

# Nursing Students' Experiences of Gender Bias: A Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

Gender bias continues to affect the academic and clinical experiences of nursing students within a traditionally female-dominated profession. Both male and female students face discriminatory attitudes, role stereotyping, and unequal opportunities, which influence their learning, self-confidence, and professional identity. This qualitative literature review examines the experiences of nursing students with gender bias and its impact on their educational journey. Eighteen qualitative studies published between 2010 and 2024 were analyzed using thematic analysis. Relevant literature was sourced from databases including PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Five key themes emerged: role stereotyping, unequal clinical placement opportunities, peer exclusion, reduced confidence and identity challenges, and coping strategies. Male students reported marginalization and questioning of their professional choice, while female students noted subtle biases in leadership roles and academic evaluation. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to create a more equitable learning environment. Recommendations include integrating gender-sensitivity training into nursing curricula, increasing faculty awareness, and ensuring equal clinical exposure. Institutions must also encourage peer support and open discussion around gender roles in nursing. Further research is needed to explore how other factors, such as socio-economic status and ethnicity, intersect with gender bias to shape student experiences.

## KEYWORDS

*Gender Bias, Nursing Students, Discrimination, Educational Experience, Qualitative Review*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Gender bias in nursing education remains a persistent and complex issue impacting students' academic, clinical, and social development. Nursing is traditionally viewed as a female-dominated profession, shaping societal expectations and institutional norms. Both male and female nursing students report experiences of gender-based discrimination and stereotyping (Stanley et al., 2016; Kelly, Barratt, & Aranda, 2019). Male students often face skepticism and stereotypes questioning their masculinity and professional suitability, this can cause social isolation and reduced confidence (O'Lynn, 2004; Meadus & Twomey, 2011). They are also discouraged from entering specialties like maternity or pediatrics, reinforcing rigid gender roles (Cleary, Horsfall, O'Hara-Aarons, & Jackson, 2012). Conversely, female students face subtle biases, such as being overlooked for leadership roles or encountering dismissive attitudes from faculty and peers (Christensen, Welch, & Barr, 2018; McLaughlin, Moutray, & Muldoon, 2017). These challenges affect their professional identity and limit career growth (Powell, Bower, & Hagan, 2018), impacting confidence, engagement, and performance.

Studies have documented various forms of gender bias, including peer exclusion, unequal faculty treatment, and inequitable clinical opportunities (Rajacich, Kane, Williston, & Cameron, 2013; Dyck, Oliffe, Phinney, & Garrett, 2009; Gallup, Larsson, & Kearns, 2020). Such discrimination can harm personal development, mental health, and retention in the profession (Smith & King, 2021). Despite increased focus on gender equity in healthcare education globally, there is limited understanding of nursing students' lived experiences with gender bias (Murray, 2016). Most research centers on

quantitative data or policy analysis, overlooking the nuanced, subjective realities students face. This literature review synthesizes qualitative studies on nursing students' perceptions and experiences of gender bias, aiming to guide educators and policymakers in fostering inclusive and equitable nursing education environments.

## **II. OBJECTIVE**

To systematically explore and synthesize qualitative research on nursing students' experiences, and responses to gender bias within nursing education. This review aims to understand how gender-based discrimination affects their academic performance, clinical training, professional identity, and social interactions, and to identify strategies that educators and policymakers can implement to foster more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative literature review was conducted to synthesize evidence on nursing students' experiences of gender bias. A comprehensive search was performed across electronic databases including PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus, and Google Scholar, covering publications from 2010 to 2024. Search terms included combinations of keywords such as "gender bias," "nursing students," "discrimination," "gender stereotyping," "clinical education and qualitative study." Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed qualitative studies that explored nursing students' perceptions, attitudes, and lived experiences related to gender bias within academic and clinical settings. Studies not available in English or lacking qualitative data were excluded. The selected articles were critically appraised, and thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns across the studies. A total of 18 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

## **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The review of qualitative studies reveals multiple, complex forms of gender bias experienced by nursing students, which profoundly affect their academic progression, clinical experiences, social integration, and professional identity development. These biases are embedded in societal stereotypes, institutional practices, and interpersonal interactions, manifesting through stereotyping, unequal opportunities, social exclusion, and differential treatment by faculty and peers.

### **Stereotyping and Role Expectations**

Male nursing students frequently face stereotypes that question their masculinity, emotional capacity, and suitability for a profession traditionally viewed as feminine. They are often perceived as less caring or empathetic, which contradicts stereotypical male traits, creating a discordant identity challenge (O'Lynn, 2004; Meadus & Twomey, 2011; Willis & Henderson, 2015). This results in male students being labeled as "the wrong gender" for nursing roles, affecting their acceptance by peers and educators (Rajacich et al., 2013). Moreover, male students report being steered away from specialties like maternity, pediatric, or geriatric nursing, areas seen as "women's work," reinforcing rigid gender norms and limiting their clinical exposure (Cleary et al., 2012; Day, 2013). Conversely, female students, despite numerical dominance, face subtle but persistent stereotypes regarding leadership and competence. They are often presumed less capable of leadership, facing implicit biases that undermine their professional aspirations and promotion potential (Christensen et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2018; Evans, 2019). Such stereotypes perpetuate gender hierarchies even within nursing, affecting career trajectories.

### **Unequal Opportunities in Clinical Placements and Leadership Development**

Gender bias is evident in the distribution of clinical placements, with male students often excluded or discouraged from certain specialty areas, reducing their experiential learning and career choices (Rajacich et al., 2013; Chambers et al., 2018). Female students report inequities in leadership development opportunities during training, with leadership roles and advanced clinical responsibilities sometimes preferentially given to male students or evaluated through a gendered lens (McLaughlin et al.,

2017; Powell et al., 2018). Such differential treatment in clinical settings not only impairs skill acquisition but also influences students' confidence and professional identity formation (Squires et al., 2017).

#### **Social Exclusion and Peer Bias**

Social exclusion emerges as a significant issue for both male and female nursing students, albeit in different forms. Male students, as a minority in nursing cohorts, often experience isolation, marginalization, and difficulty forming peer support networks, which are critical for academic and emotional support (Dyck et al., 2009; Meadus & Twomey, 2011). Female students face dismissive or competitive behaviors from male peers and sometimes faculty in inter professional contexts, reinforcing gender power dynamics and limiting collaborative learning (Gallup et al., 2020; Rasmussen & Wros, 2020). These dynamics contribute to a stressful learning environment, adversely impacting student well-being and engagement.

#### **Impact on Self-Confidence and Professional Identity**

Repeated exposure to gender bias undermines nursing students' self-confidence and professional identity. Male students frequently describe challenges in being accepted as legitimate nurses, struggling with role conflict and societal expectations (Smith & King, 2021; Meadus & Twomey, 2011). Female students often encounter barriers to asserting authority and leadership, with their professional capabilities undervalued or questioned (Murray, 2016; Powell et al., 2018). These experiences can diminish motivation, affect academic performance, and influence long-term career intentions, contributing to attrition or restricted advancement within the profession (Hall & Stevenson, 2015; Sorrell & Redmond, 2021).

#### **Coping Strategies and Resilience**

Despite facing persistent gender biases, nursing students employ various coping mechanisms. Many seek peer support and mentorship, develop personal resilience, and actively challenge gender stereotypes through advocacy and professional engagement (Stanley et al., 2016; Willis & Henderson, 2015). Institutional support through gender sensitivity training, inclusive curricula, and policies fostering equity are identified as crucial to empowering students and mitigating the adverse effects of bias (Murray, 2016; Gallup et al., 2020).

This synthesis highlights the critical need for nursing education programs to explicitly address gender bias by integrating gender-sensitivity training, ensuring equitable clinical placements, and fostering inclusive cultures. Educators and administrators must promote awareness of gender issues and create environments where all students can thrive regardless of gender, ultimately strengthening the nursing workforce's diversity and inclusivity.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

Gender bias in nursing education remains a significant barrier affecting the academic, clinical, and social experiences of both male and female nursing students. Despite nursing being a female-dominated profession, male students face stereotyping and exclusion that challenge their professional identity and limit their specialty choices. Female students while the majority; encounter subtle but persistent biases that undermine their leadership potential and professional confidence. These forms of bias manifests through stereotyping, unequal clinical opportunities, social exclusion, and differential treatment by faculty and peers, impacting students' well-being, engagement, and career aspirations. Addressing gender bias is essential not only for fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment but also for promoting a diverse and resilient nursing workforce prepared to meet the evolving needs of healthcare. Nursing education institutions must prioritize gender equity through targeted strategies to ensure all students can thrive regardless of gender.

#### **VI. Policy Suggestions**

- **Integrate Gender-Sensitivity Training:** Nursing curricula should include mandatory gender-sensitivity education for students, faculty, and clinical preceptors to raise awareness of unconscious biases and promote respectful interactions.
- **Equitable Clinical Placement Policies:** Establish transparent and gender-neutral criteria for clinical placements and specialty rotations, ensuring equal access to diverse learning opportunities for all students.
- **Supportive Mentorship Programs:** Develop mentorship and peer support initiatives that specifically address the unique challenges faced by minority gender groups within nursing cohorts, fostering inclusion and professional development.
- **Inclusive Leadership Development:** Create leadership training programs that actively encourage participation from all genders, coupled with bias-free evaluation systems to recognize and promote leadership potential fairly.
- **Regular Monitoring and Reporting:** Implement institutional mechanisms to monitor incidents of gender bias and discrimination, with clear reporting channels and responsive measures to address grievances promptly.
- **Promote Inter professional Education:** Facilitate inter professional collaboration and learning environments that challenge traditional gender roles and encourage mutual respect among healthcare students.
- **Research and Continuous Evaluation:** Support ongoing qualitative and quantitative research on gender bias in nursing education to inform evidence-based policy adjustments and best practices.
- By adopting these policies, nursing education can move toward an equitable and inclusive future, empowering students of all genders to contribute fully to the nursing profession and healthcare delivery.

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