

Examining Gender Representation in Secondary School English Textbooks and Teachers' Instructional Practices

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Abstract: Avoiding prejudice and stereotypes in the portrayal (i.e., representation) of women and men is a crucial step on the path towards gender equality. The locus of this Sequential Mixed Method research was to identify the gender representation in English textbooks and teachers' instructional practices. Document Analysis of Secondary level English textbooks of grade 9 and 10 was performed by using a quantitatively developed matrix, whereas to understand teachers' instructional practices related to gender representation, semi-structured interviews of 10 English teachers were administered. The findings of this study highlighted some significant gender inequalities in textbooks. It showed that while designing the curriculum and textbooks, the persistently existing issue of gender inclusion has not been seriously addressed by the concerned. This research stressed upon producing gender balanced educational materials.

Keywords: Gender balance, Textbooks, Instructional practices, gender representation

Introduction and Background of the Study

Textbooks, curricula, and instructional resources contain texts and speech that impact students' beliefs and practices. (Luke, 1988). Textbooks are educational materials that assist in learning by engaging cognitive functions and offering structure and growth to students. Textbooks are the most important sources used by teachers in classrooms (Agha, Syed, & Mirani, 2018). Prescribed textbooks are commonly used in education to combine discipline information and assist teachers in developing students' learning outcomes (Fasso, Knight, & Hershey, 2014). However, textbook representation and prejudice may have a significant impact on students' motivation and life choices. Students' self-esteem and identity are shaped by their exposure to gendered role models (Campbell, 2010; Ullah & Skelton, 2012). Pakistan's imitated several endeavours to curtail the gender gap in education. The Education for All (2001-2015) is one of such initiatives that acknowledged the need to avoid gender biases in the textbooks at all levels; however, in action, it remained overlooked as the stereotyped gender roles portrayed in Pakistani textbooks provided a setback for achieving gender equality. This research aimed to explore the existing gender imbalance prevalent in the secondary school English textbooks in Pakistan along with teachers' awareness to and their instructional practices addressing such critical problems.

Literature Review

Gender equality in education is a social justice issue that addresses rights, opportunities, and freedom. Gender balance in education means providing the same treatment and opportunities, and representation for people of all genders in educational environments. This involves initiatives to remove gender discrimination, ensure equitable availability of education, and promoting gender equality throughout the educational experience (EIGE, 2019).

Since the gender equality has been given a central priority in the list of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), research has consistently identified gender biases in publications,

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including student textbooks globally (Afzal, 2022). Some research reported positive or balanced gender representations, while others found imbalanced representations and biased portrayal of both males and females in curricula and instructional materials. When the gender equality is inadequately addressed by the instructional materials, it results into gender stereotypes and limits women's participation in society. Majority existing research stressed upon the role of textbooks in achieving gender equality (Lee and Mahmoudi-Gahruei, 2020).

Further, it has also been noted that the lack of gender sensitivity among teachers not only encourages discrimination in society but also lowers girls' self-esteem (Brugilles & Cromer, 2009). Thus the existing researches emphasize the necessity of making pre-service and in-service teachers aware to the gender stereotypes, language sexism, and gender-mainstreaming policies (Brusokaite, 2013). To foster an inclusive learning environment where each student's needs may be met, Dominguez (2003) suggests the teachers need to focus on assessing their lesson plans and instructional practices for gender stereotypes as a way to prevent this issue from happening in the classroom.

In two different studies conducted in Syrian and Swedish contexts, the researchers focused on comparing the representation of women in textbooks. Both studies identified some gender overlaps, as in the concerned textbooks, men were more commonly linked to positive and desirable traits than women (Mustapha, 2012). Additionally, men were portrayed as performers of the bulk of the jobs. Instead the women were represented as having stereotypical jobs or not having any at all (Holmqvist & Gjörup, 2006).

In the Pakistani context, the gender discrimination in textbooks has widely been reported by researchers (Durrani 2008; Agha et al., 2018). Particularly, in the English and Urdu textbooks implemented in Punjab, females and males status quo remains untouched in terms of cultural context. Additionally, the language texts of these textbooks promote a gendered nationalist ideology. An analysis of primary-level Sindhi textbooks found the promotion of patriarchal ideologies and discrimination in terms of gender representation. The textbooks seemed to reinforce traditional discourses of masculinity and femininity. To examine the manifestation of gender stereotypes in textbooks of four Muslim countries including Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, Islam and Asadullah (2018) exposed higher female marginalization in Pakistani textbooks. They further revealed the majority of the professions associated to female characters in the textbooks were either traditional or lower in prestige and income.

A large amount of research carried out in the Indian school context (Tyarakanita et al., 2021; Ramachandran, 2010; Sumalatha & Ramakrishnaiah, 2004; Bhog, 2002; Kalia, 1986; Saario et al., 1973 cited in Para, 2024) also reported a significant prevalence of male chauvinism exists in Indian school textbooks. Less than 10% of textbooks in the Andhra Pradesh (AP) region and roughly 14% in the Rajasthan region contained references to women. It is believed that the knowledge received through school textbooks is embedded with gender biases and stereotypes, which are transmitted to the wider community.

The findings of the past research establish that gender disparity in curriculum and textbooks is a point of concern, but the gaps within the teaching system are even more alarming. To eradicate gender inequality within classrooms in the country, teachers should be provided with gender awareness (Halai, 2011).

Research Methodology

The extremely complex subject of gender representation necessitates a thorough comprehension. Thus, the present research integrated qualitative and quantitative methods by adopting a mixed-methods sequential approach (Creswell & Clark, 2010) to address the following research questions:

- To what proportion of secondary-level English textbooks reflect a balanced gender representation?
- How is the gender related words, roles, and attributes are portrayed (if any) in the textbooks?
- What are secondary-level English teachers' instructional practices regarding balanced gender representation?

To identify the patterns of gender representation in secondary English textbooks of grade 9 and 10 published by the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board Lahore, gender representation quantitative matrices encompassing gender-related role, words, pronouns, attributes, firstness etc. across the textbooks content were used. This method allowed researchers to clearly present the frequency of occurrence of gender imbalance in the data extracted from the textbooks. However, considering the importance of qualitative content analysis which places interest in meanings, intentions, consequences, the researchers looked deeper into the description of gender related words, phrases and sentences.

Theoretically ensuring a systematic textbook content analysis, Levander and Mikkola's (2009) curriculum analysis framework was adopted. This framework aims to analyse specific content in terms of explicit, implicit, brief, and extended dimensions. The researchers used this framework to capture the varied ways that gender was portrayed in textbooks and instructional practices. This strategy guaranteed a thorough analysis of both overt and covert instances of gender depiction, paving the way for a comprehension of how gender influences students' educational experiences. Since the research highlighted the significance of sensitizing teachers to practice gender equality in the classroom settings, therefore the present research administered semi-structured interviews of 10 Secondary school English teachers. An interview protocol comprising 10 questions was used as a qualitative data collection tool.

Results/Findings

Since this was a Mixed methods research, thus each part of the analysis has its own importance and the findings are truly aligned with the research questions. The tables in this section present the quantitative analysis that used predetermined constructs to assess gender representation across different chapters of the textbooks of grade 9 and 10.

Table 1. Textbook analysis of 9th-grade English Textbook

	Indicators of balanced gender representation								
Grade 9	words					sentence		stories	Roles
Chapter/Lesson	words	pronoun	attributes	Social Roles/ activities	Profession / Occupation	firstness	Dialogue	Centeredness	Domestic roles
The savior of the mankind	✓	×	✓×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Patriotism	×	×	×	×	×✓	×	×	×	×
Media and its impact	×	×	×✓	×✓	×✓	✓	×	×✓	×✓
Hazrat Asma (R.A.)	×	×	✓	×	×✓	✓	×	×	✓
Daffodiles	×	×	×	×✓	×✓	×	×✓	×	×✓
The Quaid's vision and Pakistan	×	×	×	×	✓	×	×	×	×
Sultan Ahmed Masjid	×	×	×	×✓	×	×	×	×✓	×✓
Stopping by woods in the snowy winter evening	×	×	×	×	×✓	×	×✓	×✓	×✓
All is not lost	✓	✓	✓	×	×	✓	✓	✓	×
Drug addiction	×	×	×✓	×✓	×✓	×	×	×✓	×✓
Noise in the environment	×✓	✓	×	×	×	×	✓	×✓	×✓
Three days to see	×	✓	×	×✓	✓	✓	×	✓	×✓

To determine whether the gender representation in the textbook is balanced, a key was developed to interpret the patterns of gender presentation. This key may be understood as under:

✓ = 1 Indicates that the chapter completely shows gender balance against the specific construct(s).

×✓ = 2 Indicates that the chapter is neutral or to some extent represents both genders in a balanced way.

× = 3 Indicates that the chapter is not gender balanced at all.

The table 1 is table of constructs consisting of 9×12 grid of indicators of gender balance in columns and chapter/lesson title in rows. The above table indicates that the 9th grade English textbook consisted of total 12 lessons. The analysis revealed a pronounced gender imbalance across several chapters in the textbook. For instance the chapter *The Savior of Mankind*, exclusively features male characters with no mention of female characters or pronouns covers male representation. The lesson *Patriotism* presents a clear gender disparity as it features a list of prominent national male heroes—such as "Captain Muhammad Sarwar" and "Major Tufail Muhammad"—with no mention of any female figures. In the chapter *Media and Its Impact*, the female representation was lower than the male gender. This imbalance is clearly traceable through various constructs such as the frequency of pronouns, social roles, attributes, and professions attributed to each gender. The lack of female representation in this context may contribute to reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes and limiting the portrayal of women in diverse and influential roles within media.

The chapter *Hazrat Asma (R.A.)* presents a female historical figure but still displays masculine dominance in the overall lesson. Although this chapter offers a slightly more balanced portrayal, however, it still fails to provide full gender parity according to specific constructs.

The *Quaid's Vision and Pakistan* further reinforce gender imbalance. This chapter is based on a conversation between two male characters, thus explicitly contributing to the lack of gender balance in the textbook. The content of the lesson *Sultan Ahmed Masjid* is also found male-centric. The other lessons in the textbook, such as *Stopping by Woods in a Snowy Evening*; *All is Not Lost* and *Three Days to See* carry a male-dominated narrative, words, sentences, stories, and attributes, thus promoting gender imbalance.

Table 2. Textbook analysis of 10th-grade English Textbook

	Indicators of balanced gender representation								
Grade 10	words					Sentence		stories	Roles
Chapter/Lesson	words	pronoun	attributes	Social	Profession	firstness	Dialogue	Centredness	Domestic roles
Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) an	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Embodiment of Justice									
Chinese New Year	✓	✓	x✓	✓x	x✓	x✓	x✓	x✓	x✓
Try again	x	x	x	x	x✓	x	x	x	x✓
First Aid	x	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	x	x
The Rain	x	x	x	x	✓	x✓	x✓	x	✓
Television Vs Newspaper	✓	✓	✓	x✓	x✓	x✓	x	x✓	x✓

Little by Little One Walks Far	x	x	x✓	✓	x✓	x✓	x	x✓	x
Peace	✓	x	✓	x	x✓	x✓	x✓	✓	x
Selecting the Right Career	x	x	x	x✓	x	✓	x	✓	x
A World Without Books	x	x	x	x	x✓	x	x	x	x✓
Great Expectations	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Population Growth and World Food Supplies	x	x	✓	x	x	x✓	x✓	x✓	x
Faithfulness	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	x	✓

The analysis of the grade 10 English textbook also reveals some significant gender imbalances. The male-centric content involving male nouns, professions, roles, and attributes were found more prominent in the textbook chapters such as, *Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) an Embodiment of Justice*; *First Aid*; *Try Again*; *Peace*; *Selecting the Right Career* and *Population Growth and World Food Supplies*. On the contrary, in some chapters, female representation either slightly exceeds than the male (*In Chinese New Year*; *Television vs Newspaper*) or demonstrates a more gender-neutral approach (*Faithfulness* and *Little by Little One Walks Far*).

Alongside the textbook analysis, the semi structured interviews of Secondary English teachers were conducted. The following three major themes were developed from the interview data sets:

Theme I Participants' understanding of gender balance

Theme II Views about gender representation in textbooks

Theme II Teachers' instructional practices regarding balanced gender representation

The qualitative analysis showed a clear understanding of teachers regarding gender equality and significance of making textbooks content free from gender biases. Majority teachers were of the view that the narratives in Secondary level English textbooks are mostly focused on male heroes. Some teachers pointed towards gender imbalances in language with 'he' and 'him' being used as a noun more often as 'she' or 'her'. The teachers highlighted the male centeredness in written text and titles. They expressed serious concern about low female representation and said that English textbooks present females in more stereotypical gender roles and activities which may negatively influence both male and female students.

Discussion

The present study examined gender representation in English textbooks and teachers' instructional practices at the secondary level. The findings indicate a persistent gender imbalance in both textual and visual content within textbooks, as well as in the pedagogical approaches employed by teachers.

Many of the previous researches also established the similar stance by concluding that the English textbooks were not gender balanced as the gender prejudices are still present in the textbooks. A disproportionate representation of male and female characters exist in school textbooks as the women and men have been represented in a conventional manner. This finding aligns with previous research (Siren, 2018; Ullah & Haque, 2016; Ullah & Skelton, 2013;

Bazzul & Sykes, 2011; Mirza, 2004) that found male dominance both in the form of textual narratives and illustrations. Men were depicted in diverse professional roles and leadership positions, whereas females were often confined to domestic and passive roles which suggests that textbooks across various contexts continue to reinforce traditional gender norms. The underrepresentation of women in active and authoritative roles may contribute to shaping students' perceptions of gender roles in ways that limit aspirations and reinforce societal stereotypes. Moreover, language use in the 9th and 10th grade English textbooks frequently positioned men as the default referents, with masculine pronouns and generic male terms prevailing over gender-inclusive language. The limited presence of female historical figures, scientists, and professionals in textbook narratives further reflects a gendered knowledge hierarchy, where male contributions are given more visibility than female achievements.

Interviews with teachers revealed a complex interplay between textbook content and instructional practices. While some teachers acknowledged gender disparities in textbooks, many did not actively challenge these biases in their instruction. This echoes findings from previous studies (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sunderland, 2000), which highlight implicit gender biases in classroom instruction. The findings of the present research emphasize the urgent need for gender-inclusive curriculum reforms.

Conclusion

It is concluded that gender disparity continues to exist in secondary-level English textbooks published by PCTB Lahore. This study demonstrated that these textbooks are less gender inclusive as they reinforce traditional gender meanings. The visibility of females is quite low and limited as males were shown in different careers and roles, whereas females were shown in their traditional feminine roles. Addressing the prevailing gender discrimination in the textbooks not only requires curriculum and textbook reforms but identifying the gaps within our instructional practices also seems crucial.

The findings of the study led to the recommendation that the textbooks should give equal representation of each gender. For this, the textbook writers may be sensitized towards gender biases enabling them to be more gender sensitive while writing textbook contents. The teachers may also ensure equal gender representation by putting forth gender examples in a balanced manner. To address the gender gap in textbooks, the number of female textbook writers may also be increased.

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