

## **Do the Primary School Textbooks in Pakistan Reflect Gender Biases? A Content Analysis of Illustrations**

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**Abstract:** The present study examined gender biases in primary school textbooks used in public sector schools in Pakistan. A content analysis of textbook illustrations was conducted for this research enquiry. Results indicated that the textbook illustrations reflected gender biases. Female representation was significantly lower as compared to male images and women were presented in stereotyped roles. It was also found that girls were considerably less often portrayed in play, recreational and educational activities than boys. Traditional values and a biased approach were reflected towards gender representation. The findings are discussed in terms of what should be presented in textbooks either portrayal of social reality or ideal world. The paper also discusses the implications of gender biased messages depicted in textbooks on child perceptions. It indicates the implications of the findings for policy makers and future researchers with regard to gender equality in education.

**Keywords:** gender equality, textbooks, school children, content analysis

### **Introduction**

Despite significant human and technological development in this modern age, people face discrimination and inequalities with regard to race, religion, ethnicity, and gender. Society reflects gender inequalities in several ways which are deeply rooted in people's culture and values. Being a social process, education remains under the influence of society and it reflects societal culture and values. Research has shown that gender discrimination and inequalities penetrate into education at different levels in various forms. As an integral part of education, textbooks also can reflect this social reality and present females in stereotyped roles. Before presenting the evidence shown by researchers in this regard, it is important to discuss the role and impact of textbooks on students particularly primary school students.

Textbooks are basic tools of the curriculum and their prime function is to help

students achieve their learning goals. Generally, educationists are of the view that textbooks provide a common body of knowledge and these should be used as *flexible* tools in the learning process. Their contribution to improve the quality of education is recognized at all stages of educational development (Verspoor, 1989). Research in many countries has proved that textbooks influence the learning process significantly (Altbach, 1991). The role of textbooks becomes more influential in developing countries like Pakistan, where rural children hardly have access to books other than textbooks. Textbooks highly influence the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes of students particularly young students (Denny, 1983). Playing such a significant ideological and pedagogical role, the content of textbooks becomes a critical issue (Keith, 1991).

The content of textbooks affects children's perception and shape their mind-set for gender roles as well. Presence of gender stereotyping in the content of textbooks is an important issue for education. Research studies have been undertaken to examine this issue. For example, a study of Turkish textbooks indicated that female and male occupational roles depicted in the textbooks were biased parallel to the patriarchal values of Turkish society (Ozdogru, Aksoy, Erdogan, & Gok, 2006). Research on gender issues in textbooks from Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe also indicates that women-roles are mainly limited to domestic work (McKinney, 2005). Zittleman & Sadker (2002) found that the textbooks have minimal coverage to women contribution and gender issues. Another study of science textbooks for lower secondary schools uncovered that many lessons presented in the science textbooks do not have images of females at all (Elgar, 2004).

Several other studies examined gender biases in textbooks all over the world. In Pakistani context, such studies are found in a very limited number. When it comes to primary school textbooks the number of studies shrinks further. Two studies undertaken to examine gender biases in school textbooks are worth mentioning here. Mattu and Hussain (2004) conducted a semiotic analysis of the language and images used in the representation of females and males in secondary school textbooks developed by the Punjab Textbook Board. They found that students in Pakistan are exposed to textbooks which reflect strong gender bias. Female representation is quite low and women are depicted in stereotyped roles. Other study found that the content of Pakistani textbooks

did not represent the changing social status of women from doing unpaid housework to occupational work (Zeenatunnisa, 1989, cited in Ozdogru et al., 2006). This study also focused on secondary school textbooks.

The investigation of these studies were focused on the secondary school textbooks. In order to maintain a comprehensive account of gender roles presented in Pakistani textbooks, this study investigated how females and males are portrayed in primary school textbooks.

More specifically, this study aimed to examine the gender roles presented in the textbooks and investigate how female and male children were depicted for their basic rights to education and recreation. The present study contributes to this purpose by conducting a content analysis of how females and males are portrayed in the illustrations in primary school textbooks. Illustrations used in textbooks have a significant impact on children's mind and perceptions. They communicate intentional and unintentional messages, never stated in the text. Children, especially primary school children, show much greater interest in illustrations than text or written words. They perceive messages quickly and try interpreting images in their own daily life. Children are aware of visible differences among gender at the age of 3 or 4 and in late childhood, they tend to stereotype many things (Sleeter & Grant, 1988). Thus, illustrations given in the primary school textbooks have a powerful impact on children's minds and influence their perceptions about gender roles.

### **Methodology**

Researchers use *content analysis* method to gather and analyze the content of text. The information can be in different forms such as words, symbols or pictures. It manifests highly reliable coding (surface level coding) (Neuman, 2006). Therefore, it is commonly used to analyze the content of textbooks. This study also used the content analysis method to examine the research topic. A content analysis of textbook illustrations was undertaken.

### *Sample*

Since this was a small scale study, only one textbook was randomly selected from a list of the primary school textbooks published by the Sindh Textbook Board (STB). STB is a government body authorized to develop textbooks for primary, secondary and higher secondary classes in the province of Sindh. The Board develops and produces textbooks according to the goals of the national curriculum which is developed by the Federal Ministry of Education of Pakistan. All public sector schools in the province use these textbooks for the students' studies. The selected textbook entitled 'My English 4' was first published by STB in April 2002. This textbook is used to teach English as a second language for class IV students in those schools where the medium of instruction is either Urdu or Sindhi. The entire book, comprised of 53 pages, was selected for the analysis. The book contains 46 human (children and adult) illustrations or pictures. Each illustration had either one or more than one human character or image. A total of 166 human images were depicted in the book. In some crowded illustrations like a scene of railway station, it was difficult to recognize the gender identity of few human images. These images were omitted, i.e. not counted as male or female. However, this problem occurred in only three illustrations for six human images. No repeated illustrations were omitted because the repeated use of an image may increase the effect on a child's perceptions about gender roles. In some cases, where an illustration was vague about the nature of an image, the written text was consulted for the clarity. For example, a picture of a watchman did not depict the message of the occupation of watchman clearly but the text given on the page helped to clarify this. The illustration given on the title cover was also taken into account for the analysis.

#### *Coding procedure and Categorization*

In content analysis, categories are defined to classify the data on the basis of the selected concepts. The coding scheme employed for this content analysis was based on two main themes: stereotyped sex roles and equal basic rights for female and male children. The types of messages found in the illustrations were mainly coded by the principle researcher while other coder was involved for a random cross-check. The following four categories were defined for the coding process:

1. Occupations: illustrations depicting occupation of women and men through different ways like dress code, activity, or place.

2. Domestic work: illustrations portraying women and men involved in typical household work like cooking, serving food, cleaning, dishwashing and clothes washing.

3. Children's Play and Recreation: illustrations depicting female and male children engaged in play, entertainment, and recreational activities at different places such as playing cricket, swimming at the beach and playing in a public park or school ground.

4. Children as Students: illustrations depicting female and male children in their 'student identity' at different places like children in the classroom and school, children doing homework at home, children in school uniform crossing a road and children in school uniform talking in the street.

The first two categories are related to the theme of 'stereotyped sex roles' and the last two categories (number 3 and 4) represent the theme of 'equal rights for female and male children, more specifically equal rights to education and rights to play both for girls and boys.

#### *Coding reliability*

As mentioned above, a random cross-check was done by the second coder and agreement on the first two variables (occupation and domestic work) was found. The other two categories were negotiated after the joint review of illustrations. The written text was also referred to in this regard, where necessary.

#### **Results**

The illustrations or pictures given in the textbook depict 166 human images (characters) related to both adults and children. Of these, 69.9 per cent of images portray male characters while the remaining 30.1 per cent depict females. Of the 166 images, the analysis concluded that 134 of these were consistent with the identified categories. The remaining 32 images were miscellaneous scenes which were not relevant to the analysis. For example, a large proportion of those 32 images was scenic and did not include human images. Therefore, these results represent 134 images related to the research topic.

#### **Occupations and Domestic Work**

The occupational model presented in textbook illustrations shows women's limited role in occupations and portrays stereotyped professions for women like nurse

and doctor. The following table shows that all the occupations except two are associated with males. A wide range of male occupations presented in the textbook illustrations shows their social and economic usefulness while women's occupational importance is not significant and limited to health services. No illustration depicts women even in teaching and agriculture professions where female contribution is significant in Pakistan.

*Table-1 Frequency distribution of the occupations for both the genders depicted in the illustrations in the selected textbook*

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Fem ale</b>	<b>Male</b>
Butcher	0	1
Carpenter	0	1
Cobbler	0	2
Coolie	0	1
Doctor	1	0
Farmer	0	1
Greengrocer	0	1
Masson	0	1
Nurse	1	0
Pilot	0	1
Railway Guard	0	1
Teacher	0	1
Ticket checker in train	0	1
Watchman	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>13</b>

The textbook did not have even a single picture of male which showed him involved in household work like cooking, washing, and cleaning. All the fourteen images depicting household work showed that only women are involved in domestic work.

*Children's Play and Recreation and Children as Students*

The textbook illustrations depict more male children in play and recreation activities than female children. The illustrations have 70 images of children engaged in play and recreational activities and only ten (14.2%) of them depict female children. Male children are shown in a variety of recreational and play activities such as cricket, football, traditional games, swimming, picnic at the beach and playing in a public park while female children's play and recreational activities are limited to few traditional games like 'Hide and Seek' and playing in a public park. These illustrations do not only show a limited choice of recreation and play for female children but also communicate about their restricted mobility to beach, river, and other outdoor places.

The title cover illustration depicted equal number of girls and boys playing together which communicated a gender friendly message

The illustrations depicting female and male children in their 'student identity' also showed a gender imbalance. Again, male children were more frequently presented as students than girls. Frequency of female children as students was only 4 as compared to 31 for male children.

### **Discussion**

Results of the present study indicated that the primary school textbooks in Pakistan contain gender biases and women are presented in stereotyped roles. This reflects a social reality of gender status in Pakistan. This study indicated that portrayal of female adults and children in primary textbooks was similar to those reported in secondary textbooks studies (e.g. Mattu and Hussain, 2004; Zeenatunnisa, 1989) conducted in a Pakistani context. This study found that females were either under represented or portrayed in stereotyped roles in school textbooks. In other words, differences between female and male representations in the textbooks were not only quantitative but these representations also depicted biased gender roles related to everyday life.

Findings of the study regarding women's occupational roles indicate three-fold gender biases. First, women's role in some areas like teaching and agriculture is a social reality of Pakistani society but is not depicted in the textbook. More than one third of

primary school teachers in Pakistan are females. This shows that substantial number of women is engaged in education. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), agriculture labor force is 45% of the total labor force in the country. Around 79.4% rural women are engaged in agriculture as against 60.8% of rural men. Women have intensive and active involvement in production of major crops, crops management tasks and livestock production. Despite the fact that women in Pakistan are intensively engaged in agriculture, textbook illustrations remain nonresponsive to this reality. Second, women's occupational role is hardly presented, which may communicate a biased message to school children that girls or women are not suited for professional work. Third, the occupational role of women was presented in stereotyped roles like nurse. This restricts women's role to traditional 'women professions' and does not promote a wide range of career for women. Additionally, the textbooks show that household work is a female-only domain. Such representations may result in the wrong message that girls are expected to be housewives rather than joining a professional career.

It is generally observed that sex-role stereotyping about male and female roles in work and family starts in the primary years. Teachers and the learning environment can influence perceptions about the roles of boys and girls, men and women in appropriate way (Ve, 1990). Textbooks play a key role in the learning environment available to children. They have a powerful social role in socializing children and validate for them what counts as cultural norms and official values and knowledge (McKinney, 2005). Therefore, it is important to realize the impact of textbooks on children's perception. They need to reflect gender sensitivity including equal opportunities for women and men. Equal educational opportunities also promote equal opportunity to choose occupational roles and life styles. The full range of roles, careers and occupations should be available to females and males on an equal basis regardless of their gender (Sleeter & Grant, 1988). The textbook under investigation failed to promote equal opportunities for occupational roles to women and men.

Findings of the study related to children's play and recreation and educational activities also showed a gender bias against girl child. Girls' representation in recreational and play activities indicate two main aspects. First, it can lead to a biased impression among young students that play and recreation are mainly for boys. Second,



female children are given a limited choice for play and their mobility to recreational activities at beach, river, and other outdoor places is restricted. This reflects a traditional approach of Pakistani society where female children are generally discouraged from, and boys are preferred for outdoor activities. This type of message depicted in textbooks reiterates the traditional bias approach and ultimately influences the perceptions of young students negatively. The findings also indicate that girls are given a low priority in terms of depicting their student identity in textbooks. This can raise a question in the minds of female students about their right and ability to education. This question becomes more important in developing countries like Pakistan, where the female literacy rate is quite low and retention of girls in primary schools always remains a challenge. Every child has an equal right to education regardless of her/his gender. It is important to see how a country's education system promotes this right at different levels. Do the illustrations of the textbook promote this right without any gender bias? The findings of this study do not answer this question positively and draw an attention for appropriate actions to correct the situation.

Overall, the illustrations of the textbook were consistent with the traditional values of Pakistani society. It is right that school or textbooks reflect the social reality. Thus, the important issue to consider here is whether textbooks should present social reality or an ideal world. The role of schools and textbooks is not limited to sticking with traditional values and presenting social reality. They are important agents of socialization and change. They are believed to be powerful forces of social improvement. Generally, educationists especially those who wish to change society and believe in social justice for all human beings regardless of gender suggest that education will be their vehicle for the change process (Delamont, 1980). Human rights principles and education policy can also be followed, in order to determine the presentation of gender in textbooks (McKinney, 2005). They clearly discourage gender biases in any form and promote gender equality across the board. Therefore, the role of textbooks is beyond the present social reality. It should promote social justice and discourage societal biases against female children and adults.

## **Conclusion**

In the light of the current education policy of Pakistan, the Education Sector Reform (ESR) and the National Plan of Action for Education For All (EFA) aim to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education (Government of Pakistan, 2004). Despite the fact that the current education policy aims to discourage gender inequalities in the education system, the primary school textbooks are not free from gender biases. This indicates a gap between policy and its implementation on gender issues. On the same note, it is also important to realize that this gap can not be filled only by increasing the number of female pictures or characters in textbooks but equal choices and treatment should be offered to both female and male without any bias or stereotyping. The textbook boards in Pakistan should devise a mechanism to develop and produce gender-friendly textbooks for children. Textbook developers and illustrators can be sensitized on gender issues because they have a vital role in this regard. Overall, the entire education system should demonstrate its alignment with the national education policy by striving for gender equality in education.

Finally, this research was a small scale study and future research could usefully investigate the nature of gender inequalities more thoroughly with a larger sample of textbooks and compare differences in written text and illustrations in gender contexts. Research could examine the *impact* of gender biased messages reflected in textbooks on school children. Future researchers could also investigate the reasons for the gap between education policy and practice with regard to gender inequalities.

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