

Reconceptualizing Masculinity Through Feminist Pedagogy: Evidence From Algerian Higher Education

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Abstract

Feminist pedagogy has been widely examined as a transformative approach to teaching and learning; however, research has predominantly focused on women's empowerment, often overlooking male learners' experiences and identity negotiations. This qualitative case study explores how feminist pedagogical practices are perceived, resisted, negotiated, and internalized by male university students in Algerian higher education. Drawing on feminist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, the study investigates how classroom practices grounded in dialogue, inclusivity, and power-sharing influence male students' constructions of masculinity and learning identities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective narratives with male undergraduate students at a public Algerian university. Thematic analysis revealed three dominant patterns: initial resistance shaped by sociocultural norms, negotiated engagement through dialogic learning, and gradual reconfiguration of masculine identities toward more reflexive and egalitarian positions. The findings suggest that feminist pedagogy does not marginalize male learners but instead offers a pedagogical space for critical self-examination and transformation. This study contributes to African and Global South educational scholarship by foregrounding male learners as active agents within feminist pedagogical frameworks and by challenging monolithic assumptions about masculinity in conservative educational contexts. Implications for gender-inclusive teaching practices in higher education are discussed.

Keywords: Feminist pedagogy; masculinity; higher education; male learners; gender and education; Algerian universities; African studies

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past four decades, feminist pedagogy has emerged as a transformative educational approach that challenges hierarchical power relations, foregrounds voice and experience, and promotes dialogic and inclusive learning environments (hooks, 1994; Weiler, 1988). While feminist pedagogy has been widely associated with women's empowerment and gender equity, much of the existing scholarship has disproportionately centered female learners and educators, leaving male students' experiences and identity negotiations underexplored. This imbalance has contributed to a persistent misconception that feminist pedagogy is either irrelevant to men or implicitly antagonistic toward male learners.

In African and Global South contexts, where sociocultural norms often reinforce traditional gender roles and hegemonic forms of masculinity, the absence of male-centered analyses becomes particularly problematic. Higher education institutions in such contexts function not only as sites of knowledge transmission but also as critical spaces for identity construction, negotiation, and transformation. Algeria, as a postcolonial North African society characterized by strong patriarchal traditions alongside expanding discourses of gender equity, offers a particularly compelling context for examining how feminist pedagogical practices are received and negotiated by male university students.

Gender relations in Algerian higher education are shaped by a dynamic interplay of sociocultural norms, postcolonial legacies, and ongoing educational reform. Algerian scholars emphasize that universities operate as key institutional spaces where traditional

gender roles are simultaneously reproduced and contested (Bennoune, 2007; Mami, 2016). Within this context, male students frequently navigate competing expectations related to authority, masculinity, and participation, especially when pedagogical practices challenge established norms of classroom hierarchy and male dominance.

This study argues that feminist pedagogy should not be conceptualized solely as a women-centered or oppositional framework but rather as an inclusive pedagogical orientation capable of reshaping male learners' understandings of power, authority, and masculinity. By foregrounding male students' voices within an Algerian higher education context, the study addresses a significant gap in feminist and critical pedagogy scholarship in Africa.

Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do Algerian male university students experience feminist pedagogical practices?
2. In what ways does feminist pedagogy influence male learners' constructions of masculinity?
3. How do sociocultural norms shape male students' responses to feminist-informed teaching?

By addressing these questions, the article contributes to feminist pedagogy scholarship by reconceptualizing masculinity not as an obstacle to gender-inclusive education but as a dynamic and negotiable construct shaped through pedagogical interaction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Feminist Pedagogy: Principles and Educational Aims

Feminist pedagogy is grounded in the rejection of traditional banking models of education that position learners as passive recipients of knowledge (Freire, 1970). Instead, it emphasizes dialogue, shared authority, reflexivity, and the validation of lived experience as legitimate sources of knowledge (hooks, 1994). Central to feminist pedagogy is the recognition that education is inherently political and that classroom practices inevitably reproduce or challenge existing social hierarchies.

Scholars such as Weiler (1988) and Shrewsbury (1993) argue that feminist pedagogy seeks not merely to include women in educational spaces but to fundamentally transform the epistemological and relational foundations of teaching and learning. This includes challenging patriarchal norms embedded in curriculum design, classroom interaction, and assessment practices. However, despite its transformative aspirations, feminist pedagogy has often been critiqued for insufficiently addressing how male learners engage with, resist, or reinterpret its principles.

2.2 Masculinity and Education

Masculinity studies, particularly Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, provide a crucial lens for understanding male learners' educational experiences. Hegemonic masculinity refers to culturally dominant ideals of manhood that legitimize male authority and marginalize alternative masculinities. In educational contexts, such norms often manifest in resistance to collaborative learning, emotional expression, and critical self-reflection—practices commonly associated with feminist pedagogy.

Research in Western contexts has shown that male students may perceive feminist-informed classrooms as threatening to their social identity or symbolic power (Francis & Skelton, 2005). However, other studies suggest that when male learners are given space for dialogue and reflexivity, they may develop more inclusive and critically aware understandings of gender and selfhood (Kimmel, 2012). These findings underscore the need to move beyond deficit models that portray male learners as inherently resistant to feminist pedagogical approaches.

2.3 Feminist Pedagogy in African and Algerian Contexts

In African higher education, feminist pedagogy has primarily been examined in relation to women's access, participation, and empowerment (Mama, 2003; Morley, 2010). While these studies have made significant contributions, they often leave male students analytically invisible. Moreover, African universities operate within sociocultural contexts where gender norms are deeply embedded, requiring pedagogical approaches that are sensitive to local realities rather than imported wholesale from Western contexts.

In Algeria, research on gender and education has largely foregrounded women's educational attainment and representation, often portraying male students as neutral or unproblematic actors. However, emerging Algerian scholarship suggests that gender-sensitive pedagogical practices remain unevenly implemented and are frequently dependent on individual instructors rather than institutional frameworks (Kheladi, 2018). Belmihoub (2015) further argues that male students may perceive classroom discussions of gender equity as culturally sensitive or destabilizing, particularly when such discussions challenge normative constructions of masculinity and classroom authority.

As Bennoune (2007) notes, "gender relations in Algerian public institutions are negotiated rather than fixed, reflecting ongoing tensions between tradition and social change" (p. 112). This observation underscores the importance of examining how feminist pedagogy is interpreted and negotiated by male learners rather than assuming uniform resistance or acceptance. Yet, despite these insights, empirical studies focusing explicitly on male learners' engagement with feminist pedagogy in Algerian higher education remain scarce.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by an integrated theoretical framework combining feminist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and hegemonic masculinity theory.

Feminist pedagogy, as articulated by hooks (1994), provides the foundation for understanding education as a practice of freedom that values voice, mutual respect, and shared authority. Hooks' notion of *engaged pedagogy* emphasizes the holistic development of learners and recognizes the classroom as a site of personal and social transformation.

Critical pedagogy, rooted in Freire's (1970) work, complements this perspective by foregrounding consciousness-raising (*conscientização*) and the interrogation of power relations. From this standpoint, feminist pedagogy becomes a means through which learners critically examine social norms—including gendered expectations—and their own positioning within them.

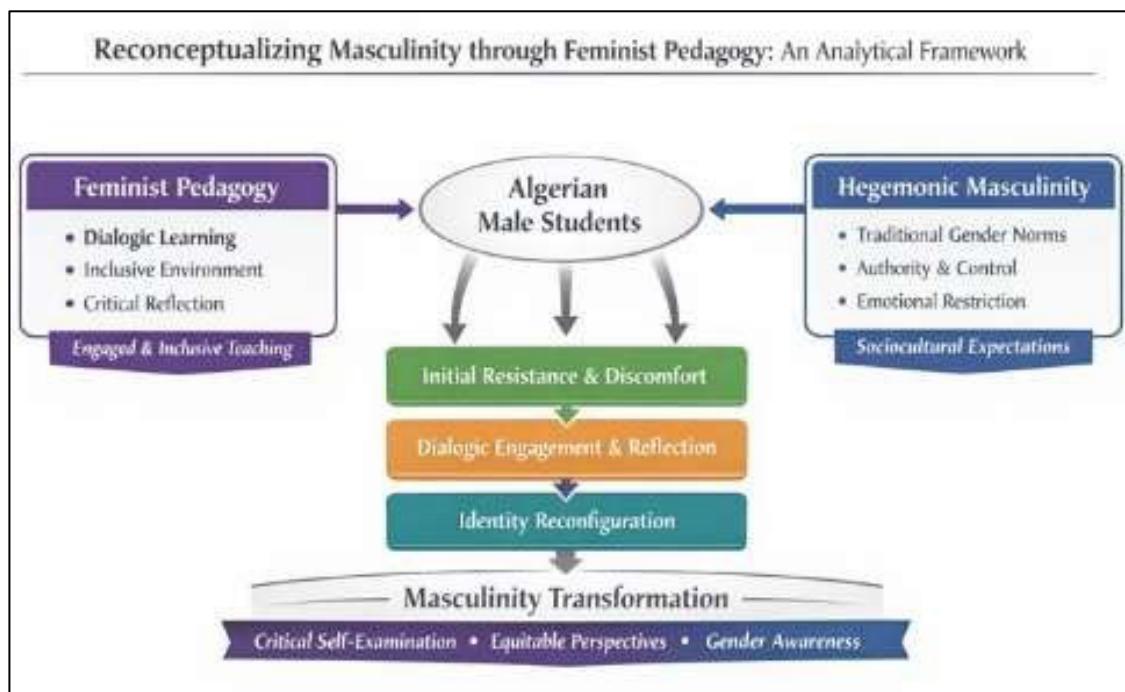
Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity offers a lens for analyzing how male learners' identities are shaped, challenged, and potentially reconfigured through feminist pedagogical practices. Rather than treating masculinity as a fixed or biologically determined trait, this framework conceptualizes it as socially constructed, context-dependent, and open to transformation.

By synthesizing these perspectives, the study conceptualizes feminist pedagogy as a dialogic space in which male learners actively negotiate their identities, confront internalized gender norms, and potentially develop more egalitarian and reflexive forms of masculinity.

In the Algerian context, research on gender and education has largely foregrounded women's access, achievement, and representation in higher education, often leaving male learners analytically marginalized. Studies indicate that gender-sensitive pedagogical practices are unevenly implemented across Algerian universities and frequently depend on individual instructors rather than institutional policy (Kheladi, 2018). Moreover, Belmihoub (2015) notes that male students may interpret discussions of gender equity as culturally

sensitive, particularly when such discussions destabilize dominant constructions of masculinity and classroom authority.

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4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design, appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena within their real-life context (Yin, 2018). Given the study's focus on male learners' lived experiences, perceptions, and identity negotiations, a qualitative approach allows for in-depth analysis of meaning-making processes that cannot be captured through purely quantitative methods. The case study design facilitates a nuanced examination of feminist pedagogy as it is enacted and interpreted within a specific higher education setting.

4.2 Research Context

The study was conducted at a public Algerian university offering programs in education and social sciences. In recent years, the institution has encouraged pedagogical practices aligned with learner-centered, dialogic, and gender-sensitive approaches, creating a suitable environment for examining feminist-informed teaching. While feminist pedagogy is not formally institutionalized, several instructors employ practices consistent with its principles, such as participatory discussion, critical reflection, and shared classroom authority.

4.3 Participants

Participants consisted of 32 male undergraduate students enrolled in education-related disciplines. The students were selected through purposive sampling to ensure exposure to feminist-informed pedagogical practices. All participants had completed at least one semester in courses emphasizing dialogue, inclusivity, and critical engagement with social issues.

To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and no identifying institutional details are disclosed. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

4.4 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using three complementary instruments to enhance methodological triangulation:

1. Semi-structured interviews

Conducted with 18 participants, interviews focused on students' classroom experiences, perceptions of gender-related discussions, and reflections on masculinity and learning. Semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted primarily in Arabic, with occasional use of French depending on participants' preference. Relevant excerpts were translated into English by the researcher for reporting purposes.

2. Focus group discussions

Two focus groups (7 participants each) were organized to capture collective meaning-making and peer interaction dynamics related to feminist pedagogical practices.

3. Reflective written narratives

Participants were invited to submit short reflective texts describing moments in which classroom practices challenged or reshaped their views on gender, authority, or participation.

4.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Coding was both theory-driven (informed by feminist pedagogy and masculinity theory) and data-driven, allowing themes to emerge inductively from participants' narratives.

To enhance credibility, coding decisions were revisited iteratively, and discrepant cases were deliberately examined rather than excluded.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained at the departmental level. Participants were informed of the study's aims, their right to withdraw, and the confidential handling of data. Given the sensitivity of gender-related discussions, care was taken to create a respectful and non-judgmental research environment.

The researcher acknowledges his positionality as an Algerian academic, which facilitated cultural access while requiring ongoing reflexivity to minimize interpretive bias during data analysis.

5. Findings

Analysis of the data revealed three major themes characterizing male learners' engagement with feminist pedagogy.

5.1 Initial Resistance and Discomfort

Many participants reported experiencing **initial resistance** when exposed to feminist-informed classroom practices. This resistance was often rooted in sociocultural expectations regarding masculinity and authority.

Several students associated feminism with female dominance or male marginalization. One participant stated:

"At first, I felt these discussions were blaming men. I was uncomfortable speaking because I thought my opinions would be judged."

This discomfort frequently manifested as silence, minimal participation, or skepticism toward collaborative activities. Such reactions reflect the tension between hegemonic masculinity norms and pedagogical practices that emphasize vulnerability and reflexivity.

5.2 Negotiated Engagement through Dialogue

Over time, many students described a process of negotiated engagement, facilitated by dialogic teaching practices. Open discussions, shared authority, and the validation of diverse perspectives allowed male learners to re-evaluate their assumptions.

Participants emphasized that feminist pedagogy became more acceptable when instructors framed gender discussions as collective social issues rather than moral accusations. As one student noted:

“When the teacher listened to us and didn’t impose ideas, I started to think differently about these topics.”

This phase was characterized by increased participation, willingness to listen, and cautious self-reflection.

5.3 Reconfiguration of Masculine Identities

A significant finding was the gradual reconfiguration of masculinity among many participants. Exposure to feminist pedagogy encouraged students to question rigid gender roles and to adopt more flexible understandings of male identity.

Some participants reported increased comfort with expressing uncertainty, engaging in cooperative learning, and acknowledging gender inequality. One reflection read:

“I realized that being a man doesn’t mean dominating discussions. Respect and listening are also strengths.”

While not all participants experienced profound transformation, the data indicate that feminist pedagogy created conditions for **critical self-examination** rather than defensive resistance.

It is important to note that not all participants reported significant shifts in their views on masculinity. A small number of students maintained traditional interpretations of gender roles, expressing respect for dialogic practices while rejecting their broader implications for gender relations. This variation underscores the non-linear and context-dependent nature of identity negotiation.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings challenge the assumption that feminist pedagogy alienates male learners in conservative sociocultural contexts. Initial resistance expressed by participants reflects broader patterns identified in masculinity studies, particularly Connell’s (1995) notion of hegemonic masculinity, which associates male identity with authority, control, and discursive dominance. In the Algerian context, such associations are reinforced through socialization processes that privilege male authority within both public and educational spaces.

Algerian educational research supports this interpretation. Belmihoub (2015) observes that masculinity in Algerian universities is often linked to classroom visibility, assertiveness, and control over discourse, rendering dialogic and reflexive pedagogical practices unfamiliar or uncomfortable for male learners. The initial discomfort and silence reported by participants in this study align closely with these findings.

However, the gradual shift from resistance to negotiated engagement highlights the transformative potential of feminist pedagogy when enacted through culturally sensitive and dialogic practices. As Mami (2016) argues, higher education classrooms in Algeria can function as spaces of sociocultural change when they encourage respectful dialogue rather than confrontation. In this study, instructors’ emphasis on listening, shared authority, and critical reflection enabled male learners to reassess rigid gender norms without experiencing symbolic displacement.

These findings extend feminist pedagogy scholarship by demonstrating that male learners are not passive recipients or inevitable resistors but active agents capable of reflexive

identity negotiation. Feminist pedagogy, when contextualized within Algerian sociocultural realities, can facilitate not the erosion of male identity but its reconfiguration toward more egalitarian and relational forms.

7. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how feminist pedagogy shapes Algerian male learners' experiences and constructions of masculinity. The findings reveal that feminist pedagogy, when enacted through dialogic and inclusive practices, does not marginalize male students but instead fosters critical reflection and identity renegotiation.

Similar patterns of initial resistance followed by negotiated engagement have been observed in other African higher education contexts. For example, recent studies in South African and Nigerian universities report that male students' engagement with gender-equitable pedagogies increases when classroom practices emphasize dialogue rather than moral prescription (Leach et al., 2021; Odejide & Aina, 2022). These parallels suggest that the Algerian case reflects broader continental dynamics while retaining its sociocultural specificity.

Beyond its contextual contribution, this study advances feminist pedagogy scholarship by theorizing masculinity as an educationally mediated construct shaped through pedagogical interaction. By repositioning male learners as reflective participants rather than resistant subjects, the study challenges binary approaches to gender and contributes to more inclusive models of feminist pedagogy in African higher education..

Limitations and Future Research

As a single-university case study, the findings are not statistically generalizable. Future research could adopt comparative or longitudinal designs to examine how male learners' engagement with feminist pedagogy evolves over time and across institutional contexts.

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