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# Gender equity in evaluating higher education faculty competency in Dubai: views from first-year undergraduate students

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to examine the perceptions of male and female Emirati students regarding the competency of male and female faculty members in general introductory courses at a higher education institution in Dubai, which follows a policy of segregating undergraduates by sex.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using a purposive research design, the study employs focus-group data to investigate the viewpoints of two groups of first-year undergraduates in Dubai ( $n = 2,43$ ) on the role of gender in shaping their perceptions of faculty competency. Additionally, the researchers utilized open and axial coding schemes to analyze gender perceptions, revealing distinct patterns and thematic outcomes.

**Findings** – The findings highlight the presence of hidden gender stereotypes that can potentially impact the development of pedagogical relationships in higher education. Based on these findings, the study recommends ways in which students, educators, and administrators may mitigate gender-related bias in faculty evaluations.

**Originality/value** – Furthermore, these insights were designed to contribute to fostering a more equitable educational environment in higher education institutions.

**Keywords** Gender equity, Higher education evaluation, Faculty competency, First-year undergraduate students' perspectives

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Teaching has evolved from individual apprenticeships and tutoring to a professional discipline in the early 1800s (Marzano *et al.*, 2011). However, even by the early 1900s, faculty evaluation was not a commonly recognized aspect of the educational process (Burke and Krey, 2005). Through systems of faculty evaluation, educational institutions aim to identify strong and weak teaching traits.

Administrator evaluation of faculty in higher education was introduced in the 1920s (Marsh, 1987; Cubberley, 1929; Wetzel *et al.*, 1929) as a way to validate the quality of teaching and research at colleges and universities. The tenure system was widely introduced shortly

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thereafter, in the 1930s (Tiede, 2018), to offer job security for faculty members who demonstrate ongoing excellence in teaching, research, and service to the profession. Contemporarily, tools such as student evaluations are often utilized to make critical decisions regarding faculty members' opportunities to pursue contract renewal, promotion, hiring, tenure, and/or merit pay.

Student evaluation of faculty performance has a relatively modern history worldwide. Edward Thorndike, a famous American psychologist, was the first to suggest that student satisfaction with teaching performance could assist in evaluating faculty competency in the 1940s (Detchen, 1940). The popularity of student evaluations was due to many factors, for example, growing emphasis on accountability in higher education and an increase in the worldwide student population. However, empirical research pertaining to the evaluation of teacher characteristics and dispositions was only emerging (Symonds, 1946).

This historical context highlights the evolving nature of faculty evaluation mechanisms. Currently, student evaluations are a common method of analyzing faculty performance (Wachtel, 1998). They were introduced to consult multiple stakeholders on the value of students' learning experiences (Marsh, 1987). However, research criticizes administrators for rushing to judge faculty without holistically examining faculty practice relative to student learning (Toch and Rothman, 2008). Despite the common use of student evaluations, there is not a common understanding of what faculty competency is and how it may be equitably evaluated.

#### *Purpose of the study*

This research examines gender equity in faculty competency evaluations by studying themes present among one accredited institution's first-year undergraduates' perspectives in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). In 2014, there were 82 higher education institutions in the UAE, and 31 were located in Dubai (UAE Open Data, 2022). At the time of data collection, the national service requirement for males had yet to be mandated, and the students were already enrolled in higher education as soon as they completed the academic requirements (e.g. both bilingual English and Arabic requirements at this institution). By focusing on the perspectives of first-year undergraduates in Dubai, UAE, this research seeks to contribute nuanced insights into their initial gender impressions, expectations, and considerations that may influence the assessment of faculty performance within a cultural framework where only male and female gender affiliations are currently recognized. The findings may help faculty recognize teaching practices that may either conflict or align with students' gender norm expectations of high-quality teaching.

#### **Literature review**

We define faculty competency as a teacher's ability to design a teaching process that achieves the lessons' goals considering all contextual factors. Research suggests humans develop gender biased perceptions early in life, and gender perceptions become evident in child interactions by age three (Berk, 2012). Perception is often influenced by sociocultural gender norms in society (Short *et al.*, 2013). For example, Google images of professors provide many cartoon characters who appear to look like Albert Einstein and are generally middle-aged white men with gray hair. Gender norms tend to vary from one society to another (Helgeson, 2002), and gender inequities exist in higher education.

Global studies have further identified potential gender biases in student evaluations of faculty competency. Notably, a university study in France found that male students were more likely to give higher satisfaction scores to male teachers than female teachers. Similarly, in Iran, male students tended to rate female faculty lower than their male counterparts (Zaree *et al.*, 2016). Also, The *Rate my professor* (2014) Website contains potential gender bias in

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student ratings, emphasizing the need for a more in-depth exploration of student descriptions of faculty competency. Gender bias in faculty evaluation occurs when students in a particular culture are influenced by perceptions of either masculine or feminine gender expressions based on subjective judgments of faculty competency.

#### *Student evaluations of faculty competency, international research*

Several studies have examined student evaluations of faculty competency, highlighting potential gender bias in these evaluations. A study conducted in 2017 at a French university analyzed a dataset of 12,847 female students and 9,818 male students (Boring, 2017). The findings revealed that male students were approximately 30% more likely to give an excellent overall satisfaction score to male teachers compared to female teachers. Additionally, students who received poor grades tended to be harsher in their evaluations of female teachers compared to male teachers who assigned equally bad grades (Boring, 2017).

In Iran, researchers designed a questionnaire to assess potential gender biases in faculty ratings by male and female students (Zare-ee *et al.*, 2016). The study, based on 800 randomly sampled student evaluations, indicated that male students rated female faculty lower than male faculty ( $p = 0.001$ ) (Zare-ee *et al.*, 2016). The researchers noted that the effects of this variable may vary based on contextual factors and student expectations. To date, there is a lack of qualitative investigations into the validity of student perceptions of faculty competency worldwide, highlighting the need for further research in this area.

Similarly, the Rate My Professor website has become a popular online tool for faculty evaluations, featuring voluntary, open-access reviews from over 14 million students worldwide (Rate my professor, 2014). An analysis of the website's data was highlighted in a New York Times article (Miller, 2015). The associated study revealed potential gender bias in student ratings, with male faculty being described as "best professors" more frequently and perceived as "more knowledgeable" across various disciplines (Schmidt, 2015). These findings indicate the need for further investigation into students' in-depth descriptions of faculty competency.

While Rate My Professor studies have shed light on faculty evaluations, previous research has also explored this topic. Wachtel (1998) conducted a systematic literature review to investigate the influence of faculty and student gender on evaluation outcomes. The review found no statistically significant association between faculty gender and student evaluation scores. However, the data used in this study was not highly disaggregated, potentially affecting the results. Further examination, considering variables such as the academic level of students, is warranted.

In the UAE, studies have also examined faculty evaluations. A survey conducted at Zayed University campuses in 2002 revealed that the faculty participants had reservations about student evaluations of faculty competency (Davidson and Lydiatt, 2006). Approximately 54% expressed concerns about the validity of student evaluations, and 79% believed that grades influenced students' perceptions. In addition, personal perceptions of the influence of gender bias on faculty evaluation were also acknowledged by 48 faculty members. Alternative evaluation methods suggested by respondents included colleague observations, management appraisals, considerations of student performance, and self-evaluation. This study calls for a deeper examination of student biases in faculty evaluations.

Another study conducted at Zayed University by Morgan and Davies (2006) analyzed 13,208 female student evaluation records (Morgan and Davies, 2006). Their findings revealed a positive correlation between faculty scores on the evaluation instrument and the grades assigned, as well as class timing (e.g. courses held between 9 am–2 pm tended to receive

higher scores, on average). Also, male faculty were rated slightly higher, on average, than female faculty. While this study employed quantifiable methods to examine the reliability of results, there is still a need for in-depth perspectives from student evaluators. Furthermore, there is a dearth of empirical data on student-gendered perceptions of faculty competency in the UAE.

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### *Summary of the literature*

Previous research suggests that student evaluations of faculty competency may be limited by bias influenced by cultural norms, highlighting the need to explore equity in faculty evaluations worldwide (Davidson and Lydiatt, 2006; Morgan and Davies, 2006; Zare-ee *et al.*, 2016). This investigation aims to explore equity in faculty expectations for males and females within the realm of higher education in Dubai, UAE. Focused on addressing gender bias statements, the study aims to evaluate their impact on the validity of faculty evaluation instruments and results. Notably, the research context is situated within a social framework, where only male and female gender affiliations are recognized.

By examining first-year undergraduates' perspectives, this research seeks to offer nuanced insights into how gender impressions may influence faculty competency evaluations. The findings aspire to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in student evaluations of faculty and, in turn, inform and benefit faculty members by providing a basis for enhancing their teaching practices.

### **Research methodology**

Students in higher education systems in the UAE typically evaluate faculty competency at the end of each semester, providing structured and open-ended feedback. Student evaluations have the potential to influence administrators' decisions regarding the formal performance evaluation of faculty (Master, 2014). Similar practices are followed by many higher education institutions worldwide (Heffernan, 2022).

### *Research question*

- (1) Does the perception of male and female faculty competency differ among male and female Emirati students in general introductory courses at a higher education institution in Dubai?
  - (a) How do student evaluations reflect potential biases in the assessment of faculty members, with a particular focus on understanding subtle influences and gender-related expectations?
  - (b) What factors contribute to variations in students' preferences for faculty members, and how do personal experiences and interactions shape these preferences?
  - (c) How do participants perceive faculty members in terms of teaching style and behavior, and in what ways do these perceptions either align with or challenge stereotypes?

### *Data collection*

This study was conducted at a higher education institution in Dubai. In 2014, at the time of data collection, it was accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). The institution had a diverse faculty consisting of 375 female faculty and 310 male

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faculty members from over 30 countries. To gain insights from students' perspectives, focus groups were conducted with Emirati student informants.

To ensure a well-defined sample, the researchers employed formal selection criteria after piloting the questions with peers. Therefore, considering their relative newness to higher education, first year students were selected for the sample by whole class participation. Both focus group sessions followed a purposive sampling method, which is commonly used in qualitative research to gain insights from specific individuals' informal choices (Thomas, 2022).

The focus group sessions involved a total of 24 females in one session and 19 male Emirati undergraduate participants in another session. All students agreed to volunteer for the study. The participants were recruited from general education classes, and the number of male students was less than the number of female students, reflecting the male-to-female ratio in the university population. Each session lasted an appropriate duration to gather comprehensive feedback, with 40 min for the male group and 60 min for the female group. The aim was to avoid overemphasizing gender in the discussion by initiating the session with open-ended questions regarding faculty competency (Creswell, 2021). Additionally, member checking was employed to validate the findings (Merriam, 1998). The open-ended questions presented pedagogical considerations which were the focus of this research during the first 5 years. Considering the context in 2014 in the UAE, (prior to the national service for males), suggestions from peer researchers encouraged the authors to further explore findings as they pertain to gender equity.

To minimize construct irrelevant variance, participants were asked to analyze and defend their claims in greater detail. Any disagreements between judges were resolved through a dynamic criteria-mapping process (Broad, 2003; Moss, 1994). For instance, to investigate the phenomenon of gender equity, the following question was posed: "When it is time to register for your courses, do you maintain a preference for a class with male or female faculty? Why?" As the dynamic criteria-mapping process unfolded during their discussions, higher levels of agreement emerged, allowing for the identification of key themes.

### *Authorial lens*

The primary researcher, a junior student at the time of the study, had a similar cultural background and authority level as the participants in the focus groups. Despite this potential limitation, the primary researcher did not know any of the students in the focus groups prior to the sessions. Also, the primary researcher believes the facilitation of a peer exchange of information aided in probing for additional details (Shento, 2004) as well as maintaining a similar power-distance structure and establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

After the primary researcher explained the relevance of the study, the secondary researcher agreed to support the convenience sample and supervise the student research. In addition, the second researcher involved in this investigation has 4.5 years of teaching experience in Dubai and a research background pertaining to gender equity. Also, while a faculty member in Dubai, the secondary research has taught both students in mixed-gender graduate classrooms, as well as students in female-only designated undergraduate classrooms, and co-taught with male faculty on two occasions. The researchers' experiences and interest in diversity and equity in assessment practices led to a collaboration with the primary researcher.

### *Research Ethics*

The data for this study is comprised of transcriptions of comments from Emirati students collected during focus group sessions. To preface, courses at the research site were gender-segregated, and the primary researcher, a female, had to obtain necessary approvals from the

Institutional Review Board (IRB), the provost, and a male instructor in order to conduct the male focus group session. Unlike the female focus group session, the male instructor was required to be present during the discussion of the male focus group. Nonetheless, the written answers from the male participants remained anonymous.

All student data was kept in a locked file and student identities were protected. To ensure the anonymity of participants, their responses have been coded as F (female participant) and M (male participant). The use of numbers after each letter is to indicate the different number of participants who shared vocal thoughts.

The focus groups were conducted to capture the opinions of students and allow them to elaborate on their answers in a semi-structured discussion format. These focus groups serve as a qualitative investigation and provide in-depth insights to inform the research question. To ensure anonymity, participants were encouraged to anonymously write down any views they did not wish to vocalize in the larger group. The sessions were recorded by the primary researcher, and ethical considerations and the methodology were explained to the students at the beginning of each session.

### *Data analysis*

The data collected from 2014 was transcribed into Microsoft Word for analysis. The researchers employed both open-coding and axial-coding techniques to analyze this qualitative research data. Initially, open coding was used to identify themes and facilitate a comprehensive interpretation. The themes from each focus group session were identified individually as part of this process. Subsequently, axial coding was applied to highlight areas where responses diverged or correlated with the main patterns in the data (Williams and Moser, 2019).

To ensure a comprehensive analysis, two authors/researchers were involved in the data analysis process, providing an emic and etic perspective. The primary researcher's native view (emics) of the phenomenon also aided in considering any culturally specific meanings within the responses. Simultaneously, the second researcher's non-native perspective (etics) helped analyze the data from a universal and outsider's point of view (i.e. edge walking) (Beals *et al.*, 2020). These different vantage points assisted in uncovering the underlying meanings and social constructions within the empirical evidence.

### **Findings**

The study investigated the socio-cultural factors influencing students' faculty evaluation decisions, shedding light on the complex dynamics affected by gender. The research revealed distinct patterns of behavior between female and male students during the evaluation process. For example, it was predominately female students who tended to engage directly with the primary researcher, whereas male students engaged in more joking and interaction among themselves. Throughout the focus-group sessions, female students demonstrated a tendency to express agreement and engage in elaborative discussions to reach a consensus. In contrast, male participants presented divergent claims and exhibited hidden biases. First, general teaching competencies were discussed in accordance with an open-ended question that was thematically organized into major themes including clarity in communication, balancing care and expectations, respectful feedback, preparation, and relevant examples. See [Table 1](#). In addition, overall, the study exposed the multifaceted dynamics influenced by gender in students' faculty evaluation decision-making, encompassing hidden biases, preferences, and stereotypes. Throughout this inductive process, the research questions were addressed. Findings suggest the perception of male and female faculty competency differs among male and female Emirati students in general introductory courses at a higher education institution in Dubai.

Criteria	Examples of student quotes within the study
Clarity in communication	<i>"A faculty who can deliver the information to the students in its simplest form"</i>
Balancing care and expectations <i>Respectful feedback (e.g. helps student save face)</i>	<i>"They see them as a friend but respect is still there"</i> <i>"Whenever you say something, the professor should not turn around your answer just to make you look bad"</i>
Value class time by being prepared	<i>"It is not acceptable to say you forgot to print the papers, you will go to get the papers, or that the projector is not working. Okay, you must have a backup . . . you still have to explain [yourself]"</i>
Relevance of examples	<i>"It is not good when some faculty teach as if the students have an entire background of a topic; as if they are graduate students when they are not"</i>

**Table 1.**  
Student suggestions  
for criteria of faculty  
competency

Source(s): Table by authors

- (a) How do student evaluations reflect potential biases in the assessment of faculty members, with a particular focus on understanding subtle influences and gender-related expectations?

### *Hidden biases*

The study exposed the presence of hidden biases among male participants, despite their initial claims that the gender of faculty members did not matter when selecting a course or evaluating faculty performance. Upon further investigation, some responses unveiled implicit gender expectations. For instance, participant M1 stated that "female faculty should be more nurturing," with many members silently or verbally indicating agreement while displaying amusement or reluctance to openly express these views. These hidden biases were evident in participants' responses, highlighting the complexity involved in evaluating faculty members. Even the use of general pronouns displayed a preference, as seen in the statement by participant M2, "If the university gives him the right to teach me, that means he is a good faculty." These biases, including the expectation for nurturing behavior from female faculty, underscored the intricate dynamics at play in faculty evaluation.

Also, participants consistently concluded that male faculty members were better suited to provide a comprehensive understanding of a subject. This deeply ingrained preference for male faculty was a prominent theme in the study. Additionally, male students' emphasis in the quotes suggests that this preference is rooted in societal norms or perceptions of authority, and therefore impacting interactions.

- (b) What factors contribute to variations in students' preferences for faculty members, and how do personal experiences and interactions shape these preferences?

### *Preferences*

Female participants widely expressed a preference for male faculty when given the option, displaying a strong and unwavering inclination throughout the focus-group sessions. However, this preference was not universal, as one female participant believed that any high-quality faculty member would treat them like family, adopting a nurturing approach. "The bond between student and faculty should not be a bond of work," said Participant F1. Personal experiences were also shared, emphasizing the impact of faculty members who had gone the extra mile to build connections and solve problems. Participant F2 recalls:



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I had a personal problem. A faculty tried to come close to me [to build a close friendship with me] just to [help] me understand that there are people there [who care]. [She taught me] there are ways to solve your problems. You can do something about it. So many times, she talked to me . . . That inspired me a lot. [She did this] to help myself to stand on my feet again. And just like a pencil, [she helped me] sharpen myself and come out stronger than before.

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Female participants desiring a nurturing approach and seeking a familial connection with faculty suggest a desire for a supportive learning environment. However, the implications of meeting these expectations warrant careful consideration, as balancing academic rigor with a familial approach may pose challenges. Exploring the potential benefits and drawbacks of fulfilling these expectations can guide faculty in creating a balanced and effective teaching approach.

Nevertheless, participants consistently concluded that male faculty members were better suited to provide a comprehensive understanding of a subject. This deeply ingrained preference for male faculty was a prominent theme in the study. Additionally, male students emphasized that having male professors allowed them to express their gender identity more freely and act “boyish”, enabling behaviors such as active participation in discussions and offering personal examples. “I feel comfortable reacting more dramatically to what a male faculty member has to say,” and “giving examples pertaining to my personal life,” says M3 participant. In contrast, interactions with female faculty were described as requiring reserved behavior and the need, as participant M4 suggests, to “draw a line of respect, I reserve my comments or examples during a discussion out of respect for the female psyche.”

Male participants expressing a preference for male faculty may indicate a complex dynamic in student-faculty relationships. This preference might be rooted in societal norms or perceptions of authority, influencing interactions between male students and male faculty. The admission of “boyish” behavior raises questions about its impact on the learning environment and faculty-student relationships, urging an exploration of whether it fosters a conducive atmosphere for academic engagement.

- (c) How do participants perceive faculty members in terms of teaching style and behavior, and in what ways do these perceptions either align with or challenge stereotypes?

### *Stereotypes*

Both male and female participants held certain stereotypes about faculty members based on their gender. Male participants perceived male faculty as stricter, particularly in the classroom. Female participants, on the other hand, viewed female faculty members as more rigid and prone to providing excessive details. They described some female faculty as oversensitive and hormonal, recounting experiences of abrupt changes in facial expressions and intense gazes during interactions. These stereotypes portrayed female faculty members as abnormal or freakish. An example, F3 proclaims, “There is a teacher when she is looking at you and smiling, and then suddenly the angry face comes on, and she turn[s] around, and when you answer right, she keeps staring at your face, you just feel your heart dropping there.” Everybody started laughing, as they knew who that faculty member was, and they kept adding to the banter. F2 added, “You turn and turn; she is still looking at you,’ ‘She is freaky; some female faculty just do not act normally.” Furthermore, female participants believed that workload varies by faculty gender. F4 explained, “Females give you a lot of work; males are not in the mood to give you a lot of work.”

### *Fears about teaching competency of pregnant faculty*

Female participants expressed concerns regarding the teaching competency of pregnant faculty members. They reported feeling anxious in class, fearing that a pregnant faculty member might suddenly give them a failing grade or burst into tears. “We come to class

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shivering, like, she is pregnant - she can give me an F now, and then she can just cry out of nowhere in the middle of the class." F5 participant said. Students acknowledged that females can also experience mood swings and recognized that they suggested that some male faculty members might struggle to handle such fluctuations. However, when the interviewer asked, "Hypothetically speaking, how would you feel if you were a female faculty member? What if your students maintain these beliefs about female faculty members?" An immediate response was from F6 "I will behave more like a male." The other female participants nodded in agreement or remained silent.

The quotes expose an intricate interplay of societal stereotypes and gendered perceptions within the comments of the student participants. The revelation that female faculty members are often portrayed as "freakish" or abnormal, based on facial expressions and intensity during interactions, indicates the prevalence of deeply ingrained stereotypes. Moreover, the fears expressed by female participants about the teaching competency of pregnant faculty members expose a nuanced layer of concern, potentially reflecting broader societal anxieties that warrant further investigation. Lastly, the acknowledgment that female students would alter their behavior to align with perceived male norms if they were faculty members unveils the subtle but impactful pressures imposed by prevailing gender expectations within the academic sphere. These findings, supported by direct quotes from students, highlight the intricate socio-cultural factors influencing students' faculty evaluation decision-making. The study exposes the existence of hidden biases, strong preferences for male faculty, the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, and concerns about pregnant faculty members among female students. These complexities and challenges underline the need to establish an equitable and unbiased evaluation system.

## Discussion

This study examined the influence of faculty gender on student perceptions and biases in a university setting in Dubai. Throughout the study, many socio-cultural factors were revealed, including, hidden biases and stereotypes, gender preferences in teaching, teaching competency concerns, and equity challenges within the evaluation system. Male participants indirectly showed a preference for male faculty, and many admitted to exhibiting "boyish" behavior while describing more restricted behavior with female faculty. Female participants desired a nurturing approach and wanted faculty to treat them like family. Male participants perceived male faculty as stricter, while female participants perceived female faculty as more rigid. Female participants explicitly preferred male faculty, while male participants were less vocal about their preferences, claiming to have a meritocratic ideology (i.e. viewing each individual as the only or primary responsible agent for their success or failure (Wright, 2001)), despite the hidden gender bias which conflict with this philosophy.

Female participants expressed concerns about pregnant faculty and acknowledged their own moodiness. The general population is somewhat aware gender inequities exist in higher education (e.g. as evidenced by the underrepresentation of female faculty members who are also mothers in the United States (Britton, 2014)). Some female participants stated they would behave more like men if they were faculty, perpetuating gender biases. Hidden gender biases and norms may affect the quality of pedagogical relationships between faculty and students. Female students displayed bias against other females, marginalizing them and not recognizing their own marginalization (i.e. comparatively, this is a "chameleon-like" gender hierarchy as Ridgeway (1997, p. 218) suggests).

The findings of this study also suggest that gender norms can influence student perceptions of faculty competency. For example, female students may be more likely to perceive male faculty members as competent, while male students may be more likely to perceive female faculty members as nurturing. This is concerning, as it could lead to female faculty members being

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stereotyped and marginalized. One way to reduce the impact of student evaluations on judgments of faculty competency is to use balanced assessment practices and multiple measures when evaluating faculty competency (e.g. student evaluations, peer reviews, and self-evaluations). In addition, experts on gender equity in faculty evaluation may train faculty evaluators on how to identify and avoid gender bias. Moreover, student evaluations of faculty are relatively new in the history of education, and there is a lack of qualitative research on bias in evaluation instruments. Each evaluator can interpret situations differently, emphasizing the need for exploring the context and any potential for bias in evaluations.

### *Recommendations*

In accordance with social justice theory, faculty should be perceived as competent educators unless a reasonable amount of evidence suggests otherwise (Theoharis, 2007). When students overhear other students making unfair gender bias comments regarding faculty competency, they may employ social justice leadership to resist the spread of bias within the institutional culture. Therefore, proactive methods for teaching students about gender bias, grounded in baseline research data from that context (Essary and Hoot, 2017), may help individuals avoid making gender bias comments.

In some cases, students may provide helpful comments when open-ended responses are available for faculty evaluations. However, since students lack professional expertise in education, it is important to balance the risk of unfair prejudice (e.g. gender bias) with the opportunity to receive detailed open-ended responses. One recommendation is to assign an ombudsperson to review and remove any prejudiced data to protect faculty members from discriminatory judgments (e.g. assessing a faculty member's competency based on their pregnancy status). Detecting biased opinions entirely is challenging for the ombudsperson who is not present in the classroom, but they can identify inequitable discrimination and collaborate with a diversity, equity, and inclusion committee to develop educational materials that indirectly address these biases.

### *Opportunities for students to receive gender education support in Dubai*

The presence of confounding variables (e.g. gender bias) in assessing faculty competency suggests that students may benefit from training to fairly judge faculty members. Providing guidance in both English and Arabic, especially for a highly English/Arabic population, could enhance students' understanding of faculty competency and gender equity in structured evaluations. Orientation leaders can review instructions, explain questions, and hold brief sessions to reiterate the quality characteristics of faculty competency. Also, sharing relevant, contextualized research on faculty bias may help students become informed allies in supporting equitable faculty development.

It is crucial to acknowledge a potential unintended consequence of this article: the creation and/or proliferation of negative stereotypes. Despite the confirmation of student hesitations regarding faculty well-being at the onset of the course, the second author, who was a pregnant female faculty member in Dubai, experienced outstanding gestures of friendship from female alumni during pregnancy and after labor (e.g. hospital visitations from alumni, ongoing interest and care, etc.). Faculty can overcome stereotypes and receive positive student evaluations, yet the psychological effect of receiving more personal gender differentiation feedback in the workplace (e.g. *how are you able to smile so peacefully each day while teaching pregnant*) than most faculty can have a myriad of cumulative gaslighting effect (e.g. influencing motivation, fear, stress, etc.) despite the complimentary and caring intentions (Storm and Muhr, 2023). Additional education regarding maternal health and prenatal development is recommended to challenge cultural myths (e.g. often perpetuated in many

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parts of the world through media with widely inaccurate depictions of pregnant women and childbirth (Gaskin, 2003).

This investigation offers insightful perspectives from student participants but does not explore the origins of these gender biases. Future research could examine how gender bias emerges from societal stereotypes, such as portraying faculty as masculine or feminine in academic media culture, the treatment of gender norms within other areas of societal culture (e.g. family norms), or the influence of the earlier schooling culture on the expectations when arriving in a higher education institution. These depictions may shape student perspectives and influence the establishment of respectful pedagogical relationships. Additional content analysis investigations can delve into how illustrators depict men and women in various professional roles across different countries and create advocacy campaigns to combat those stereotypes (e.g. similar to the international movement for additional women in STEM education).

### *Opportunities for faculty to receive gender education support in Dubai*

Faculty might be unaware of students' gender biases (Boring, 2017). According to Boring (2017), "These biases have strong negative consequences for female academics, who may spend more time on teaching to try to obtain high scores . . . reducing the time available for research (p.2)". Faculty share student expectations in a syllabus, therefore, asking students what makes a high-quality faculty member on the first day of class is an appropriate time to create an open, pedagogical compact of expectations between faculty and students in a mutually reciprocal way.

Furthermore, throughout the semester teachers may use strategies that are stereotypically associated or contrasting with masculine or feminine student stereotyped expectations. Therefore, labeling the intentions of each teaching strategy may help to avoid misconceptions about faculty behaviors. Intervention research can explore whether helping faculty articulate their teaching philosophy throughout the year and establishing mutual expectations with students might help make implicit pedagogical intentions more explicitly understood and avoid inequitable bias.

For male faculty, it's crucial to navigate student preferences and stereotypes revealed in the study. Perhaps boyish behavior may lead to more expectations for male faculty to have additional classroom management strategies. Also, being aware of gender-based biases that tend to favor males, while adapting teaching styles, and advocating for fair assessment practices, is essential. Balancing assertiveness with approachability, considering communication styles, and engaging in professional development on gender dynamics may further enhance the teaching experience. Active support for gender equity initiatives and clarifying pedagogical intentions contribute to a diverse and inclusive educational environment. In essence, male faculty should proactively foster equity, challenge biases, and actively contribute to a culture of inclusion.

### *Validating student evaluation instruments*

According to Cousins *et al.* (2014), evaluation consultants who lack an understanding of cultural aspects and contextual factors often influence the creation of new faculty competency assessment instruments without involving local assessment experts. Experts outside of the context may seem less biased in instrument creation. However, local experts maintain crucial knowledge about the organization's history, expertise in the topic under assessment, and other relevant factors. For example, the faculty member may want to further define what broad criteria in the student evaluation instrument might involve (e.g. such as "enthusiasm"). Similar to the findings within Essary and Hoot (2017) on gender equity in teacher pedagogy, this study also emphasizes the importance of conducting baseline studies and employing emic and etic lenses in qualitative research design to further contextualize future research in the assessment of teaching and learning.

### *Limitations*

This study has several limitations worth noting. First, the sample was restricted to first-year university students enrolled in introductory courses, which excludes perspectives from students on their way to specializing in specific majors. To gain a comprehensive understanding, future research could compare the perspectives of senior students with those of first-year students. This comparative research could account for a shift in perceptions over time. Also, another limitation of this study is that the data were collected 10 years ago. We recognize this topic is prevalent in higher education today, and thus the data remains relevant. In addition, a qualitative analysis of this magnitude received new insights from prolonged periods of removal from the topic to examine the assertions with fresh eyes. However, student attitudes towards faculty gender may have changed over the past 10 years. Future research should collect data from current students to assess whether the findings of this study are still relevant today.

Furthermore, the absence of Emirati faculty members at the institution during data collection poses a limitation. All faculty members involved were expatriates, making it difficult to determine if gender bias expressions from students would vary with a faculty member from the participants' native country. Investigating this aspect in future studies may provide valuable insights.

Another limitation is the focus on gender bias without considering age differences and the intersectionality of age and gender. Ageism discrimination and its potential impact on perceptions were not explored. It is recommended that future studies investigate these factors to gain a more comprehensive understanding of bias in academia.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that these findings should not be misconstrued as an evaluation of any specific gender or ethnic group. The evidence presented solely pertains to faculty competency within the specific context under investigation and should not be generalized to broader populations. Moreover, maintaining a cautious and nuanced approach when interpreting these limitations helps to ensure the accurate representation of the study's scope and findings within the academic discourse.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides new insights into the influence of faculty gender on student perceptions and biases in a university setting in Dubai. According to this case study, female faculty members may experience specific preconceptions about their emotional and behavioral interactions while teaching students in higher education in Dubai. Moreover, some biases may particularly impact female faculty members when it comes to developing pedagogical relationships and receiving fair evaluations of their teaching competency. The findings suggest that preventative development of fair and equitable faculty evaluation practices is warranted in higher education. Gender equity in faculty competency interventions and advocacy initiatives may protect faculty from potential discrimination, and challenge inequities in gender norms in higher education. Also, gender equity familiarization efforts are suggested for both students as well as faculty. In considering the universal nature of the recommendations, these insights may also be helpful for higher education, worldwide.

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### Further reading

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