

Gender Representation in Children's Books: A Critical Review of Empirical Studies

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Abstract: Gender representation in school textbooks, referred to as children literature in the western world, has been researched and discussed extensively in a serious academic tone since the early classic studies by second wave feminist in the 1970s and 1980s using content analysis approach. These early studies as well as those carried out by feminist poststructuralists, using qualitative approaches, asserted that children literature is gender bias: these carry significantly more males than females and both females and males are portrayed within their traditional gender roles. Keeping in view the persistent sexism in children literature, this critical review examines key findings of various studies, both from developed and developing countries, with two basic arguments: (1) Textbooks still carry gender stereotypes and (2) Gender bias in textbooks does matter as textbooks knowledge is essential medium of power that shapes the ways in which children think about themselves and society. Thus, the key purpose of this review is to assert that the persistent gender biases in children literature aims to reinforce and legitimize gender system.

Key words: Gender system • Content analysis • Discourse analysis • Agency

INTRODUCTION

Children's books are powerful means through which children learn their cultural heritage [and gender] [1]. Dorthy Smith asserts that text [books] is essential medium of power that shapes the ways in which children think about themselves and society [2]. It is argued that texts and illustrations embedded into children books determine models of thought [3,4] and offer preferred position to boys and girls. McCabe *et. al.* [5] asserted that children's books provide 'messages about right and wrong, the beautiful and the hideous, what is attainable and what is out of reach...and play central role in the development of gender identity'[5]. It is an established fact that, along with parents, teachers, peers and television, children's books 'contribute to how children understand what is expected of females and males and shape how they think of their place in the social structure' [5-8]. Bronwyn Davies argues that through [textbooks] stories, "children learn to constitute themselves as bipolar males or females with the appropriate patterns of power and desire" [9]. The aforementioned assertions affirm that texts [school knowledge] are really messages to [the students] about

the future [10]. It was /is this powerful influence of children books that drew feminists' attention to examine the representation of females and males in school textbooks/children literature.

The issue of gender bias in school textbooks was initially investigated by western second wave feminists in the 1970s/1980s using content analysis approach [11]. The main focus in content analysis approach involves 'the quantification of images and activities: it was to see 'how many men/boys there were in relation to women/girls, what roles they were portrayed in and the terminology used to speak about males and females' [7, 12]. The findings of such studies were that there were more males and they were engaged in different occupations and were undertaking a different and wider range of activities to that of females [13, 8]. Nevertheless, the focus on frequency and numbers of male and female were thought inappropriate for explaining gender power relationship. It was this discontent with mere numbers of male and female characters that poststructuralist perspective appeared in educational research in the late 1980s. Poststructuralist perspective drew attention to and provided ways of interrogating meaning in text [14, 8].

Here the focus shifted from simple frequency to a more complex and sophisticated stage than the one practised by second wave feminism [15]. Feminists' analysis of children literature and textbooks focussed on the exploration of underlying meaning, forms of relationship, metaphor, pattern of power desire created in this text [7, 8, 16-19]. Some studies on gender representation in children's literature have revealed some signs of improvement since Weitzman *et al.*'s classic study more than 35 years ago [5]. Nevertheless, recent research studies across nations continue to claim the stereotypical and underrepresentation of women and girls in children books [20-23, 5, 8]. The persistent presence of gender bias in children's books is due to the lack of serious efforts and less attention "in recent years to the images and texts in the reading material offered to young children in schools contrasts" [8]. Keeping in view powerful influence of text and images offered to children, this paper reviews current and previous research studies and highlight the persistent, but varied, patterns of gender bias in children books. The paper concludes with the assertion that the persistent sexism in children books is ideologically invested to construct boys and girls as gendered individuals which, in turn, guides their perception and understanding of the social world as gendered space.

Survey Empirical Studies: The under representation of females specific names, nouns and pronouns in children books.

Many studies across various societies have revealed that the numbers of culturally specific male names, nouns and pronouns are more in children books than female names. A recent study conducted by Hazir Ullah on Pakistani school textbooks revealed that the numbers of culturally specific male names are more in the text than female names. Similarly, the numbers of gender specific pronouns counted were considerably higher than the number of those referring to females [24, 21]. Similarly, the numbers of gender specific pronouns counted were considerably higher than the number of those referring to females [24]. Pasco, analyzing language textbooks, found that *he* occurs three times more than *she* in school textbooks [25]. Similarly, Feizmohammad Poor's study of gender discrimination in Iranian school textbooks revealed that more adjectives describe males; the number of males in 'subject' position of sentences are more than the number of females; the number of females in 'object' position of sentences are more than the number of males and approximately 95 percent of the reading text of the

textbooks are about males [26]. In Syria, Alrabaa analyzed 28 textbooks and found that young children books are gender-biased in content and language. The author summed up that females were derogated and victimized [27]. Sajjadi asserts that in Iran English textbooks significantly under-represent females" [28]. Kalia argues that school textbooks in India use male-exclusive language to signify all of humanity [29]. The point to be noted here is that the lack of female names, nouns and pronouns in children literature communicates to girls that knowledge is about males and only they matter. This can develop feeling of inferiority among girls which may have lifelong implication, i.e. it is persistently observed in Pakistani context that not only male but females use the pronouns "He" in their speeches and writing when citing an example.

Women Invisibility in the Text and Images: Girls and women are less visible in school textbooks-both in the text as well as in pictures whereas boys and men are more visible. Findings of many earlier studies on children reading materials in the western and non-western context revealed that there were more male characters than females [5, 12, 13, 23]. The study of 18 popular high school American history textbooks revealed that 1,335 females were included throughout those texts, in comparison to 12,382 males. In illustrations, there were 616 pictures of women and 3,505 images of men [30]. Examining public school textbooks in Pakistan for the number of women and men religious and historical figures in text content and illustrations, significantly more men than women were found at all levels [24]. Various studies found that female heroes and their contributions in various wars and freedom movements are rarely seen in textbooks [23, 24, 31, 32]. It is asserted that ignoring women in history is to [misguide the impressionable mind of children] and misunderstand the entire organization of any society" [33]. The point to be pondered upon here is that the history part of textbooks, like all other aspects, is predominantly that from a male perspective which implies that males are more important than females. Thus it is argued that the absences of prominent women's stories inhibit girls' capacities to think and move away from stereotypical positioning in society.

Mukundan and Nimehchisalem, on the basis of their study on Malaysian secondary schools textbooks, asserted that there was an absolute gender bias with males outnumbering females in the text and illustrations [34]. Jon Ellis, examining part 1 and part 2 of History and Geography textbooks in the state of West Bengal,

found that Part 1 has 71 pictures of males (seventy six percent) vs. 29 of females (twenty four percent) [35]. English language training (ELT) materials in Japan carry an unrealistic preference for male characters [36]. Hazir Ullah and Christine Skelton found that school textbooks in Pakistan are highly gender biased [20]. Girls and women are almost invisible in the illustration as well as in content of textbooks in Pakistan [37-40]. Mirza analysis of gender bias in primary school textbooks in the Punjab Province of Pakistan revealed that out of the total 1276 characters, 26 percent were females and 74 per cent were males. Females' pictures were only one fourth of the total pictures. Female characters were systematically withdrawn from the public scenario as they grow up [41]. Tacker, cited by Tetreault, noted that 'women were largely excluded from textbooks [42]. Maria Chin Abdullah, examining textbooks in Malaysia, found 'strong gender bias in the portrayal of men and women's roles and a lack of recognition for women's contribution in Malaysia. Abdullah further concludes that women are underrepresented and when they did contribute, they are not mentioned [43]. Shobhita Rajagopal, on the basis of her study of high school textbooks in the State of Rajasthan India, argues that underrepresentation of women is clearly evident in all textbooks and across all subjects [32]. To truncate the discussion, it is argued that most of the studies examining gender bias in textbooks have reached essentially the same conclusion: "gender biased images remain strongly present in school textbooks throughout the world" [44, 5]. Many studies across various societies have pointed out that readers identify with characters of their own gender in books and the relative lack of female characters in textbooks can limit the aspirations and opportunities for girls to fully explore their capabilities and validate their place in society [34]. Sunderland (2001) argues that learners [school children] are required to use the contents of textbooks frequently which can affect their consciousness as well as sub-consciousness, for example in terms of their self esteem. Therefore, the negative and sensitive influence that textbooks may exert on the learners' sense of gender identity and their understanding of gender equality cannot be denied [45]. Similarly, children identify with characters of their own gender in books and construct identities which are offered to children for them to aspire to [46-48]. Therefore, the absolute absence or underrepresentation of girls and women in school textbooks are "symbolic annihilation" because it denies existence to women and girls, which in turn reinforces and legitimizes the patriarchal gender system [49].

Legitimization of Sex Based Division of Labor: A considerable number of studies across societies have revealed that textbooks portray women in stereotypical gender role like cooking, cleaning, sweeping, washing clothes, pitching water, looking after children and the other domestic chores [see 5, 20]. Stone argues that the findings of such textbooks analysis across societies were that there were more males and they were engaged in different occupations and were undertaking a different and wider range of activities to that of females [13]. Ellis's study on the textbooks used in the state of West Bengal revealed the cited textbooks did not show a single woman in the position of earning for the family or in any other area of public domain [35]. In Iran high school textbooks attribute greater variety of jobs to males-80 per cent to males and 20 percent to females [26]. Esen argues that textbooks present males in a wider variety of professions and activities, while female figures are locked in the role of mother and wife, most of the times, in the domestic sphere and in the role of a nurse or teacher which are traditionally women's jobs' [21]. Kowitz and Carroll, on the basis of their study, assert that in school [textbooks] key social roles are given to men whereas female character appeared often when household chores and child care were topic of discussions [50]. Michael S. Kimmel argues that school curriculum demonstrates girls/women in the traditional stereotypical gender roles: girls are shown busy in domestic chores while boys in outdoor activities [51]. Hamilton *et al.* found that textbooks depict men in more than nine times as many traditional as nontraditional jobs and women were portrayed in traditional jobs over ten times as often as they were portrayed in nontraditional jobs [22]. Firoz Bakht Ahmed argues that despite Indian government's stress on the elimination of sex stereotypes and sex biases from textbooks, textbooks still depict women in fetching water, working in kitchens or cleaning the room/house [52]. Kalia's study of the textbooks used in India found that of "465 occupations in the texts, women were completely excluded from 344 (74 per cent). She argues that this [gender biases] in textbooks construct children's gender-related values, especially if reinforced by the teacher [53,54].

Mirza examined textbooks in the Punjab province of Pakistan found that women constituted only 12.7 per cent of the occupational and professional characters in the textbooks. Females were portrayed in only 19 occupations out of 56 occupations mentioned in the textbooks. Female characters were portrayed in the activities which do not demand the creative potentials of individuals, i.e. cooking, running households. Males were portrayed

in fighting wars, selling, boating, flying, driving etc. The qualities ascribed mostly to male and female characters were happy, powerful, religious, advisor, humane, well mannered, pious, hardworking, patriot and active [55]. A recent study conducted by Hazir Ullah on textbooks taught in the Province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan found the new textbooks depict men engaged in wide range of occupations that agrarian and modern capitalist economies offer. The study found that adult men are shown with 'roles' in the culturally valued public domain, e.g. shoe makers, carpenters, builders, cultivators and harvesters of crops in the field, hunters, drivers, fishers men, or in their white collar professional roles like army officers, police men, forest officer, bank managers, doctors, post office functionaries, shopkeepers, business men, university professors and some time as school teachers. On the other hand, women represented in these textbooks are assigned only seven occupations: teaching (17) predominantly doctors/ nurse (7), pilots (1), bank employees (2), shopkeepers (1), telephone operators (1) and news paper assistants (1).

What we want to emphasize here is that the sex based division of labour in the textbooks across societies is indicative of how strategically children are given frequent signals and messages through school knowledge to develop gender identities and learn about gender expectations. The messages inculcated through the stereotypical representation of females and males in school textbooks contribute to children's understanding of what it means to be a boy, girl, man, or woman [5].

Findings of Discourse Analysis: As reviewed in the preceding texts, results of the content analysis of textbooks show vivid gender bias with males outnumbering females. As mentioned in the introduction of this article feminist analysis of children books was not restricted to quantification of images and activities but were also focussed on the exploration of underlying meaning, forms of relationship, metaphor and pattern of power desire created in this text [see 12, 16-19]. It is, therefore, pivotal to review findings of discourse analysis studies of children books. Discourse analysis of textbooks in Malaysia revealed that "males spoke more, talked first, more often and more frequently excluded females from the conversations they had with the members of their own gender" [24, 34]. Similarly, Esen analysis of the revised textbooks in Turkey revealed that the rate of illustrations showing women with authority is lower than that of the illustrations showing men with authority [21]. Cerezal's study of English Language

textbooks in Spain found that in most cases males appear superiors, had superior occupations and play the protagonist's role [56]. In Greece, Poulou examined two language textbooks in terms of male / female amount of speech, initiation/ completion of dialogue and detected a vivid manifestations of sexism against women" in these books [57]. Rajagopal's study of high school textbooks in India concluded that "out of 30 chapters in the class 8 textbook, women protagonists are present in just four lessons". Rajagopal's analysis of textbooks taught in state of Rajasthan also pointed out that there is no mention of women as political subject and their contribution in area of arts and culture, science, mathematics and economics [32]. Malaysian school textbooks portrayed men in leadership position and speakers on [public occasions] and women as audience [31]. Similar findings were found by Hazir Ullah in textbooks in Pakistan [24]. Jafri study of textbooks taught in Pakistani schools concluded that boys / men in the textbooks were identified by their jobs or professions e.g. doctor, engineer, carpenter, potter, farmer, postman, playing etc. Women, on the other hand, were always demonstrated as daughters, sisters, wives or mothers [37]. Sami Alrabaa's study of the *Syrian School Textbooks* in 1985 revealed that despite Syrian Government commitments, textbooks in Syria victimize women and consist of texts that are derogatory to the dignity of women [58]. Rajagopal argues that textbooks in India depict men/ boys as being strong, valorous, having high virtues of morality and character. Women are represented as mothers, caregivers and being nurturing and emotional [32]. In almost similar vein, Esen's study of textbooks revealed that boys are portrayed as more active, independent, successful, skilful and brave figures, while girls are portrayed as more inactive, coward, unsuccessful and dependent figures [21]. Rajagopal argues that textbooks in the state of Rajasthan India are replete with traditional meaning of masculinity and femininity [32]. In Pakistan, "gendered textual discourses and illustrations of pictures are embedded into textbooks to perpetuate and reinforce hegemonic masculinity-boys / men are physically strong, capable of carrying heavy weight, taller than girls. Females, on the other hand, are described with feminine traits-pretty, nurturing, thin, having long hair (cultural criteria for the beauty), passive and quite" [24].

Jayakaran Mukundan and Vahid Nimehchisalem, examining textbooks taught in Malaysian secondary schools, found that female family members were mentioned more than male ones, 'word *wife* appears 24 times altogether throughout the books and *husband* does

not even once, this uneven distribution cannot be judged as an example of over-representation of females since *wife* in all the cases filled the role of an *appendage*, a *passive receiver*, or a *wifely status* [59, 60, 34]. All these representation show her in the stereotyped roles and in relation to her male family members. The representation of females in relation to their male family members is also vividly observed in Pakistani textbooks. Hazir Ullah, examining the new textbooks taught in public school in Pakistan, found that the few women whose contribution is highlighted in curricula are appendages to men and tend to fall into subordinate positions which fit traditional stereotypes of women. He argues that the pertinent example would be that of the representation of Fatima Jinnah with reference to her brother Quaid-I-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Fatima Jinnah has been represented as a great sister who sacrificed her career to support and look after her brother Jinnah. The cited story makes no reference to Fatima Jinnah role in politics when she contested general election 1965 in Pakistan [24]. Some may take these as mere stories to engage children with little knowledge of the powerful influence these biased stories may have in the creation of gendered individuals. Davies and Skelton argue that stories provide a means through which children come to know and discover what 'positions are available to members of their gender and how to live the detail of those understandings' [9, 12, 16].

The examination of children's books for gender representation also revealed that sports and physical activities (running and stretching) have been portrayed as boys'/men's prerogative in the textbooks [24, 31]. Our argument here is that through this stereotypical and hegemonic representation of sports and physical activities traditional beliefs of masculinities (men as active and muscularly stronger) and femininities (women as passive, weaker and physically fragile) are constructed, communicated and reinforced. It is also found that textbooks discriminate against girls and women when it comes to outings, excursions and trips to beautiful places and big cities with class fellows, friends and teachers [24]. The concern here is that this deprivation from excursions and outings blocks the opportunity for girls to learn and develop their self-image with diverse experiences, as traveling offers them possibilities of escaping from their prescribed places and roles acquiring new knowledge, which may transform their whole lives and enable them to learn how to be independent when they wish and need.

CONCLUSION

This critical review vividly shows that children's books consist of significantly more men than women in text contents and illustrations across nations, especially developing countries. The review also highlights that not only are females portrayed less often than males in children's books, but both genders are frequently presented in stereotypical gender roles as well. It can be asserted that this portrayal of males and females in stereotypical ways makes counter gender socialization difficult. The review makes it further clear that the wide prevalent gender bias in children's books is an indicative of sexist ideology constructed and naturalized through the contents of the school textbooks in many regions of the globe. Drawing on the claimed that 'children identify with characters of their own gender in books [61] and 'construct identities which are offered to children for them to aspire to [16, 47, 48], it is argued that textbooks contents have lifelong effects on the learners as they are required to use these messages frequently, which can affect their conscious as well as their subconscious. The findings of these studies around the world suggest that there are no such things as objective knowledge or politically neutral books for children, but the knowledge children are taught in schools is 'male knowledge' in that it was written largely by men, about men and from a male perspective (see 15). The above review also affirms feminists' claim that schools are like factories where instructors create gendered individuals through the state approved textbooks (also see Wood 2003). The crux of the study then is that the continuous presence of gender discrimination in the textbooks may have adverse effects on the children identity formation. Mem Fox argues that "everything we read constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men" (6). This affirms that the way genders are portrayed in school resources (textbooks) contribute to the image young children develop of their own appropriate role and that of their gender in society. Similarly, Kath Woodward asserts that representations create images and ways of acting that [children] might aspire to. This reinforcement of gendered social order predisposes children not to question existing social relationships (62). To sum up, it can be argued that what is included and excluded in school textbooks arises from gendered power/knowledge relations.

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