2020) note that male educators report feeling disconnected from female peers and struggle to identify role-models who share their professional journey. Ncube and Gumbo (2023) recount rural male teachers' accounts of social disapproval (both within schools and in surrounding communities) which intensifies their sense of alienation. Mathwasa and Sibanda (2020) found that male practitioners in peri-urban ECD centres often forgo collaborative meetings, anticipating that their contributions will be dismissed. Documenting Bulawayo's male teachers' narratives will elucidate the specific social and organisational factors that erode their professional confidence and job satisfaction.

School Administrators' Perspectives on Male ECD Teachers

Across diverse education systems, school leaders acknowledge the theoretical benefits of gender-balanced staffing in early years settings yet often lack concrete strategies to achieve it. In the United Kingdom, administrative surveys reveal that headteachers value diversity but report limited expertise in targeted recruitment, coupled with concerns about disrupting established staff dynamics (Spencer and Wainwright, 2021; Allen and Sim, 2019). Upton and O'Connor (2020) further observed that many administrators feel ill-equipped to challenge parental expectations or to market ECD positions specifically to men. OECD case studies note that, without dedicated guidance and resources, school leaders default to existing hiring practices, perpetuating female-dominated applicant pools (OECD, 2022). These insights suggest a need to explore

whether Bulawayo administrators share similar uncertainties around proactive male recruitment and what support they require.

In South Africa, administrators find themselves navigating between national gender-equity mandates and entrenched cultural biases. Bhana and Nkani (2020) report that while policy frameworks encourage male teacher engagement, district-level managers rarely translate these into concrete recruitment targets. Chikoko, Mncube and Reddy (2022) document that principals frequently postpone male appointments to avoid perceived staffroom tensions and Badenhorst and Le Roux (2021) highlight a deficiency in mentorship structures tailored for men, limiting their professional integration. Examining Bulawayo's administrative practices will clarify whether similar policy–practice disjunctions exist and how they shape male teacher retention.

Within the Zimbabwean context, preliminary reports highlight administrators' reluctance to recruit men into ECD. Ncube and Gumbo (2023) found that headteachers often describe male appointments as “exceptional cases,” reflecting anxiety about community pushback. Maphosa, Chimbundika and Makone (2020) note that few schools have written guidelines or incentives for attracting male candidates and the 2022 National ECD Policy Framework omits any administrator-focused directives on gender balance (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2022). A recent qualitative study by Ndlovu and Chikanga (2023) reveals that even when male teachers are hired, they receive minimal induction support, reinforcing their perception as outsiders. Bulawayo-specific research is lacking on the decision-making processes of ECD administrators regarding gender diversity and on the effects of existing policy gaps on staffing composition. Investigating Bulawayo administrators' attitudes and practices will uncover the institutional hurdles to male recruitment and the types of policy or capacity-building interventions needed.

Strategies to Enhance Male Participation in ECD

In Northern Europe, targeted national campaigns and structured support programmes have yielded modest gains in male ECD staffing. Sweden's Men in Care initiative combined public-awareness drives with government-funded training stipends and peer-mentoring networks, resulting in a rise in male entrant rates from 4 percent in 2015 to 7 percent in 2021 (OECD, 2019; Johansson and Gustafsson, 2022). Finland's MiesKasvun mentorship scheme pairs experienced male educators with newcomers and has been linked to a 15 percent improvement in male teacher retention over three years (Soini, Pietarinen and Pyhältö, 2020). Parallel efforts in Denmark incorporated targeted scholarship funds for men enrolling in ECD qualifications, alongside community outreach in local media to challenge stereotypes about caregiving (Einarsdóttir and Wagner, 2020). No analysis exists of how such multi-pronged strategies could be calibrated to Zimbabwe's policy environment, funding constraints and cultural landscape. These Northern European models suggest that combining recruitment incentives with mentorship and public-relations campaigns may bolster male participation in Bulawayo's ECD sector.

Across Africa, a handful of pilot programmes have sought to counteract gendered labour divisions by offering financial and professional incentives to male teachers. In Ghana, the Father Figures in ECD pilot provided hardship allowances and fast-track promotion pathways for male recruits, yielding a 20 percent increase in male hires at participating centres over two years (Agyekum and Sackey, 2023). South Africa's MenTeach project experimented with male-only induction workshops and reflective practice groups, which improved participants' job satisfaction scores by 25 percent but achieved only limited impact on overall recruitment (Bhana and Nkani, 2020; Moyo and Chikoko, 2022). Evaluations emphasise that without concurrent community-level engagement to shift perceptions, such incentives can be under-utilised. Bulawayo interventions should pair school-based incentives with local campaigns to shift societal attitudes.

In Zimbabwe, sporadic efforts to address gender imbalance in teaching have seldom targeted the ECD sector. The Ministry's Teach Zimbabwe recruitment fairs have highlighted professional teaching as a career for men but focus primarily on primary and secondary levels, neglecting early years (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2022). A small NGO-led mentorship pilot in Harare paired six male trainee educators with female-led cohorts, reporting positive feedback on peer support yet noting negligible uptake beyond the pilot schools (Ncube and Gumbo, 2023). Maphosa, Chimbundika and Makone (2020) advocate for

gender-sensitive recruitment campaigns, salaried incentives for male ECD trainees and the inclusion of positive masculinity modules in preservice curricula. Evaluating which of these strategies resonate with Bulawayo's men and administrators will inform locally adapted interventions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by Gender Role Theory, as articulated in social psychology and gender studies, to elucidate the under-representation of male teachers in Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Zimbabwe. Originally formulated by Eagly (1987) and later refined by Eagly and Wood (2018), Social Role Theory posits that gendered behaviour emerges from culturally transmitted divisions of labour and is perpetuated through socialisation agents (family, media, educational institutions) which prescribe the attributes and occupations deemed appropriate for each sex. Empirical research demonstrates that these prescribed roles are neither innate nor fixed; rather, they evolve in response to shifting economic structures and policy interventions (Eagly and Wood, 2018; England, 2019). Employing this framework enables a systematic examination of how social prescriptions about masculinity and caregiving inhibit men's entry into ECD teaching in Bulawayo.

Central to Gender Role Theory is the notion that institutional practices both reflect and reinforce societal expectations. Ridgeway and Correll (2004) show how workplace norms (such as recruitment criteria, performance evaluations and professional development pathways) tacitly privilege traits associated with traditional femininity in caring professions. More recent analyses in the South African context highlight how similar mechanisms operate; De La Rey and Mkhize (2022) document that male prospective teachers in child-care settings are routinely channelled towards alternative career streams deemed more "masculine." Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity further explicates how dominant ideals of manhood (authority, technical expertise) marginalise those who assume nurturing roles, branding them as deviants from normative male identities. These perspectives guide inquiry into Bulawayo's policy and institutional arrangements, revealing the channels through which male ECD applicants may be deterred or excluded.

Applying Gender Role Theory to ECD in Zimbabwe foregrounds the cultural scripts that cast early years teaching as an extension of maternal labour. Chabaya, Mtetwa and Rembe (2020) illustrate how Zimbabwe's colonial and post-colonial education systems entrenched clear gender divisions; men were steered towards technical and administrative posts, while women assumed classroom and care duties. Maphosa, Chimbundika and Makone (2020) further note that male ECD aspirants confront social sanctions (from familial discouragement to community mockery) which reinforce a sense of professional illegitimacy. This body of work highlights that male under-representation in ECD is not attributable to individual deficits but to systemic constructions of gender-appropriate work. Gender Role Theory frames the investigation of Bulawayo's social and familial pressures, pinpointing the cultural taboos and support gaps that the study will interrogate.

Moreover, Gender Role Theory furnishes a foundation for designing interventions that recalibrate gendered expectations. Bhana and Nkani (2020) argue that re-orienting teacher education curricula to valorise nurturing as a masculine strength can disrupt prevailing stereotypes. Empirical trials in Finland (where mentorship and public-awareness components have been integrated into male-targeted recruitment) demonstrate that reframing masculinity in caregiving terms can improve male teacher retention (Soini, Pietarinen and Pyhältö, 2020). Such findings suggest that multi-level strategies (addressing policy, institutional culture and public discourse) are essential for re-shaping gender roles in ECD. Grounded in Gender Role Theory, this research will explore which combination of normative-shifting and capacity-building measures might be most effective in Bulawayo's socio-cultural and institutional milieu.

METHODOLOGY

This investigation is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which holds that social phenomena are constructed through individuals' subjective experiences and interpretations (Creswell, 2014; Schwandt, 2015). Such a lens proves essential when probing how men negotiate professional roles in Early Childhood Development (ECD) within Bulawayo Province, where entrenched cultural scripts and gendered expectations shape both identity and institutional practice. Emphasis rests on participants' own narratives, enabling the research to reveal how male educators interpret, contest and adapt to a workplace traditionally coded as

feminine. The methodology also embraces reflexivity, acknowledging that the researcher's positionality and evolving understanding influence every stage of data collection and interpretation.

An exploratory qualitative design was adopted to generate rich, context-sensitive insights into a subject that remains under-investigated across Bulawayo's five districts (Stebbins, 2016; Bryman and Bell, 2018). To ensure broad provincial representation, the sample was expanded to include thirty male ECD teachers and twenty school administrators. This larger cohort enabled comparisons not only between urban and peri-urban contexts but also across different governance models (government, private and community-run centres). The design's iterative nature allowed emergent themes (such as the interplay between economic pressure and social stigma) to inform subsequent interview questions and sampling decisions, enhancing the depth and relevance of the inquiry.

Participants were recruited through a mixed strategy combining purposive, snowball and stratified approaches. Initially, purposive sampling targeted thirty male teachers with varying years of service (ranging from one to twenty years), qualification levels and institutional affiliations; professional networks, early-childhood NGOs and teacher-training colleges facilitated this process. Those teachers then referred colleagues via snowball sampling, ensuring inclusion of men across diverse ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic strata. School administrators (n = 20) were selected through stratified purposive sampling, with quotas set for each district and for both public and non-state ECD centres, thereby capturing twenty distinct leadership perspectives on male recruitment and retention.

Data collection relied on semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in English, Shona or isiNdebele, depending on participant preference. Interview guides (drawn from existing studies (Peeters et al., 2019; Maphosa et al., 2020) and refined through a pilot with two teachers and one administrator) explored motivations for entering ECD, encounters with professional marginalisation, financial constraints and institutional support mechanisms. Interviews, each lasting between sixty and ninety minutes, were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim, preserving the nuance of participants' reflections on both personal and systemic dimensions of their work.

Data analysis proceeded via the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). Transcripts were managed in NVivo 12, where repeated readings facilitated the generation of initial codes capturing key ideas such as "breadwinner expectations" and "mentorship deficits." Codes were clustered into themes and reviewed iteratively against the research questions and Gender Role Theory's conceptual framework. Triangulation took place through cross-comparison of teacher and administrator narratives, alongside relevant policy documents and was reinforced by peer debriefings with two qualitative methodology experts and by maintaining an audit trail and reflexive memos to track analytic decisions.

Ethical approval was granted by Midlands State University's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. All participants received comprehensive information sheets outlining the study's aims, procedures and their rights, including voluntary withdrawal without penalty. Written consent was obtained, pseudonyms replaced identifying details in transcripts and data were stored securely on encrypted drives accessible only to the principal investigator, in line with institutional and national guidelines for human-subjects research (Babbie, 2016). The study's findings are presented thematically, organised around barriers to male participation, lived experiences of male educators and administrators' recruitment and retention perspectives. Narrative excerpts from the thirty teachers and twenty administrators bring to life the textures of their experiences, while policy references situate the discussion within Bulawayo's broader ECD landscape.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Barriers to Male Participation in ECD

Out of thirty male ECD teachers (MT1–MT30), twenty-one (70 %) reported encountering overt and covert messages that early years work is not a "man's job." In central Bulawayo, MT4 (urban, middle-class, Shona) described how the headmistress paused his lesson demonstration to ask, "Are you certain you applied for ECD? This is for women." In contrast, MT17 (peri-urban, working-class, Ndebele) reported that local elders

circulated rumours questioning his integrity; “They say a man teaching little ones must be hiding something,” he explained. Such dynamics mirror Connell’s (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity, but these accounts reveal how ethnicity and class compound the gendered stigma. Financial pressures intensified these barriers for nine participants (30 %), particularly those from low-income townships; MT7, for example, earns ZWL 802 000 per annum on a diploma salary, leading his family to warn, “No respectable man teaches toddlers.” Across both urban and peri-urban sites, MT9 and MT12 noted that interview panels often pre-emptively excluded them, stating, “We need someone who naturally understands children; usually women.” Comparable patterns in Ghana and Rwanda attest to the universality of such stereotypes (Agyekum and Sackey, 2023; Uwizeye, Nzabonimpa and Mukadasi, 2021), but Bulawayo’s socio-economic disparities and ethnic tensions serve to intensify the exclusion men face.

Lived Experiences of Male ECD Teachers

Despite facing widespread prejudice, twenty-four teachers (80 %) spoke of profound professional fulfilment that kept them committed. MT2 (urban, Shona, five years’ service) introduced a series of kinetic learning games, drawn from his traditional dance background, which transformed a withdrawn pupil into “the star of circle time.” He reflected, “When I saw him volunteer for the first time, I felt we had broken a barrier; not just for him, but for male teachers.” In peri-urban contexts, however, isolation was more acute; MT6 and MT10, the only male staff members in their centres, described being routinely excluded from co-curricular planning sessions they derisively termed “girls’ gatherings,” where resource sharing and pedagogical discussions took place informally. MT8 (ten years’ service, urban, privately trained) reported twice being passed over for leadership workshops (even after securing requisite qualifications) because “they said ECD leaders need to be maternal figures.” These experiences resonate with Sinclair and Maher’s (2021) Australian findings, yet in Bulawayo, language and class further narrow male teachers’ access to peer networks; English-medium educators found it easier to engage in professional groups than colleagues who taught in isiNdebele.

School Administrators’ Perspectives on Male ECD Teachers

All twenty administrators (SA1–SA20) acknowledged a pressing shortage of male ECD staff but described divergent challenges across settings. SA3 (urban, well-resourced centre) reported losing four enrolments when parents learned of a male teacher’s appointment, a pattern corroborated by SA7 (peri-urban, government school) who said, “Community elders insisted men should not care for toddlers; they withdrew children en masse.” Four administrators (SA2, SA5, SA9, SA14) recounted sending recruitment teams to nearby teacher-training colleges without success, echoing OECD’s (2019) critique of one-off outreach. Informal mentoring of male recruits (initiated by SA2, SA5 and SA9) proved short-lived; “We paired new male hires with senior colleagues, but without clear objectives, interest faded,” observed SA5. Only SA8 (urban NGO-run centre) offered tailored professional-development schedules to fit male teachers’ outside commitments, though he admitted, “It’s still experimental and we lack evaluation data.” Several administrators (SA7, SA16) lamented that the 2022 National ECD Policy Framework provides no guidance on gender-balanced staffing, leaving them to navigate complex cultural and socioeconomic landscapes without institutional support. In lower-income, Ndebele-dominant areas, SA15 emphasised that men often decline ECD roles outright, fearing social censure and financial hardship. These layered accounts highlight that effective recruitment and retention strategies must attend not only to gender but also to class, ethnicity and local belief systems.

DISCUSSION

The findings illuminate how entrenched ideals of masculinity and the inertia of existing institutional practices combine to limit men’s participation in ECD across Bulawayo Province. A majority of the thirty male teachers (MT1–MT30) reported encountering stereotypes that equate caregiving with femininity; an experience that echoes Connell’s (1995) depiction of hegemonic masculinity and mirrors accounts from the United Kingdom (Raynauld and Larose, 2019) and Australia (Sumsion and Wong, 2020). In Bulawayo, these cultural prejudices intersect with local breadwinner norms, as evidenced by participants from lower-income townships who described family pressure to seek better-paid work. Such material constraints resonate with England’s (2019) analysis of gendered labour markets. Moreover, our data reveal that ethnicity and class further intensify exclusion; Ndebele-speaking, working-class educators in peri-urban areas faced more suspicion and

community censure than their English-medium, middle-class counterparts. This layered interplay of gender, socioeconomic status and ethnicity helps to explain why broad policy incentives (such as those documented by the OECD (2019) and evaluated in Sweden and Denmark (Johansson and Gustafsson, 2022)) have had only limited success in contexts where male breadwinning remains deeply valued.

Notwithstanding these barriers, many participants derive considerable professional fulfilment from their pedagogical contributions, illustrating what Peeters, Mörsoy and Vandenbroeck (2019) describe as the “male educator effect.” For example, MT2’s use of play frames drawn from his Shona heritage not only engaged reluctant learners but also challenged pupils’ and colleagues’ assumptions about men’s capacities in early years settings. However, participants across urban and peri-urban sites described profound professional isolation. In well-resourced central schools, MT8 (despite holding postgraduate qualifications) lamented being excluded from leadership workshops; in township centres, MT10 reported total absence of male peers from both formal meetings and informal planning sessions. These experiences parallel Sinclair and Maher’s (2021) findings in Australia and Chikoko, Mncube and Reddy’s (2022) work in South Africa, yet the addition of class and language barriers in Bulawayo underscores the need for contextually tailored support.

School administrators (SA1–SA20) were acutely aware of male teacher shortages but lacked coherent mechanisms to recruit and retain men. Urban leaders attributed low male enrolment to parental withdrawals (a phenomenon noted by SA3, who lost four nursery places when a male teacher joined the staff) while peri-urban administrators pointed to community elders’ pronouncements that men should not serve in caregiving roles. Four administrators reported one-off recruitment visits to teacher-training colleges that produced no male hires, echoing the OECD’s (2019) critique of sporadic outreach. Informal mentoring schemes, largely driven by SA2, SA5 and SA9, often collapsed once initial enthusiasm waned. The absence of any explicit mandate in Zimbabwe’s 2022 ECD Policy Framework (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2022) leaves schools without guidance or resources to sustain male-focused initiatives; a gap similar to that identified in the Icelandic context by Einarsdóttir and Wagner (2020).

Taken together, these findings suggest a need for action at multiple levels. Public messaging must challenge the notion that caregiving is incompatible with masculine identities, drawing on positive-masculinity concepts (Bhana and Nkani, 2020) and using local cultural references to resonate across socioeconomic and ethnic groups. Schools require formal mentoring structures, complete with clear objectives, regular evaluation and dedicated budget lines to prevent ad hoc implementation. Crucially, salary scales for ECD teachers should be adjusted to reduce the financial disincentive for men, particularly in lower-income areas. Only through coordinated efforts that address cultural scripts, institutional practices and economic realities can Bulawayo (and similar contexts in Africa) foster an ECD workforce that values the contributions of both men and women.

CONCLUSION

This investigation has revealed that men’s participation in Early Childhood Development (ECD) teaching in Bulawayo Province remains constrained by intertwined cultural, institutional and economic forces. Persistent stereotypes present caregiving as a feminine occupation, leading male candidates (especially those from working-class, Ndebele-speaking communities) to face overt scepticism and subtle exclusion reflecting hegemonic masculine norms (Connell, 1995). Low ECD salaries, which lag significantly behind those in other sectors, reinforce expectations that men adhere to breadwinner roles. Recruitment processes often screen out male applicants based on gendered assumptions, while isolated outreach efforts have delivered minimal lasting impact. Nonetheless, the accounts of MT1–MT30 attest to powerful vocational commitment and pedagogical creativity (such as culturally grounded play-based activities) that enhance children’s socio-emotional development (Peeters et al., 2019).

School leaders (SA1–SA20) acknowledged these barriers yet lacked policy instruments and evaluation systems to support male educators. Urban centres reported parental withdrawals in response to male appointments and peri-urban schools noted objections from community elders rooted in local traditions. Informal mentorship schemes frequently collapsed in the absence of clear objectives and the 2022 National ECD Policy Framework provides no explicit targets for gender balance (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2022). Drawing

on Gender Role Theory (Eagly and Wood, 2018), findings indicate that segmented initiatives will not suffice; a coordinated approach is required to transform the cultural narratives that confine caregiving to women and address the material conditions that reinforce men's economic imperatives.

Future efforts should embed specific male-recruitment goals within national and provincial ECD policies, accompanied by monitoring tools to track progress. Teacher-training curricula ought to include modules on positive masculinity, collaborative pedagogy and cultural competence, thereby reframing professional identity in ways that resonate across Bulawayo's districts. Establishing formal mentorship networks with defined aims and periodic assessment would help male educators overcome isolation and access clear pathways to leadership. Aligning ECD remuneration with local cost-of-living standards and implementing targeted community outreach will further encourage men to enter and remain in the field. Such measures can help Zimbabwe build an ECD workforce enriched by the diverse strengths of both male and female teachers.

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