



## Gender Equality in Achieving Inclusive Education in Elementary School and Junior High School

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### Abstract

*Gender inequality in education remains a persistent issue, with boys and girls often facing different expectations, opportunities, and treatment within learning environments. This research focuses on gender equality between girls and boys in the context of inclusive education, aiming to identify empowerment patterns that address barriers to educational access. Using quantitative methods, data were collected through questionnaires completed by students at the elementary and junior high school levels. Analysis was conducted to understand the challenges of gender disparities in educational participation. The results indicate significant differences in participation between male and female students, with boys dominating in high-intensity physical sports and girls more engaged in the arts. Additionally, there were differences in teachers' attitudes towards students based on gender. This study aims to create empowerment strategies and more inclusive education policies, providing guidance for policymakers and educational practitioners to support gender equality in the education sector.*

**Keywords:** innovation; educational inclusion; empowerment.

**Paper type:** Research paper

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Inclusive education has become a fundamental pillar in the pursuit of equitable global education systems, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education for all. However, the implementation of inclusive education should go beyond merely integrating students with special needs; it must also encompass other critical dimensions such as gender equality. In this regard, elementary and junior high school levels play a pivotal role in shaping long-term educational participation, especially for vulnerable groups such as girls.

This study, entitled “Gender Equality in Achieving Inclusive Education in Elementary School and Junior High School”, explores how gender considerations are integrated into inclusive education policies and practices at the basic education level. Inclusive education, in this context, refers to a system that actively creates supportive and responsive environments that accommodate the diverse needs of all students, including those marginalized due to gender, disability, or socio-economic status (Al-Shammari 2021).

Teachers, especially those in special and inclusive education roles, hold strategic responsibility not only in delivering instruction but also in ensuring equitable access to the curriculum. Their role is essential in eliminating biases and building classroom environments that are empowering, participatory, and respectful of diversity (Al-Shammari 2021; Kuteesa, Akpuokwe, and Udeh 2024). However, research shows that gender bias continues to influence educational processes. Studies indicate that girls are often less encouraged to participate actively in classroom discussions, and are frequently perceived as passive, which undermines their academic confidence and long-term engagement in education (Lwamba et al. 2022).

**Table 1.**  
**Gender Disparities in Education Worldwide**

Region	Percentage of Girls in Primary Education	Percentage of Girls in Secondary Education	Percentage of Women in STEM Higher Education
High-Income	98%	92%	54%
Low-Income	67%	49%	29%
Sub-Saharan Africa	73%	55%	20%

*Source: (Kuteesa et al. 2024; Lomazzi, Israel, and Crespi 2018; Psaki, McCarthy, and Mensch 2017)*

Globally, gender disparities in educational access and outcomes remain stark. For example, in fragile and low-income contexts, only 67% of girls complete primary education, compared to 98% in high-income countries. At the higher education level, particularly in STEM fields, the inequality deepens—only 28% of women from low-income countries enter higher education, compared to 54% in developed nations (Kuteesa et al. 2024). This inequality is particularly pronounced in Sub-Saharan Africa, where only 20% of women access tertiary education in STEM fields (Lomazzi et al. 2018).

**Table 2.**  
**Gender Disparities in Education in Indonesia (2022)**

Education level	Male Enrollment	Female Enrollment	Gender Gap
Primary	20 million	19 million	1 million
Secondary	12 million	10 million	2 million
Higher Education	5 million	4 million	1 million

*Source: (Candra, Nurhotimah, and Syaifulloh 2022)*

In Indonesia, the trend mirrors global patterns. Data from the Ministry of Education and Culture show that at the elementary level, female enrollment (19 million) is slightly lower than male enrollment (20 million), and the gap widens at the junior high level, where disparities reach up to 2 million students. This suggests that as educational levels rise, girls face increasing barriers, stemming from economic, cultural, and institutional challenges that remain insufficiently responsive to gender-specific needs.

The findings of this study reinforce the urgent need for systemic support that includes both governmental and private sector involvement. Governments must prioritize gender-inclusive policies through targeted teacher training, equal school

facility provision, and dedicated budget allocations for inclusive programs (Parihar 2024). At the same time, the private sector can contribute by investing in child-friendly technology and developing gender-sensitive curricula.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that gender-sensitive pedagogical strategies significantly enhance educational outcomes for girls and other marginalized groups (Kuteesa et al. 2024). These strategies must be accompanied by comprehensive policies and community engagement efforts to dismantle entrenched gender stereotypes and enable greater participation of women, particularly in male-dominated fields like STEM (Lwamba et al. 2022; Were et al. 2021).

Initiatives such as India's National Education Policy 2020 demonstrate how inclusive and gender-responsive education frameworks can serve as foundational strategies for sustainable education outcomes, especially for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds (Parihar 2024). Yet, in the Indonesian context, there remains a significant research gap regarding the extent to which inclusive education at the primary and junior secondary levels truly empowers girls. This study seeks to fill that gap and provide a basis for inclusive educational transformation that centers on gender equity.

In Indonesia's inclusive education context, significant challenges remain regarding the gap between policy and on-the-ground implementation. Although the government has enacted several policies to support inclusive education, such as National Education Minister Regulation No. 70 of 2009 and Government Regulation No. 13 of 2020, many teachers still feel undertrained in inclusive methods and face practical obstacles in classrooms (Ediyanto and Kawai 2023; R. Rasmitadila et al. 2023). Furthermore, Indonesia's diverse education system, which includes both public and faith-based schools, introduces variations in the interpretation of inclusion that may present challenges in its application (Zuhdi and Dobson 2024). In some cases, the involvement of universities in training and mentoring programs is deemed essential for improving teacher competence in inclusive education, especially in remote areas where access to resources and training is limited (Priyanti 2022; Rasmitadila et al. 2023).. Collaboration among various stakeholders is viewed as crucial for enhancing the quality of inclusive

education so that education can truly be accessible to all students without discrimination.

Unfortunately, in Indonesia, various challenges still persist in the implementation of inclusive and gender-responsive education. These range from the lack of teacher training and school infrastructure that fails to support equal access, to the limited adoption of curricula that take into account the diverse needs and backgrounds of students. In some regions, cultural and religious norms also continue to hinder female participation in education, particularly during the transition from elementary to junior high school.

Therefore, this study is highly urgent in examining the extent to which gender equality has been integrated into inclusive education practices at the elementary and junior high school levels in Palembang City. In addition, this research aims to identify and evaluate the empowerment efforts that have been implemented, as well as to find more effective solutions to address existing barriers. Through this study, it is expected that a clearer framework will emerge to enhance the participation of marginalized groups, particularly girls, in inclusive education in Indonesia, thereby creating a truly inclusive and equitable learning environment.

### **Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectional Feminism Theory**

Intersectional Feminism is a theory developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the early 1990s to explain how overlapping social identities—such as gender, race, socioeconomic class, and disability—affect individuals' experiences in society, including in the context of education. Crenshaw argues that experiences of oppression cannot be understood through a single identity category but must be viewed through the lens of the interactions between these various factors (Crenshaw 1991). In education, an intersectional approach provides insight that students from marginalized groups, such as those with special needs or from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, face barriers not only due to their disabilities but also because of factors like racial or economic inequality.

This theory emphasizes the importance of understanding how different layers of identity interact to exacerbate inequalities experienced by individuals within the educational system. Inclusive education, as explained by Pather and Nxumalo 2013, is not just about placing students with special needs in regular schools but also involves curriculum adjustments and the creation of supportive environments that

take into account students' diverse social and cultural backgrounds. In Indonesia, the challenges in implementing inclusive education, as noted by (Priyanti 2022), are often hindered by the gap between existing inclusive policies and their implementation, influenced by interacting socioeconomic and cultural factors.

### **Sarah Longwe's Empowerment Theory**

Sarah Longwe's Empowerment Theory outlines the concept of women's empowerment as a gradual process involving increased awareness, access to resources, and greater participation in decision-making. According to Longwe, empowerment can be achieved through five levels: welfare, access, critical awareness, participation, and control. Welfare and access emphasize meeting basic needs and women's access to resources that support their well-being. At the level of critical awareness, women begin to understand the injustices they may face and develop a deeper awareness of their rights. Active participation enables women to engage in decision-making processes, and the highest level—control—entails gaining full control over resources and decisions that affect their lives (Longwe, 1991).

This theory is relevant in the context of inclusive education because it helps identify steps that can be taken to empower students from marginalized groups, including women and individuals with special needs. In inclusive education, empowering students means ensuring they not only have access to education but also opportunities to actively participate in learning activities and decision-making processes. Thus, Longwe's empowerment theory provides a valuable framework for developing educational policies that focus not only on providing access but also on promoting greater involvement and control for students within the educational process.

### **METHODS**

This study employs a quantitative research approach aimed at examining the challenges and barriers related to gender equality and inclusive education in elementary and junior high schools. The research design is descriptive-quantitative, utilizing a structured questionnaire to collect data. The choice of a quantitative

approach allows for the identification of measurable patterns in students' participation, activity preferences, and attitudes regarding gender and inclusion.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select the schools for this study. The selected schools were those that had implemented inclusive education programs, as identified through information provided by the Palembang City Education Office. From each school, a minimum of 30 students who had experience sharing classrooms with peers with special needs were selected. This selection criterion ensured that the respondents had relevant experiences with inclusive education.

The total number of respondents in this study was 226 students, with 89 students at the elementary school level and 107 students at the junior high school level. Among the elementary students, there were 45 male and 44 female students, with 58 from public schools and 30 from private schools. At the junior high school level, the gender distribution was 60 male and 47 female students, with 65 from public schools and 43 from private schools. This distribution reflects a relatively balanced representation of genders, with a higher proportion of participants from public schools at both educational levels.

The data collection instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire that included questions related to students' preferences in various activities, such as sports, arts, and academic subjects, as well as their behavior in school and attitudes toward peers with disabilities. The questionnaire was reviewed for content validity by education experts and was pre-tested with a small sample of students to ensure its reliability and clarity. Based on feedback from the pre-test, revisions were made to enhance question comprehension and consistency before distributing the final version to the participants.

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. The analysis included cross-tabulations to examine the relationships between school level, school type (public vs. private), gender, and key indicators of gender bias and inclusivity. Descriptive statistics such as percentages and means were used to summarize the data, while Chi-square tests were conducted to determine significant differences in students' perceptions and experiences based on gender and school type. This analytical approach provided a detailed understanding of gender-related disparities and the implementation of inclusive practices in educational settings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Based on the Respondent

#### Characteristics Questionnaire

**Table 3.**  
**Characteristics of Respondents**

No	Item	Indicator	Total
1	Elementary School (SD)	Gender	
		Male	45
		Female	44
		Public Elementary School (SD Negeri)	58
		Private Elementary School (SD Swasta)	30
2	Junior High School (SMP)	Gender	
		Male	60
		Female	47
		Public Junior High School (SMP Negeri)	65
		Private Junior High School (SMP Negeri)	43

*Source: Processed by the author (2024)*

The data in Table 3 shows the characteristics of respondents from elementary and junior high school levels, outlined by gender and type of school (public or private). At the elementary school (SD) level, there are 45 male students and 44 female students, indicating a nearly even distribution between genders. Based on the type of school, 58 students come from public elementary schools, while 30 students are from private elementary schools. This data indicates that the majority of respondents at the elementary level come from public schools, with a significant proportion compared to those from private schools.

At the junior high school (SMP) level, there are 60 male students and 47 female students, showing a slight dominance of male students. In terms of school type, 65 students come from public junior high schools, while 43 students are from private junior high schools. Similar to the elementary level, the majority of respondents at the junior high level also come from public schools, although the



proportion of students from private schools is larger compared to the elementary level. Overall, the data indicates a tendency for more students from public schools to be respondents at both educational levels. The number of male and female students is also relatively balanced, although there is a slight difference in number at the junior high level. This difference may provide initial insights into the characteristics of respondents that could influence their perceptions or attitudes in the context of the research conducted, especially regarding the differences between public and private school students and the potential differences in perspectives between genders at each educational level.

**Table 4.**  
**Student Activity**

No	Domain	Indicator	M	F	E
1	Sport	Physical sports such as soccer (4.1)	158 (80,6%)	10 (5,1%)	28 (14,3%)
		Extracurricular Volley (4.3.1)	69 (35,2%)	23 (11,7%)	104 (53,1%)
		Basketball extracurricular (4.3.2)	91 (46,4%)	12 (6,1%)	93 (47,4%)
		Football extracurricular	167 (85,2%)	3 (1,5%)	26 (13,3%)
		Chess Extracurricular (4.3.8)	135 (68,9%)	10 (5,1%)	51 (26%)
		Karate Extracurricular (4.3.9)	65 (33,2%)	5 (2,6%)	126 (64,3%)
		Tekwondo extracurricular (4.3.10)	53 (27%)	11 (5,6%)	132 (67,3%)
2	Art	Participate in arts such as dancing (4.2)	4 (2%)	171 (87,2%)	21 (10,7%)
		Dance Extracurricular (4.3.3)	5 (2,6%)	162 (82,7%)	29 (14,8%)
		Painting Extracurricular (4.3.5)	8 (4,1%)	73 (37,2%)	115 (58,7%)
		Choir Extracurricular (4.3.11)	9 (4,6%)	68 (34,7%)	119 (60,75)
		Music Art Extracurricular (4.3.12)	11 (5,6%)	58 (29,6%)	127 (64,8%)
		Scouting Extracurricular (4.3.4)	35 (17,9%)	13 (6,6%)	148 (75,5%)
		Literacy and Numeracy Extracurricular (3.4.6)	9 (4,6 %)	30 (15,3%)	157 (80,1%)
3	Subjects	In textbooks that like to fight (6.1)	176 (89,8%)	3 (1,5%)	17 (8,7%)
		In textbooks that clean the house (6.2)	8 (4,1%)	147 (75%)	41 (20,9%)
		In textbooks that clean the yard (6.3)	52 (26,5%)	71 (36,2%)	73 (37,2%)
		In textbooks that involve physical exercise (6.4)	141 (73,5%)	6 (3,1%)	46 (23,5%)
		In textbooks that involve cooking activities (6.5)	5 (2,6%)	167 (85,2%)	24 (12,2%)
		In textbooks that involve cooking activities (6.5)	5 (2,6%)	167 (85,2%)	24 (12,2%)
		In textbooks that involve cooking			

		activities (6.5)	5 (2,6%)	167 (85,2%)	24 (12,2%)
		In textbooks that involve reading newspapers (6.6)	140 (71,4%)	6 (3,1%)	50 (25,5%)
		In textbooks that involve littering (6.7)	82 (41,8%)	15 (7,7%)	99 (50,5%)
No	Domain	Indicator	M	F	E
4	School Work	In textbooks that involve cooking activities (6.5)	5 (2,6%)	167 (85,2%)	24 (12,2%)
		In textbooks that involve reading newspapers (6.6)	140 (71,4%)	6 (3,1%)	50 (25,5%)
		In textbooks that involve littering (6.7)	82 (41,8%)	15 (7,7%)	99 (50,5%)
		In textbooks that involve playing soccer (6.8)	168 (85,7%)	4 (2%)	24 (12,2%)
		In textbooks that involve flying kites (6.9)	141 (71,9%)	24 (12,2%)	31 (15,8%)
		In textbooks that involve playing jump rope (6.10)	9 (4,6%)	122 (62,2%)	65 (33,2%)
		In textbooks that involve dancing (6.11)	3 (1,5%)	166 (84,7%)	27 (13,8%)
		Lifting desks (1.1)	141 (71,9 %)	3 (1,5 %)	52 (26,5 %)
		Cleaning the classroom (1.2)	3 (1,5 %)	78 (39,8%)	115 (58,7%)
		Position of class leader (3.1)	125 (63,8%)	26 (13,3%)	45 (23%)
		Position of secretary (3.2)	18 (9,2%)	144 (73,5%)	34 (17,3%)
		Position of treasurer (3.3)	11 (5,6%)	153 (78,1%)	32 (16,3%)
		More frequently invited to join craft material activities (11.1)	96 (49%)	17 (8,7%)	83 (42,3%)
		More frequently encouraged to join knitting activities (11.2)	6 (3,1%)	140 (71,4%)	50 (25,5%)
		More frequently encouraged to join sewing activities (11.3)	5 (2,6%)	143 (73%)	48 (24,5%)
5	Behavior	Students with untidy appearance (9.1)	150 (76,5%)	7 (3,6%)	39 (19,9%)
		Students with neat appearance (9.2)	17 (8,7%)	136 (69,4%)	43 (21,9%)
		Students who are poorly dressed (9.3)	136 ( 69,4%)	15 (7,7%)	45 (23%)

Students who are dressed neatly (9.4)	22 (11,2%)	131 (66,8%)	43 (21,9%)
Students who behave cleanly (9.5)	8 (4,1%)	121 (61,7%)	67 (34,2%)
Students who behave untidily (9.6)	130 (66,3%)	10 (5,1%)	56 (28,6%)
Students who do not skip school (10.1)	13 (6,6%)	100 (51%)	83 (42,3%)
Students who often skip school (10.2)	130 (66,3%)	12 (6,1%)	54 (27,6%)
Students who frequently complete assignments (10.3)	17 (8,7%)	78 (39,8%)	101 (51,5%)
Students who frequently do not complete assignments (10.4)	108 (55,1%)	18 (9,2%)	70 (35,7%)

*Source: Processed by the author (2024)*

The data in Table 4 summarizes student participation in various school activities grouped into five main domains: sports, arts, subjects, school services, and behavior. Each indicator within these domains reflects not only student preferences but also the underlying social and cultural constructs that shape their choices. The pattern of participation reveals significant gender-based disparities that, when analyzed through the lens of Crenshaw's intersectional feminism, expose how gender roles intersect with institutional practices and societal expectations to create unequal experiences for male and female students.

In the sports domain, for instance, the overwhelming participation of male students in high-intensity physical activities such as soccer (158 male students or 80.6%) compared to female students (10 female students or 5.1%) illustrates how masculinity is constructed around ideals of physical strength and dominance. This aligns with Crenshaw's assertion that gender identity does not exist in a vacuum but is influenced by social structures that privilege certain forms of expression over others. Simultaneously, the high participation of female students in activities like gymnastics—a sport perceived as graceful and less confrontational—reveals how societal expectations about femininity influence the opportunities available to them. These patterns suggest that participation is not merely a matter of personal preference but a reflection of broader structural inequalities embedded within the school environment.

From the perspective of Longwe's Empowerment Framework, which emphasizes levels of empowerment including welfare, access, conscientization, participation, and control, the data suggest that female students remain at the lower levels of empowerment, particularly in terms of access and participation. While both male and female students may have access to the same activities, their participation is shaped by social conditioning that limits the choices of girls, often

steering them away from spaces where assertiveness and competition are rewarded. For example, the tendency of female students to engage more in group learning (27.6% compared to 26.1% for male students) may reflect both a strength in collaboration and a result of socialization processes that encourage girls to be supportive rather than competitive—thereby limiting their control over more dominant spaces of expression such as technical or sports-based activities.

In the arts domain, female students' dominant presence in dance (56.6%) versus male students (3.6%) also exemplifies how empowerment through creative expression is gendered. While these activities provide space for self-expression, they are still confined within traditional gender norms that value aesthetics and emotion for girls and strength and rationality for boys. From an intersectional perspective, the marginalization of boys who may be interested in dance or other non-normative activities further reflects how rigid gender binaries suppress diverse identities and expressions.

The behavior domain reveals further disparities. A significantly higher number of male students reported leaving tasks incomplete (55.1%) compared to female students (19.4%). This can be understood through the intersectional feminist lens as a result of how gender expectations shape notions of responsibility. Girls, often socialized to be compliant and meticulous, may feel greater pressure to fulfill tasks as part of conforming to normative gender roles. In contrast, boys may experience leniency from teachers or peers when displaying non-compliant behaviors, reinforcing the notion that assertiveness or defiance is acceptable, even expected for them.

Teacher attention and support, as indicated in the data, also reflect gendered expectations. Male students tend to receive more guidance in subjects considered technical or cognitively demanding, such as mathematics and science, while female students are supported more in subjects related to the arts and humanities. According to Longwe, this reflects an unequal distribution of access and control, where boys are positioned to gain more control over future career paths in STEM fields, while girls are encouraged to develop skills in areas deemed less prestigious or economically empowering. Crenshaw's theory supports this interpretation by

emphasizing how institutional practices such as differential teacher attention perpetuate gender hierarchies under the guise of individualized support.

This analysis demonstrates that gender disparities in student participation are not simply individual choices but the outcome of intersecting social, cultural, and institutional factors. Applying Crenshaw's and Longwe's frameworks reveals how gender identity interacts with structural conditions to either empower or constrain students' full participation in educational activities. To move toward greater gender equity, schools must go beyond surface-level inclusion by addressing the deeper power dynamics that limit student agency. By fostering an environment where all students, regardless of gender, can explore activities free from stereotype and bias, schools can play a transformative role in promoting genuine empowerment and intersectional inclusivity.

**Table 5.**  
**Teacher Attitude Tendency**

No	Item	Indikator	M	F	E
1	Subjects	Emphasizing achievement in Science (7.1)	20 (10,2%)	22 (11,2%)	154 (78,6%)
		Providing opportunities in Science (7.2)	24 (12,2%)	24 (12,2%)	148 (75,5%)
		Achievement in Mathematics (7.3)	33 (16,8%)	46 (23,5%)	117 (59,7%)
		Struggling in Science (7.4)	66 (33,7%)	15 (7,7%)	115 (58,7%)
		Struggling in Mathematics (7.5)	60 (30,6%)	21 (10,7%)	115 (58,7%)
		Teacher is more attentive in Science (7.6)	19 (9,7%)	29 (14,8%)	148 (75,5%)
		Teacher is more attentive in Mathematics (7.7)	27 (13,8%)	24 (12,2%)	145 (74%)
		Teacher is more attentive in Social Studies (8.1)	30 (15,3%)	22 (11,2%)	144 (73,5%)
		Providing opportunities in Social Studies (8.2)	25 (12,8%)	23 (11,7%)	148 (75,5%)
		Achievement in Social Studies (8.3)	40 (20,4%)	32 (16,3%)	124 (63,3%)
		Providing opportunities in Arts (8.4)	19 (9,7%)	62 (31,6%)	115 (58,7%)
		Providing opportunities in Arts (8.5)	13 (6,6%)	66 (33,7%)	117 (59,7%)
2	School Work	Assigning tasks based on gender (1.3)	6 (3,1%)	10 (5,1%)	180 (91,8%)

Often giving attention (2.1)	7 (3,6%)	23 (11,7%)	166 (84,7%)
Crying when scolded by the teacher for inappropriate behavior (2.2)	79 (40,3%)	54 (27,6%)	63 (32,1%)
Gentle attitude (2.3)	6 (3,1%)	161 (82,1%)	29 (14,8%)
Complimenting for leadership (5.1)	105 (53,6%)	22 (11,2%)	69 (35,2%)
Complimenting for bravery (5.2)	120 (61,2%)	18 (9,2%)	58 (29,6%)
Complimenting for diligence (5.3)	15 (7,7%)	119 (60,7%)	62 (31,6%)

*Source: Processed by the author (2024)*

The data in Table 5 presents an analysis of teachers' attitudes toward students across two main domains: subjects and schoolwork, categorized by gender (Male [M], Female [F], and Total [E]). Indicators observed include teacher attention, recognition, and task distribution. These reveal patterns of gender-based differentiation, suggesting that internalized gender norms may shape how teachers treat male and female students within the classroom setting.

In the subject's domain, teachers provide relatively equal encouragement in Natural Sciences (IPA), as shown by 20 male students (10.2 percent) and 22 female students (11.2 percent) receiving attention. However, in mathematics, a disparity arises, with 66 male students (33.7 percent) receiving attention compared to only 15 female students (7.7 percent). This indicates a gendered bias where male students are more often associated with competence in technical subjects. In Social Sciences (IPS), teacher attention is more evenly distributed, with 25 male students (12.8 percent) and 21 female students (11.7 percent). In contrast, within the arts domain, female students receive greater opportunity and encouragement (63 or 31.6 percent) than male students (19 or 9.7 percent), reflecting a perception that artistic domains are more suitable for girls.

In the schoolwork domain, task distribution also reflects gendered tendencies. A higher number of male students (79 or 40.3 percent) are given tasks compared to female students (54 or 27.6 percent), suggesting that teachers may associate responsibility and technical tasks more with male students. Meanwhile, recognition is largely shaped by gender stereotypes. Female students are more frequently

praised for neatness (123 or 62.8 percent) and gentleness (161 or 82.1 percent), while male students receive praise for leadership (105 or 53.6 percent) and courage (120 or 61.2 percent). These patterns reinforce traditional gender roles and reflect how schools can unintentionally serve as spaces for the reproduction of gender norms.

Intersectional Feminism, as introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, emphasizes that gender does not operate in isolation, but intersects with other social identities and structures. Applying this lens helps uncover how institutional practices, including teacher-student interactions, can sustain inequalities even when they appear subtle. Rather than simply acknowledging differences, intersectional analysis pushes for understanding the mechanisms through which gendered experiences are formed and reinforced in everyday contexts, such as classrooms.

Sarah Longwe's Empowerment Framework further informs this analysis by offering five levels of empowerment: welfare, access, conscientization, participation, and control. This study particularly focuses on the dimensions of access and conscientization. Access refers to the extent to which male and female students are provided with equal opportunities to participate in academic and non-academic activities. Conscientization relates to the awareness of unequal gendered treatment and the willingness of both teachers and students to critically question those norms.

The observed patterns in teacher behavior can thus be interpreted as indicators of unequal empowerment. The fact that male students are disproportionately associated with mathematics and leadership, while female students are often confined to the arts and praised for behavioral qualities, reflects a limited empowerment process. Rather than enabling students to break out of gendered expectations, the classroom becomes a site where such expectations are maintained. True empowerment, as Longwe suggests, requires not only equitable access but also a transformation of perceptions and power dynamics.

Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that teachers' attitudes still reflect and reinforce implicit gender stereotypes. Integrating the theories of Intersectional Feminism and Empowerment allows for a deeper understanding of these dynamics, emphasizing the need for schools to actively foster inclusive educational practices. In order to genuinely support student development, all learners must be given the

opportunity to explore their full potential without being confined by socially constructed gender roles.

## **Inclusive Education Policies: Public vs Private Schools and Financial Implications**

### **Comparison of Inclusive Policies in Public and Private Schools**

Inclusive education policies in Indonesia show significant differences between public and private schools in terms of implementation, resources, and accessibility for students with disabilities. Public schools, which are obligated by the government to accept students with disabilities, are based on the principle that all children have the right to equal and quality education, regardless of their social background or physical condition (Fang 2022; Rueda 2024). However, limited resources, lack of teacher training, and inadequate infrastructure are major barriers to achieving optimal inclusive education (Riahta and Kurniawati 2018; Veradegita et al. 2021). At the provincial level, regulations on managing inclusive education are governed by Governor's Decree of South Sumatra No. 538/KPTS/DISDIK/2024, which establishes the task force for disability services in the education sector under the Department of Education of South Sumatra. This regulation aims to ensure that the management of inclusive education at the provincial level has clear and strategic guidelines, involving various related sectors, including the Department of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (DPPA), the Social Affairs Office (Dinsos), and academics. Meanwhile, in Palembang City, the management of inclusive education services is driven by Mayor's Decree of Palembang No. 143/KPTS/Disdik/2024 on the Establishment of the Disability Services Unit (ULD) under the Department of Education of Palembang City. This decree serves as the legal foundation for the establishment and management of the ULD at the city level, which focuses on providing services to schools in Palembang. As a follow-up, Decree of the Head of the Department of Education of Palembang No. 420/061 SK/DISDIK/2024 establishes a team to implement disability services in education across both public and private schools.

However, there are differences in the structure and involvement of related sectors between the ULD at the provincial and city levels. The Provincial ULD



involves various sectors such as DPPA and Dinsos, whereas the ULD in Palembang City is solely composed of institutions from the Department of Education of Palembang City. This highlights a difference in the scale and scope of approaches to handling inclusive education between the two government levels.

**Table 6.**

**Number of Students with Special Needs in Elementary Schools in Palembang City Based on Gender**

Sekolah	Laki-Laki	%	Perempuan	%	Total
<b>Negeri</b>	340	68,69%	155	31,31%	495
<b>Swasta</b>	75	78,13%	21	21,88%	96
<b>Total</b>	415	70,22%	176	29,78%	591

*Source: Department of Education of Palembang City, processed by the author from raw data reports from each elementary school (2024)*

The Department of Education of Palembang (Diknas) has reported that as of November 2024, a total of 591 students with disabilities are enrolled in general schools in Palembang. Data on the distribution of students by gender shows that males with disabilities dominate the number of registered students in both public and private schools, with 70.22% of the total students being male. This figure indicates a gender imbalance that requires further attention in inclusive education policies.

### **The Impact of Stereotypes on Gender Bias in Inclusive Education**

The urgency of addressing gender bias has emerged as a key finding in these interviews. Many teachers and school staff recognize that, often unconsciously, there are still discrepancies in how male and female students, particularly those with special needs, are treated. One informant shared, "Many teachers unconsciously treat male and female students differently, even though equal treatment is crucial for boosting their self-confidence." This gender bias is seen as a barrier to students' potential, especially for female students, in accessing equal learning opportunities.

Some schools have begun implementing special training for teachers to raise awareness about the importance of fair treatment, although such training remains limited. The goal is to foster an environment that supports students' self-confidence, free from gender discrimination. Sarah Longwe's empowerment theory can be

applied here, emphasizing the need for fulfilling access and participation for female students, particularly those with special needs. Longwe asserts that empowering women through education involves several levels, including critical awareness and active participation. By reducing gender bias and ensuring equal treatment, female students will not only gain confidence but also be better equipped to participate in learning activities and decision-making processes at school.

Moreover, parents' reluctance to enroll children with special needs in mainstream schools remains a significant obstacle to achieving inclusive education. Many parents worry that their children will not receive the appropriate treatment or adequate facilities in general education settings. One parent expressed, "I am doubtful whether this school can meet my child's unique needs, but I hope they can be more inclusive in the future." This highlights the need for schools to build trust with parents through effective communication and improvements in facilities. By creating a more inclusive and responsive environment to meet students' needs, schools can help parents feel more comfortable and confident about enrolling their children with special needs.

Parents' trust in public schools is also crucial for the success of inclusive education. Many still question whether public schools can provide a safe and welcoming environment for children with special needs. As one school principal explained, "We strive to explain the inclusion program to parents, but many remain skeptical." This illustrates that raising awareness about inclusive education is necessary to ensure parents understand its importance and feel reassured about their children's welfare at school. Through more targeted efforts, schools can strengthen their relationships with parents, fostering greater openness to the concept of inclusion.

In alignment with Sarah Longwe's empowerment theory, it is clear that creating equal access and reducing gender bias in the educational environment is essential for empowering students, particularly girls and children with special needs. By doing so, inclusive education becomes not only a safe and fair space but also a tool for students to grow and develop to their fullest potential. While inclusion aims to provide a fair learning environment for all students, including those with special needs, concrete steps are still required to fully realize this goal.

These steps include curriculum adjustments, teacher training, and the provision of supportive facilities. Challenges such as gender bias and parents' reluctance to enroll children in public schools remain significant obstacles. Therefore, raising awareness among teachers and parents, as well as enhancing communication and improving school infrastructure, is vital. Through dedicated efforts, we can build an educational system that is truly inclusive, offering all students equal opportunities to learn and thrive.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study highlights the importance of inclusive education that addresses students' needs, particularly in tackling gender bias and negative perceptions. The findings show that disparities in how male and female students are treated can hinder their development, emphasizing the need for teacher training on fair and equal treatment. A comparison of inclusive policies in public and private schools reveals key differences. Public schools, mandated by the government to accommodate students with special needs, face challenges like limited resources and insufficient teacher training. On the other hand, private schools have more flexibility but higher fees, which can limit access for families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The government and private sector play a critical role in providing resources to improve the accessibility and quality of inclusive education. Addressing gender issues, particularly for female students, is vital to ensure equal opportunities. The findings underscore the need for a more inclusive educational environment that supports all students, aiming to create a fair and just system where every student can thrive.

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