



Gender Representation in English Textbooks: A Content Analysis about Public Sector Middle School Textbooks in Punjab

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates gender representation in grade 6, 7, and 8 English textbooks used in public schools in Punjab. For a comprehensive analysis, both textual contents and pictures were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative techniques. The findings show that the female characters were not only under-represented, but also misrepresented. Not even a single chapter was titled after any female character. Even in the text, they were heavily outnumbered and generally shown in stereotypical and traditional roles. There was not even a single female character that was portrayed positively. They were mostly shown in a neutral way. The same pattern was observed in the pictures. In spite of the fact that national education policies and curriculum frameworks put heavy emphasis on gender parity, the textbooks appear to have failed to incorporate it. This study suggests that textbooks should contain gender parity and represent women in a respectful way so that the students may pick those values and inculcate them.



Introduction

Education plays a vital role in shaping the mindset and attitude of the people (Littky, 2004). Students believe in what they see in and learn through the books. Textbooks have become the focal point as most of the class time and lectures are based upon them. Research suggests that students spent 80-95 percent of their class time on textbooks related activities (Sadker & Zittleman, 2007). On the other hand, teachers have been reported to have used 70-90 percent of the class time on textbooks based instructions and activities (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1992). Those books influence the attitude and behavior of the students by transmitting to them what the society believes in (Mkuchu, 2004). Previous studies have shown that students view how women are depicted in the textbooks as “unquestionable and historically truthful” (Chiponda & Wasserman, 2011, p. 13). Textbooks are also an essential source of mass media in society (Kobia, 2009).

The role of textbooks becomes even more critical in language courses (Author, 2015). It has been found that students not only refer to these textbooks in the classes; but also read the stories, poems, and dramas from them in their leisure time (Author, 2015). As a result, their impact and influence are not limited to the classroom and exam related activities. Language and culture are also connected to one another (Kramsch, 1998), consequently, the contents in the language textbooks have a significant impact on the way students conceptualize their culture and social norms. Language textbooks become a highly effective medium to reshape students' perceptions of what is acceptable and what is not in a given context (Curdt-Christiansen, 2017).

Considering that patriarchy plays a vital role in the social and political fabric of the society in many parts of the world, women are often considered weaker and inferior ones (Eagly, 1995; Emslie & Hunt, 2008; Shah, 2012). Books have traditionally been used to maintain patriarchy and depict the same tradition (Godelier, 1981; Godelier, 1986). This despite the fact that gender disparity in different walks of life generally prevents a country from national and societal growth and development (Malik & Li, 2014).

Countries of the North have worked to great lengths to diminish the patriarchal effects by maintaining gender parity in different aspects of life, but the same cannot be said about many countries from the South. Pakistan is also known for its patriarchal culture and norms, which is also reflective of its high gender disparity. In the Global Gender Gap Report of 2018, Pakistan sits at 148 out of 149 countries on the gender-parity index (World Economic Forum, 2018). There are multiple factors behind this trend in Pakistan such as tradition, culture, religious misinterpretations, parental preference, seeing men as breadwinners, and regional customs and values (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Raza & Hasan, 2010; Ghazi et al., 2011).

Interestingly, there was a time when it was not even considered a bias, but part of a proud culture where women were always protected and kept behind the curtain. Often called “modesty code”, this culture has traditionally been a part of most of the Muslim societies in the world (Antoun, 1968). Although gender bias has been diminishing, it still exists and dominates the Pakistani society where male dominance is “culturally accepted” (Shah, 2012, p.119).

Relevant to this study, gender bias has been maintained and reinforced through textbooks (Mirza, 2004; Khurshid, Gillani & Hashmi, 2010; Shah, 2012; McDonald, 2013; Jabeen, Chaudhary & Omar, 2014). Pakistani textbooks traditionally depict women in roles associated with residential households, and those associated with traditionally weak positionality. Not only are the female characters presented in more conservative and submissive roles, but they also occupy much less space in the textbooks than the male ones (Mirza, 2004; Khurshid, Gillani & Hashmi, 2010; McDonald, 2013; Jabeen, Chaudhary & Omar, 2014). The increasing outcry of different scholars and members of civil society has got the attention of the policymakers and curriculum designers, who pledged to consider gender balance in designing new curriculum and textbooks (Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training, 2017a; Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training, 2017b; Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training, 2018).

The latest curriculum along with newly compiled textbooks have been introduced recently in Pakistan. This study attempts to evaluate the policymakers' commitment to gender balance in the textbooks by analyzing the English textbooks of grades 6, 7, and 8 used in the public schools in the Punjab province of Pakistan. Specifically, this study examines (1) the frequency of male and female characters, (2) pictures, and (3) the way those gendered characters are depicted in the textbooks.

Literature Review

Gender representation, gender bias and sexism have been the focus of the researchers for a long time. Interestingly, some researchers have pointed out that even in research on gender bias, bias exists (Cislak, Formanowicz, & Saguy, 2018).

Language depicts the overall attitude of the society. Sexism, gender bias, or male domination in language may be attributed to a patriarchal society (Spender, 1985). Holmes (1996) described sexism as a way through which women are portrayed negatively through language. This may be done by using vocabulary that points to males, portraying male characters in dominant and females in submissive roles, or by using more male characters than the female ones. Scott Foresman and Company (1972) said that the textbooks could be considered sexist or containing gender bias if they portrayed males and females in stereotypical roles. They further added that using patronizing words for women or painting them with submissive colors could also be considered gender bias.

This paper investigates the gender representation in Pakistani English language textbooks of grades 6, 7, and 8. As a result, the literature is divided into two main categories: first more broadly about gender representation in textbook which is not limited to any country, level or subject; and secondly gender

representation in Pakistani textbooks to see how the situation has been there.

Gender Representation in Textbooks

Gender representation or gender bias in textbooks has been a popular area amongst the researchers due to its significance and impact upon the students. Denmark (1982) analyzed sixteen introductory textbooks for psychology published from 1979 to 1982 for gender bias. He found out that not only were the topics about women very few, but most of them also depicted women stereotypically.

Alrabaa (1985) conducted pervasive research on gender bias in Syrian school textbooks. He found that not only male characters outnumbered female ones, they were also shown in dominant roles. Demonizing language was also used for female characters such as “jealous, fussy, do nothing, weak, irrational” etc. (p. 345).

Jassey (1998) also concluded that despite many efforts, gender bias not only existed in school textbooks, but in most parts of the world, it was still quite dominant. Blumberg (2008) echoed the same opinion saying that the data from many second-generation studies showed that although there had been some improvement, yet often at a languid pace. Lee and Collins (2008) also pointed out that despite some improvements over the years, women were still shown in traditional, weak and stereotypical roles.

Low and Sherrard (1999) focused their research on photographic presentation of women in “Human Sexuality, and Marriage and Family” textbooks taught in colleges. They analyzed over 1000 photographs. The results showed that in the 1970s, photographs mainly showed women in traditional and stereotypical roles. In the 1990s, although the situation improved comparatively, the photographs were still dominated with the traditional depiction of women. Otlowski (2003) analyzed EFL textbooks to see how males and females were represented in them. It was found that generally male characters not only outnumbered female ones, but they were also in more dominant roles. Out of seventeen gendered human pictures, only five contained women. Lee and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei (2020) examined English language textbooks published for Iranian schools. They found that despite some efforts for gender parity and using gender-neutral vocabulary, “low female visibility is still prevalent”. (Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020, p. 1107).

Literature shows that by and large, women have been misrepresented in the textbooks across different levels and regions. In some areas, things might have been improving, but still gender parity has not been achieved.

Gender Representation in the Pakistani Textbooks

Nisa (1989) conducted a study of school textbooks in Pakistan. She pointed out that female characters were portrayed in traditional and stereotypical roles. Khurshid, Gillani and Hashmi (2010) analyzed secondary level English and Urdu textbooks. They also found that male characters outnumbered female ones. Female characters were mostly portrayed in traditional and stereotypical roles. Jabeen, Chaudhary and Omer (2014) also found the same patterns and trends in Punjab Textbooks Board books at primary level. Ullah, Ali and Naz (2014) analyzed the children’s books in Pakistan, and also came up with similar findings.

Mirza (2004) carried out a project about gender analysis in the Pakistani school curriculum and textbooks. She analyzed 194 textbooks of six main subjects (Urdu, English, Islamiyat, Social Studies, Mathematics, and Science) for grades 1 to 10. She also conducted interviews from all the stakeholders. That study revealed that the curriculum was heavily biased towards males. This bias was not limited to the number of female characters and personalities in the textbooks, but also how they were portrayed. The study found that although the number of female authors had almost doubled since the last research carried out in 1999, the number of female characters declined by 1%. Her study reported that female characters and personalities were in a much smaller number in both text and pictures (23.1% in total, 20.9% in text, and 25.7% in pictures) in the books analyzed. The pattern existed in all four provinces with some variation. There were only six adjectives exclusively used for women. They were “expert, domestic worker, blunt, ill-mannered, stubborn, and caring” (p. 12).

Naseem (2006) pointed out that gender equality and equal representation are by and large missing

in language and social science textbooks used in Pakistan. The same pattern was observed by Shah (2012) during a study about Pakistani secondary level English books. In 2013, McDonald analyzed 23 textbooks from grade 1 to 10 taught in Pakistani capital city, Islamabad. Those books were of five different subjects (Social Studies, Pakistan Studies, Home Economics, Islamiyat, and English). Interviews with the teachers and the students were also conducted during that study. It was found that women were underrepresented in those books. They were also presented in roles commonly associated with submissiveness and weakness. Gender biased vocabulary was also used quite frequently.

Interestingly, issues of gender bias or misrepresentation of women are not limited to the books published by Pakistani public or private publishers. Even international companies that publish books in Pakistan show the same tendencies. Ahmed and Nancy-Combes (2011) conducted research about gender bias in English books published by foreign publishers. They found that in Oxford books, male characters were mostly shown in a number of varied professions while the females were by and large limited to stereotypical roles such as housewives and fashion models.

The literature clearly shows gender bias in Pakistani textbooks against women where they were not only underrepresented, but also shown in conservative and stereotypical roles.

Research Method

This study analyzed the English textbooks published by Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB) for grades 6, 7, and 8 to investigate the gender representation in them. Textbooks published by PCTB were selected because there have been a few studies conducted earlier in the same area about them, making it easy to see if any substantial improvement has been made in this regard. English books were selected as the researchers did not have to do the translation and retranslation thus presenting the words in their original form.

An instrument was first developed for this purpose. The instrument consisted of those elements that could determine the gender representation in a textbook. Those elements were: if the lesson topic was about male or female character, number of male and female characters in the lesson, number of times those characters were cited in the text, nature of the characters (positive, negative or neutral), adjectives/qualifiers used for, and the roles assigned to them.

Pictures were divided into four categories: male- containing male human character(s) only, female- containing female human character(s) only, mixed- containing both male and female human character(s), and neutral- containing non-gendered character(s) or thing(s). Pictures that conveyed a strong message from this perspective were also explained. They were not only analyzed in terms of numbers, but also what message they conveyed.

Data analysis was done by two of the researchers independently using the instrument. Finally, the findings were compared and discussed to eliminate any error or bias.

Data Findings

The findings of the data analysis for all three English textbooks are given below.

Grade 6 English Book

In Grade 6 English Book, there were 13 chapters in total. As table 1 shows, the contents were heavily male-dominated. There were a lot more male characters than the female ones. Also, they were cited more than three times than the female ones. In the entire book, there was not even a single female character that was portrayed positively.

Table 1. *Grade 6 Textbook Text Analysis (13 Chapters)*

	Chapters titled after gendered characters	Total characters	Character type			Total times cited
			Good	Bad	Neutral	
Male	2	16	3	-	13	115
Female	0	6	-	-	6	35

Good and positive qualifiers were used for male characters such as “fair, just, truthful, great, noble, role model” and “trustworthy”, whereas qualifiers used for female characters were “expert” (in spinning) and “poor” (in financial term). Male characters were shown in positive and dominant roles such as prince, trader, student, inventor and writer. Female characters, on the other hand, were seen in the roles of spinner, weaver, trader and wife (“married to him”).

When it came to pictures, the situation was equally one-sided. There were 159 pictures in the book. Out of them, 92 pictures were neutral, 42 of males and 14 mixed pictures. In the entire book, there were only 11 pictures that consisted of female characters. In pictures, women were not only outnumbered by a large margin, they were also portrayed in traditional and passive roles. In most of the mixed pictures, women were shown in the roles of mother and wife (p. 43 & 90) where they were shown sitting or listening. Men, on the other hand, were portrayed in a lot more proactive roles. They were shown performing different activities such as writing and swimming (p. 63 & 93).

Grade 7 English Book

Grade 7 textbook showed the same pattern (Table II). Again, none of the lesson titles was about female characters. In the entire book, there were only two female characters (compared to 19 male ones). Similarly, the number of times female characters were cited in the whole book was really low. Again, not even a single female character was portrayed positively. All of them were portrayed in a neutral way.

Table 2. *Grade 7 Textbook Text Analysis (14 Chapters)*

	Chapters titled after gendered characters	Total Characters	Character Type			Total Times cited
			Good	Bad	Neutral	
Male	2	19	10	-	9	133
Female	-	2	-	-	2	3

Male characters were shown in dominant and respectful roles like “doctor, leader, preacher, politician, teacher, governor-general, inventor”, and “scientists”, while two female characters were shown in the roles of “wife” and “woman”. Good and positive qualifiers such as “good, hardworking, great, brave, strong, daring” and “steadfast” were used for male characters. Both of the female characters were portrayed neutrally, and no positive or negative qualifier was used for them.

There were 73 pictures in the 7th class English book. Out of them, 29 pictures consisted of neutral, 26 of male, 10 of female, and 8 of both male and female characters (mixed pictures). Pictures containing male characters showed men in roles of scientists, inventors, doctors, farmers and cricketers (p. 24, 80, 144, 151 & 152). Pictures containing female characters were mostly passive in nature (showing them sitting or standing) (p. 38, 70, 87) or doing petty work like carrying pitchers (p. 24, 26).

Grade 8 English Book

Finally, Grade 8 book was analyzed. This book contained 13 chapters. Once again, all of the three chapter topics about gendered characters were about male ones. When it came to the number of gendered

characters and how many times they were cited, the same trend continued (Table III). This book also showed male-dominance and superiority. Surprisingly, once more none of the female characters was portrayed positively. They were painted with either neutral or negative colors.

Table 3. *Grade 8 Textbook Text Analysis (13 Chapters)*

	Chapter titled after gendered characters	Total Characters	Character Type			Total Times cited
			Good	Bad	Neutral	
Male	3	34	9	3	22	328
Female	0	6	-	1	5	36

Male characters were described positively using qualifiers like “tolerant, kind, great, well-wisher, strong, beloved, sympathetic, brave” and “pious”. Women were again described in a neutral way like some kind of object. Male characters were shown in the role of preacher, ruler, teacher, wrestler, student, magician, woodcutter, farmer, inventor, and scientist. Female characters were again in the traditional family roles of wife, mother and sister.

This book contained 33 pictures in all. Pictures containing males outnumbered the ones containing females by a large number (10 pictures of male characters to 2 of female ones). Three pictures contained both male and female characters. The rest of the pictures were neutral. Not only the pictures with male characters outnumbered those with female ones, they also showed men in dominant roles. In one of those pictures (p. 38), a man was holding the arm of a woman (his wife) and taking her away forcibly. The physical expressions of the two characters were also interesting to note. Whereas the male character was looking up and sideward, the woman was looking down with her head covered in a shawl.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study show that despite the hue and cry from the civil society, and the claims from government authorities; the presence and presentation of women in Pakistani textbooks still lags behind what the civilized societies expect. In middle school English textbooks used in Punjab, Pakistan, female characters are still marginalized. Not only did the male characters outnumber the female ones, they were also painted with much more positive and proactive colors.

Out of 41 lesson titles in the three textbooks, not even a single one was about any female character (on the contrary seven were about male characters). This despite the fact that there have been a lot of historical, national and religious female figures who are as prominent and deserving as some of the male characters mentioned in the books. This pattern was not only found at the macro level, but also at the micro-level. Chapter 13 of the grade 7 English book, for example, is titled ‘Inventions and Discoveries’ (p. 150). It talks about famous inventors and scientists. Out of five inventors and scientists mentioned in the topic, none was female. Similarly, out of 83 total gendered characters in those books, only 14 (19.25%) were females. Not only was the number of female characters only a fraction of the total, the number of times they appeared in the text was also shockingly low. The findings of the previous research on this topic showed the same patterns in Pakistan (Mirza, 2004; Khurshid, Gillani & Hashmi, 2010; McDonald, 2013).

Previous studies repeatedly pointed out that women were not only underrepresented in terms of numbers, but they were also presented in passive or insignificant way in Pakistani textbooks (Naseem, 2006; Shah, 2012). In all three books that were analyzed, 13 out of 14 total female characters were presented in a neutral way, and one in negative. It clearly indicates that despite all the claims, how patriarchy dominates the discourse in Pakistani textbooks. Most of the time, no qualifiers were used for female characters. They were presented like an object which did not have any quality or influence, but mere presence. The qualifiers which were used for them were neutral or negative. Jabeen, Chaudhary, & Omer (2014) also found the same treatment with female characters in the Pakistani textbooks.

Another thing that most of the researchers pointed out was how women were shown in stereotypical, traditional and conservative roles (Mirza, 2004; Khurshid, Gillani, & Hashmi, 2010; McDonald, 2013). This study also found the same pattern as women were mostly shown in the roles of spinner, weaver, wife, mother, and sister. Women were frequently presented in the roles of mother, sister and wife. In these roles, often they did not have their own identity, but called with reference to a male character like “his wife” (Grade 7 textbook, p. 15), “woodcutter and his wife” and “my sister” (Grade 8 textbook, p. 21 & 39). It clearly shows that men are at the center of attention, and women are merely in supporting or auxiliary roles. Agha, Syed and Mirani (2018) also pointed out how women were put in secondary roles, and textbooks generally preached patriarchy. Male characters, on the other hand, were in much more prestigious and dominating roles such as preacher, ruler, teacher, wrestler, inventor, scientist, doctor, leader, preacher, politician, and governor-general.

The study shows that this gender bias in Pakistani textbooks is not limited to textual contents only. Pictures also show the same pattern both in terms of numbers and portrayal. This study found female characters mostly shown in traditional roles, performing household or petty chores. It was not only the numbers of pictures and portrayal of female characters that showed clear male-domination; but also the importance given to the pictures. In grade 8 English textbook, for example, there was a lesson titled “Hockey” (p. 46). It showed a picture of a male (p. 46) and a female hockey player (p. 48); but the picture of the male player was not only on the first page as compared to the female one which was on the last; it (the picture of the male player) was much bigger (4”*5”) than the female one (2”*2”). It clearly indicates the more prominence given to the picture with male character than the female one. Ullah, Ali and Naz (2014) and McDonald (2013) also found the same results while analyzing books used in Pakistan. This trend has been observed in other countries as well (Low & Sherrard, 1999; Otlowski, 2003).

This study proves that female characters are indeed underrepresented and misrepresented in Pakistani textbooks, clearly showing gender bias. That bias is found in eight different ways: lessons not dedicated to female characters, much less number of female characters in the books, numbers of times those characters are cited, the way those characters are portrayed (qualifiers used for them), the roles those characters are assigned to, number of gendered pictures, messages given in those pictures, and prominence given to those pictures (in terms of size and their placement). These findings show that the situation has not improved a great deal since the previous studies (Mirza, 2004; Khurshid, Gillani & Hashmi, 2010; McDonald, 2013). This is sad and deplorable because the policy documents and frameworks in Pakistan have been continuously talking about gender parity and eliminating all kinds of discriminations (Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training, 2017a; Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training, 2018). Even National Curriculum Framework emphasized this (Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training, 2017b).

Despite all these policy directions and claims, what the textbooks are promoting and preaching are patriarchy, male-dominance, and female submission and marginalization. These are not the national policies or curriculum documents that the students read and learn, but the textbooks. Even the teachers hardly study those education policies or curriculum frameworks. They mostly rely on textbooks for classroom teaching and activities (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1992; Sadker & Zittleman, 2007). If the government officials and policymakers want to eliminate gender bias and discrimination in society, they must align the textbooks according to the policy documents and the curriculum framework.

Students are greatly influenced by the depiction of women in the textbooks and often take them as real and true. If Pakistani governments and policymakers really want to promote gender parity in the society, women must be given equal and respectful roles in the textbooks so that the young students can read about and view them with equality and respect.

Recommendations of the Study

Equal gender representation in textbooks is imperative for promoting gender parity, harmony and respect towards women. For this purpose, the study comes up with the following recommendations.

- There should be chapters/lessons about prominent female characters so that their contributions, roles and importance in various areas may be understood better.

- Female characters should be given their own identity. Terms like “his wife” and “her mother” should be avoided.
- They should be shown in more vibrant and diverse roles like rulers, engineers, civil servants and scientists rather than being limited to stereotypical ones.
- They should be presented positively so that the students may view them with respect and positivity.
- Picture should also depict gender parity, and convey the same message. Equal importance should be given to the pictures with female characters.

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