

Exploring Gender Issues in the Field of Special Education in Nepal



Sharan Hari Shrestha¹, Smriti Rai², Kyounggun Han³, Sabina Chaudhary⁴

¹Assistant Professor in Central Department of Education, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Nepal.

²PhD in Special Education from Changwon National University, South Korea.

³Professor & Dean, Dept. of Special Education, Dankook University, South Korea.

⁴Assistant Professor, Unique Medical College & Teaching Hospital, Purbanchal University, Nepal.

ABSTRACT: This study aimed to explore the issues of gender inequality in the Nepalese special education system. Qualitative research which consisted of a descriptive research design was utilized. It was conducted in Kathmandu Valley and centered on the six special education schools with a total participation of 24 teachers. The results identified many issues chiefly in the areas of instruction, lack of teacher training, school policies, socio-cultural background, sexual harassment, interaction with teachers, and parental support. It was concluded that these issues should be taken into deep consideration by the related stakeholders so that gender equity can be obtained in the field of special education in Nepal.

KEYWORDS: Gender; Special education; Gender inequality; Equity

INTRODUCTION

Gender issues are prevalent in countries and societies all over the world. Males and females are discriminated against in education and the employment sector which generates gender-based differences not just in their private lives, but even in schools and the workplace (Salanauskaitė & Reingardė, 2018). Gender stereotypes affect all areas of a person's life, including selection of subjects in schools and career options for males and females. Nowadays, society has started to view gender role inequalities as despicable (Eyer, 2015). To fight against the ill effects of gender disparities, there are continued governmental and non-governmental efforts to increase equality globally.

In Nepal, women have always been looked down upon compared to men in society. Thus, it is obvious that girls and women have fewer opportunities, access to information, and less access to education which limits their personal as well as career development. A National Female's Commission Report on the Socio-Economic Status of Women in Nepal supports the fact that females have lesser access to freedom, property, social security, education, and health services, as well as decision-making processes (Bhattarai, 2017). It is widely known that the society of Nepal is patriarchal and that boys and men are entitled to more privileges in every area of life including education.

These days, many women in Nepal are getting some form of education, but there are differences among ethnic groups, castes, and geographical regions (Asian Development Bank, 2010). Hindrances for females in their daily lives include; lesser access to education which leads to fewer job opportunities, and sexual and psychological abuse perpetuated by superstitions and societal traditions that promote gender discrimination. In addition to this, disability of any type increases social stigma and biased treatment by society.

In the educational sector of Nepal, a lot needs to be done to achieve gender equality. The Nepalese government has adopted measures to provide access to education for all, especially for marginalized groups like people with disabilities and females. Nepal officially acknowledged the human rights of people with disabilities in 1981, when the country observed the International Year of Disabled Persons. Following this, the Disabled Persons Protection and Welfare Act (DPWA) 1982, and the Disabled Persons Protection and Welfare Rules (DPWR) 1994 were enacted (Dhungana, 2006). DPWA and DPWR listed a number of services and privileges for individuals with disabilities such as free education, free medical facilities, job opportunities, self-employment services, traveling facilities, and free legal aid facilities.

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Additionally, Nepal signed the World Conference on Education for All, in 1990, which promoted the treatment of education as a basic need and right of every person. It was mentioned that improvement in access to education and the participation of females should be prioritized by eradicating gender stereotyping in education (UNICEF, 2009). The new constitution of Nepal 2015 also advocated the educational rights of people with disabilities and females (Constituent Assembly Secretariat; Singha Durbar, 2017). It states that all Nepalese legally have the right to basic education and that individuals with physical impairments and economically backward citizens have the right to free higher education. It also stated that individuals with visual impairments have the right to free education with Braille script. Moreover, it was stated that education programs for females must be created to diminish the socio-cultural barriers that have prohibited them from receiving the benefits of any educational programs and also to provide fair opportunities in all aspects of their lives.

While reviewing previous studies regarding gender issues in special education, some main issues were identified. Developed countries such as USA and UK, have also been facing gender issues in the field of special education. First of all, one of the major emerging issues globally is the over-representation of boys in special education as compared to girls. Studies show that generally, boys make up 2/3 of the population of students referred to special education services especially for Emotional and Behavioral Disorders and Learning Disabilities (Tschantz & Markowitz, 2003). Furthermore, the gender ratio for referral to special education was found to be 2:1 where, 2 boys are referred for every 1 girl (Emily, Bickett, & Graf, 2008). Thus, these studies conducted in the USA show gender disparities in special education. In the UK, like the USA, there is also an issue of over-representation of boys in special education services. One study raised the matter of gender equity (Daniels H., Hey, Leonard, & Smith, 1999; Rai, 2019) by stating that the problem should be tackled not by referring more girls to special education services, but by addressing the needs of both boys and girls fairly and ensuring that they are getting special educational services as per their individual needs.

Similarly, another major gender issue in the field of special education is that there is gender-biasness in special education textbooks. In one study conducted on two popular editions of introductory LD books written by one male and one female author, it was seen that the female author utilized 28% masculine, 24.3% feminine, and 47.8% gender-neutral pronouns while the male author utilized 36.5% male, 58.2% gender neutral and just 5.3% female pronouns. Even in the second edition of the textbooks, no particular changes were found (Foley & Safran, 2015). Therefore, this study indicated that the gender of the author influenced the writing of the textbook.

Furthermore, another important issue that has been identified is that there is teacher bias in the special education referral process. As per a study conducted in Greece, it was found that the gender of the teachers highly influenced the referral of students to special education services. The ratio was 2:1 in which, male teachers identified 2 students with LD for every 1 student by female teachers (Georgios, Faye, & Padelidiu, 2008). However, some studies conducted did not show any significant teacher bias while referring students to special education services (Bolden, 2009; Eyer, 2015). Another study found that gender greatly influences teacher referral and, classroom behavior especially, disruptive behavior of boys, also influences teacher referrals (Anderson, 1997; Rai 2019). Therefore, there are mixed results regarding teacher biases in the referral process of special education.

As for the case of Nepal, it was difficult to find literature on this topic. The field of special education is currently in the initial phase of development in the country, so, there is still a lot of work to be done to enhance the quality of special education services. Therefore, the main focus at present is on enhancing the available resources and services rather than gender-related issues. In this context, this study could be a pioneer in this field, which can open up the way for more research to be conducted in the area of gender concerns related to special education.

Nepalese social concepts and ideas on disability are generally founded upon religious beliefs that take it as a punishment for the past lives' sins of the parents (Lamichhane, 2013). Because of narrow mindset of the society, females with disabilities face double discrimination owing to their gender and their disability (Rousso, 2003). A recent study conducted by Handicap International Nepal reported that, 59% of children identified with a disability were not enrolled in schools and that even if they do get enrolled in primary school, it is rare for them to pass Early Childhood Education Development (ECED) and gain access to secondary education, as compared to their non-disabled peers. Moreover, even in the case of people with disabilities, girls and women had comparatively lesser school attendance, lesser literacy levels, low involvement in jobs, more restricted access to assistive devices, and overall lesser participation levels (Eide, Neupane, & Hem, 2016). This highlights the grim scenario regarding how females with disabilities in Nepal are facing double discrimination, which further marginalizes them in society.

In this context, females with disabilities experience numerous obstacles in accessing secondary and primary education and also in receiving an equitable education after getting admitted into schools. Most of the time, the main reason is gender bias in addition to disability bias, which is an attitudinal barrier; although other kinds of barriers like transportation, infrastructural difficulties, etc. may also be noteworthy. All in all, in a majority of the cases, obstacles to education for girls and women with disabilities stem from societal bias against females, which results in better treatment and access to opportunities and resources for males. Typically, education is not considered very important for girls, who are expected to become future mothers and wives; while on the contrary,

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boys who are expected to become the breadwinners of the family, are given priority in schooling and higher education (Rousso, 2003). Thus, the Nepalese social beliefs, practices, norms, values, etc. all promote gender inequality greatly.

In the field of general education, the gender issue has already been raised as a matter of discourse in Nepal. However, this issue has not gained attention in the special education sector of the country to the date. Therefore, this study can help the gender-related issues to be raised in the Nepalese special education field. In this scenario, this current study can establish itself as a milestone and open up the door for more discussion and debate on such issues. There are different kinds of gender-related challenges and problems which are hidden in society and have not been exposed due to a lack of systematic and scientific studies on the related issues. These problems are causing discrimination and unequal treatment between males and females in society. In this situation, it is crucial to examine special education practices from a gender perspective.

Objective and Research Question

The main purpose of this study was to explore the gender-related issues in the practices of special education in the Nepalese context. For this purpose, this study tried to answer the question: "What are the key gender-related problems existing in the sector of special education in Nepal?"

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was performed through a qualitative method (Creswell & Poth, 2018) with a descriptive research design (Kaul, 2009). Participants were selected using purposive sampling method as teachers of students with special needs are expected to have more information compared to others because they are directly involved in their education. It was carried out in special education schools of the Kathmandu valley comprising the three districts of Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, and Kathmandu. The total number of teachers taken as respondents was 24 from six special education schools. Equal numbers of both male and female teachers were included in this study. Semi-structured interview questionnaire was utilized to collect information.

First and foremost, to conduct the semi-structured interview, the school administration staff were met personally. During that time, the objective of the study was thoroughly clarified in order to gain their permission. The head teachers were asked to provide the authentic and appropriate candidates who had the longest teaching experience (minimum five years). The main criterion for selecting the teachers as participants was their teaching experience level.

Following the granting of permission, the participants were met individually during their leisure time during school hours. Twenty-four semi structured interviews were taken with teachers. Each interview lasted at least 25 to 30 minutes so as to obtain detailed information. Similarly, related documents were carefully reviewed to collect relevant information. The information obtained was analyzed in a descriptive method. For this purpose, editing, transcribing, coding, classifying, and analyzing processes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) were carried out based on the themes created.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents (N=24)

Item		N	%
Gender	Male	12	50%
	Female	12	50%
Age	Less than 30	9	37.5%
	Above 30	15	62.5%
Years of Teaching Experience	5 years and more	24	100%

RESULTS

All in all, it was seen that the government and private sector have not paid enough attention to gender issues in the field of special education in Nepal. Since the history of special education is not very old in the country, it is a recently emerging sector after the passing of the Inclusive Education Policy 2017. This study attempted to explore this issue for the first time in the country. The findings of the study were categorically described based on the research question. The main themes were obtained via the method of qualitative data coding and analysis. The central findings are presented in more detail in the following sections.

Instruction

Most teachers' responses indicated that there is no differential instruction for boys and girls in their schools. However, some also mentioned that the type of instruction a child receives depends upon their curriculum and IEP. It was also mentioned that one of the main differences in instructional strategies for both genders is related to toilet training where especially girls need to be taught

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proper menstrual hygiene and boys also need to be taught proper toileting techniques. Other than that, there were no major differences in instruction. One of the teachers noted that:

Girls appear to be less active when they are menstruating. From my own experience, I know the aches and pains that they feel at such times. Therefore, I am very caring and considerate towards my students during those times
[Teacher 2 from School A].

Since there is social awareness among educated people about gender discrimination and its adverse effects, most teachers said that they are giving equal opportunities and using the same instructional strategies for all students regardless of their gender.

School Policies

Most schools do not have any school-level policies but teachers said that they have been giving a fair platform for males and females in the educational environment. They said that students are taught about gender equality and not to discriminate against any individual based on their gender through curricular subjects like moral education and social studies. A teacher shared:

Boys and girls are surely treated fairly in my class. All students feel comfortable with me as their teacher, as I am never gender biased. For me, their strengths and weaknesses are more significant rather than their gender
[Teacher 9 from School C].

In this way, despite a lack of school-level policies, special school teachers feel that they are providing equal opportunities for all students to learn and grow as individuals in their classrooms.

Gender sensitization training

Most teachers don't have any gender sensitization training. Only a few of them had short-term training. A teacher spoke on this matter:

The government has not yet paid adequate attention to gender sensitization training for teachers because it is not yet able to conduct context oriented and pedagogical training. Additionally, we already know about gender related social issues so I think additional gender sensitization training is unnecessary [Teacher 5 from School B].

Here, we can see a lack of government interest on the related issue as well as a lack of interest on the teachers' part. However, gender is a complex concept and the issue should be studied in detail by educators to stop gender discriminatory practices in schools. Even though teachers are aware of gender issues, gender biases, and creep into their attitudes and behaviors unknowingly. Therefore, gender sensitization training is highly crucial to diminish such problems.

Socio-cultural factors

Many teachers expressed that the education level of parents affects how they treat their sons and daughters. They said that financial status is another chief factor for gender discrimination. Similarly, geographical location is equally important in Nepal's case. In far-flung areas, people still do not have access to education, and they may still be following gender-biased practices.

I know a family whose son is sent to a boarding school in Kathmandu, while the daughter is sent to a public school. Moreover, girls are traditionally required to do household chores, which affects their educational performance greatly. Boys do not have any such responsibilities. In extreme cases, only sons go to school while daughters do housework and help in raising their siblings. These unjust practices must be eliminated as soon as possible [Teacher 15 from School D].

As we can see, more countrywide efforts are needed to end these negative practices through lawful measures and by promoting education and awareness in the country.

Physical and sexual abuse

A majority of the teachers demonstrated awareness regarding the issues of sexual harassment and many admitted their belief that girls are more prone to sexual harassment than boys because society perceives them as being weaker physically as well as emotionally. Similarly, teachers also believed that students with disabilities may also be more prone to such kind of harassment because of the same reason. On the other hand, they stated that there are hardly any cases of sexual harassment against boys that they know of. Another issue raised was that of human trafficking of girls who are sold into lives of sexual slavery. Especially, girls from villages who are uneducated are prone to fall victim to this kind of social evil. They are naïve and unaware and are easily tricked by traffickers who make false promises of providing them with decent jobs but end up selling them in big cities and also in India.

I know that women and children with disabilities are more prone to sexual abuse as society perceives them as weak beings. Newspapers constantly report rape, molestation, human trafficking, and so on. This is very upsetting and the government should take strong action to stop these social evils [Teacher 18 from School E].

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As we can see through the statement, this issue needs to be taken seriously by the government as well as special schools in the country to ascertain the safety and security of their students.

Student-teacher interaction

Regarding student-teacher interaction, teachers expressed differing views. They are as follows:

Maybe it's natural that ever since childhood, girls are chattier than boys. I have seen that baby girls start speaking earlier than boys. Even in my class, I see girls interacting with me more, which leads me to conclude that girls are indeed more interactive than boys [Teacher 23 from School F].

Contradictorily, another teacher opined:

Culturally, girls are more oppressed than boys. Since the time they are little, society teaches them different social values. Boys are encouraged to be brave and outgoing while girls are taught to be submissive and well-mannered. So, I personally believe that boys are more confident to speak up and interact with teachers as compared to girls [Teacher 2 from School A].

As we can see from the responses, the teachers held stereotypical views regarding their student's gender. This can certainly affect the way they behave with their students in their classrooms.

Parental Support

There were once again differing opinions on the topic of parental support. They are as follows:

Well-educated parents treat their sons and daughters equally, but, among the uneducated population, people still believe that sons are better than daughters. Sons are expected to be the families' future breadwinners while girls are considered as someone else's property since they have to be married off. Therefore, socially, sons are preferred over daughters [Teacher 12 from School C].

Socially, we have seen that females are more prone to sexual harassment. Therefore, parents tend to be more protective towards their daughters. For instance, parents don't hesitate to send their sons to school alone but for girls; parents are more particular about dropping them off and picking them up from school [Teacher 13 from School D].

As we can see, the social background of the family as well as the social dangers for girls and women affect how parents deal with their sons and daughters. Therefore, parents might show preferential treatment towards either their sons or daughters.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of this study, the following can be said about the identified gender issues in the field of special education in Nepal. Research in the field of toilet training for children with various disabilities shows effective results. A study on an intervention that comprised of removing diapers during school time, scheduled time intervals of bathroom visits, maximum time of 3 minutes to sit on the toilet, giving reinforcers soon after urination on the toilet, etc. were extremely successful in teaching toileting skills to children with ASD and developmental delays across 5 cases in community-based elementary schools (Cocchiola, Martino, Dwyer, & Demezzo, 2012). Another study on children with ASD found that urinary control was enhanced via animated toileting videos together with operant conditioning strategies (Keen, Brannigan, & Cuskelly, 2007). For girls with intellectual disabilities, training in the right hygiene techniques was effective for better menstrual care and hygiene (AltundağS & ÇalbayramNÇ, 2016). Hence, teaching proper toileting skills to students with disabilities is crucial. In this current study, teachers stated that they use differential instruction for both genders in the aspect of toilet training, especially menstrual care for girls.

The above literature shows that differences in biological aspects of boys and girls call for different toileting skills to be taught. Teachers must examine the efficient methods and strategies to teach proper toileting skills based on the student's gender and disability.

Secondly, there are no school-level policies that address gender issues in special schools in Nepal. School-level policies that guide the management of the school system exist in many developed countries (Pedder, 2010; Haruthaithanasan, 2018; Reznik & Halterman, 2016). There can be numerous types of policies that cover a vast area of themes ranging from the classroom level to the school level that assist schools in establishing rules and setting a benchmark for quality education. Nepalese schools must consider this and start developing school level policies that serve as guiding principles. It is essential to create school-level policies related to gender issues like constructing a gender-friendly curriculum, gender sensitization teacher training, gender-friendly toilets, gender-friendly teaching materials in classrooms, etc. A gender policy can address all these matters at the school level. Thus, all schools should be encouraged to develop such policies.

Thirdly, in this study, results showed a lack of gender training among the teachers. Most of them appeared self-assured that they were knowledgeable on gender issues. Research in this field has consistently shown that teachers may unknowingly reflect their

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notions of gender stereotypes upon their students. In a Korean study on gender equality in classroom instruction, teachers selected and used curricular materials that perpetuated traditional gender roles such as housework for women and office work for men (Jung & Chung, 2006). Although the government had projects for gender equality in education, it was seen that those teachers were unclear concerning the concept themselves and they weren't able to discern their own gender-biased behaviors (Chung & Kim, 2000; as cited in Jung & Chung, 2006). This shows how important gender sensitization training for teachers is. As Nepal is also a patriarchal and male-dominated society, teachers would significantly benefit by undertaking gender sensitization training. Their awareness, knowledge, and skills in imparting education through gender-equitable methods in their classroom would be enhanced. It would also help in eliminating gender-biased language, behavior, and instruction in classrooms.

Fourthly, this study showed that teachers generally believe that the social background of student greatly affects their education. It is true that culturally, girls do the housework while boys go to school. Also, there are some harmful practices like 'Chaupadi' i.e. forcing menstruating females to live away from their family (Langan & Phuyal, 2014). Therefore, personal beliefs, educational background, financial condition, geographical area, etc. all affect the perceptions of gender in Nepal.

Fifthly, another major issue identified was sexual harassment. Studies show that about 8000 girls and women are trafficked in Nepal annually (Plan International UK, 2018). Likewise, there is a high rate of sexual violence against females in Nepal i.e. 4.6% of girls aged 15-19 with physical violence found in one in five women of the same age group (Demographic & Health Survey 2011 as cited in Puri, Misra & Hawkes, 2015). Violence like the dowry system, witchcraft accusations, discrimination against widows, child marriage, etc socially exists and it is much more for women with disabilities (Puri, Misra, & Hawkes, 2015). A situation assessment in 2001 in Nepal displayed that 25% (N =13,005 households) of people with disabilities had been physically abused and bullied. These findings are dismal and suggest that more efforts should be made to create awareness among girls with disabilities in Nepal about these social evils. Self-defense training in schools could be a viable option for their safety.

Sixthly, regarding student-teacher interaction based on gender, some teachers believed girls, while others believed boys are more interactive. Some believed that girls are more talkative and friendly while others held the view that boys are more outspoken and confident as girls are naturally shy. All teachers had different opinions and there was no common answer. On this topic, a Korean study found that boys were more outspoken and interactive with their teachers than girls (Jung & Chung, 2006). Also, boys expressed themselves more verbally and acted out in class, especially academically frustrated ones (Oswald et. al 2008, as cited in Frawley, McCoy, & Banks, 2018). In contrast, girls were more prone to internalizing their emotions, were keener to please and those with anxiety were found to remain quiet (Bierdman et. al, 2002 as cited in Frawley, McCoy & Banks, 2018). Hence, research shows that girls are more reserved while boys are more forthright.

However, the variation of opinions in this current study reflected teacher's personal gender stereotype beliefs. Therefore, their attitude towards their students is surely influenced by these individual beliefs. Finally, regarding parental support based on child's gender, some teachers mentioned parents are more supportive towards their sons as Nepalese society is patriarchal. However, others believed that social evils like harassment and abuse targeted at females make parents more protective towards their daughters.

In research conducted on this topic that investigated parents' differential utilization of autonomy-supportive and controlling strategies towards their sons and daughters, hardly any differences were found. As per the review of literature published in the 1970s and 80s more autonomy-supportive strategies were found towards boys, whereas, after 1990, parents showed more autonomy-supportive strategies towards girls. Overall, it was seen that there were negligible differences in raising sons and daughters (Endendijk, Groeneveld, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Mesman, 2016). Another study showed that despite gender preferences or not, parents may still feel that sons and daughters must be reared differently. Moreover, even if parents believe boys and girls should be treated the same; they might not raise them androgynously (Raley & Bianchi, 2016). Thus, research has shown ambiguous results. It should also be noted that these studies were done in Western countries where social values and lifestyles differ significantly from those of Nepal.

CONCLUSION

This study gave essential insights about gender related issues in the sector of Nepalese special education. In short, they can be presented as follows:

First and foremost, teachers don't employ different instructional strategies for boys and girls excluding toilet training. Toileting is a basic life skill that many children with disabilities struggle with. As a result, teachers must teach them appropriate toileting skills depending on their gender and disability. Moreover, it was found that school-level policies are almost non-existent in Nepal. Although all schools have rules about the general dos and don'ts, there aren't any particular school policies, especially concerning gender issues. It was seen that the topic of gender is only discussed through curricular subjects like moral education or social studies.

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Furthermore, maximum number of teachers lack gender sensitization training but they were self-confident that they possess enough knowledge on the subject and that they do not promote gender biasness in their educational practices. Nonetheless, their personal views and perceptions regarding gender which is influenced by the social customs and values might affect their behavior and attitudes towards their students, even though unintentionally.

Hence, gender sensitization teacher training would be beneficial in minimizing gender-biased behaviors in school environments. Socio-cultural factors such as the education level of parents, financial status, geographical region, etc were seen to influence parent's attitudes and behavior toward their children. For this, concerned government and nongovernment agencies should work to impart knowledge and awareness about gender equity nationwide. In addition, harassment and abuse were identified as a crucial gender issue with females with disabilities falling prey to such crimes at alarming rates. To tackle this problem, it is suggested that schools take serious measures such as self-defense training, creating anti-harassment policies, etc. to guarantee student safety.

There were ambiguous views on student-teacher interaction based on gender. The teachers' responses reflected their personal views regarding gender such as "boys are more outgoing" or "girls are naturally more talkative". This showed that teachers do possess stereotypical gender views. Lastly, there were various views regarding parental support. One group of teachers believed that boys are given more support because of society being patriarchal. However, another group of teachers believed that parents are more concerned about the safety and well-being of their daughters due to the social crimes like abuse, molestation, rape, etc. committed against females. Thus, there was no unanimity on this topic.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Like every other study, this one also had its limitations. It was conducted in Kathmandu Valley which includes the three districts i.e. Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur. Remote areas where perceptions of gender stereotypes might have differed could not be included in this study. Therefore, this study cannot be generalized in the context of the entire country. Additionally, the semi-structured interview had a time limitation of 25 to 30 minutes for each participant. If they had been given more time, perhaps they would have been able to provide more detailed information. Additionally, due to the time and resource restriction in this study, only 24 participants were selected in total which might have further influenced results.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study being one of a kind in Nepal, can contribute significantly to providing information on this topic in the country. All related stakeholders such as schools, educational institutions, governmental agencies, and nongovernmental agencies can gain insights from this study. This can help in formulating and implementing better plans and policies from the governmental and private sectors in the future. Furthermore, it can help school personnel like teachers, administrators, principals, and counselors etc. to understand the issues related to gender faced by children with special needs and can help in making them aware on these issues and inspiring them to change outdated views.

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