

Gender Stereotypes and Bias in English Language School Textbooks: Reflection from Literature Review across Different Countries

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article information	Abstract
Submitted: 2024-11-21 Revised: 2024-12-114 Published: 2024-12-31	Textbooks significantly influence student learning, shaping values, beliefs, and cultural views. They convey gender roles, social norms, and biases, making it crucial to create gender-neutral materials. This requires a thorough review of existing textbooks to ensure they do not favor any gender. This review paper aims to examine five specific aspects of the selected previous research: the portrayal of gender in language and terminological aspects, visual representation, professional, occupational, and working roles representation, games and leisure time activities, cultural and regional differences in the portrayal of gender in textbooks. A wide-ranging strategy was employed to search and identify research papers from Web of Science, Scopus, Springer Link, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and ERIC. The chosen papers span the years 2007 to 2024. Out of 358 results generated, 68 publications representing 45 selected papers were chosen and themed for discussion, investigating gender stereotypes and biases in English language textbooks at the school level. Results revealed a predominantly male presence in illustrations, often in active leadership roles, while females are underrepresented or shown in passive roles. Boys are portrayed in adventurous activities, while girls are depicted in domestic pursuits, with textbooks consistently minimizing female achievements across cultures and regions. The researcher concluded that the findings are valuable for textbook development agencies, authors, and educators in creating a gender-sensitive curriculum and textbooks.
Keywords: Gender Stereotypes and Bias, English Language, SchoolTextbook	

Introduction

Gender stereotypes and biases in English language school textbooks present a significant issue as they can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and limit the opportunities and aspirations of students (Pavlenko, 2004; Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2008; Esmaili, 2015; Barton & Lee, 2005). Studies across various countries have shown that these biases can reinforce traditional gender roles, (Zhou et al., 2021; Ullah, Ali, & Naz, 2014; Halimatussakdiah et al., 2021). impacting students' self-perception and career choices (Ali & Hussain, 2019; Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Blumberg, 2008; Sunderland, 2000; Sadker & Zittleman, 2009; Ullah & Skelton, 2013). These stereotypes are often reflected in the content, illustrations, and language used in textbooks, which can contribute to the marginalization of female students and affect their academic performance and self-esteem (Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012; Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Sleeter & Grant, 2017; Lee & Collins, 2008; Nousiainen et al., 2020). The issue is compounded by the lack of representation of diverse gender identities leading to a narrow view of gender that

To cite this article (APA Style):

Nandi, A., Hader, T., & Das, T. (2024). Gender Stereotypes and Bias in English Language School Textbooks: Reflection from Literature Review across Different Countries. *An-Nisa Journal of Gender Studies*, 17(2), 133–148. <https://doi.org/10.35719/annisa.v17i2.320>

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excludes non-binary and transgender individuals (Pimentel, 2010; Taylor, 2003; Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2008; Ahmad & Shah, 2019; Khurshid, 2015). Addressing these biases requires a comprehensive review and reform of educational materials to ensure that they promote gender equality and inclusivity (Lalor, 2017; Dominguez, 2003; Paechter, 2000; Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009; Kobia, 2009).

Recent studies have highlighted the persistent presence of gender stereotypes and biases in English language school textbooks, (Saleem & Zubair, 2013; Arslan Ozer, Karatas, & Ergun, 2019). reflecting traditional gender roles and contributing to the reinforcement of gender inequality. Despite efforts to promote gender equality in education, these biases remain prevalent, influencing students' perceptions of gender roles and expectations (Lee & Collins, 2008; Yang, 2011; Hellinger, 1980; Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009; Mikulecky, 2011; Ariyanto, 2018; Sever, 2004).). Studies have revealed that male characters are often depicted in more active and diverse roles, while female characters are portrayed in passive, domestic, and subordinate roles, thus limiting the representation of women in professional and leadership positions (Cunningsworth, 1995; Hartman & Judd, 1978; Poulou, 1997; Renner, 1997; Shnookal, 2001). Furthermore, the linguistic features used in textbooks, such as pronouns and occupational terms, often favor males, reinforcing the notion of male superiority and female inferiority (Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Bahman & Rahimi, 2010; Ghorbani, 2009; Rifkin, 1998).

The purpose of this study is to analyze and identify gender stereotypes and biases found in English textbooks in schools, and their impact on students' perceptions and attitudes towards gender roles. The research aims to evaluate the extent to which unequal gender representations in educational materials can reinforce gender inequality and affect students' career choices and self-esteem. In addition, this study aims to examine the role of textbooks in formulating a narrow view of gender, which ignores non-binary and transgender identities. It also aims to provide recommendations on reforming textbooks and educational materials to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment and promote more gender-sensitive policies in global education.

The presence of gender stereotypes and biases in school English textbooks significantly affects students' perceptions of gender roles, which can reinforce gender inequality and limit their career aspirations. Textbooks that contain biased gender representations, such as the selection of active roles for male characters and passive roles for female characters, have the potential to shape students' views of rigid and traditional gender roles. This can result in female students' lack of confidence in taking on leadership roles or pursuing careers in male-dominated fields. In addition, the underrepresentation of non-binary and transgender gender identities in textbooks can also hinder the development of gender inclusivity awareness among students. It is hoped that by identifying and examining these biases, solutions can be found to create textbooks that are more inclusive and promote gender equality.

Methods

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to analyze gender stereotypes and biases in school mathematics textbooks. The SLR approach ensures a comprehensive, transparent, and reproducible analysis of existing literature, adhering to the guidelines outlined by (Moher et al., 2009) (Tranfield et al., 2003). To focus on previous research regarding gender stereotypes and biases in textbooks both in India and internationally, Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, Semantic Scholar, and Springer Link were chosen as the primary databases. This selection aimed to enhance the likelihood of locating pertinent literature. The search terms used were "gender stereotypes in textbooks," "gender bias in educational

materials,” “English textbooks and gender representation,” and “gender equality in school textbooks.” Ultimately, publications that met the established criteria were identified.

The authors compiled the selected information into a spreadsheet. Initially, they manually checked the titles and abstracts of the papers before proceeding to read the full texts. This process helped determine if the papers met the criteria for the review. They ensured that the chosen papers were relevant to the main topic and selected them carefully. The authors selected documents and data for the review by focusing on papers that formally investigated gender stereotypes and bias in school English textbooks, including those based on consultations. They examined studies from organizations, institutions, Departments of School Education, and government sources. The research needed to cover themes such as gender discrimination in textbooks, bias in images, gender issues in the curriculum, and the extent of gender bias in mathematics textbook literature.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studies published between 2007 and 2024. • Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and reports. • Studies focusing on gender representation in school textbooks, particularly English textbooks. • Articles available in English. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studies not directly related to gender stereotypes or biases in textbooks. • Non-peer-reviewed articles, editorials, and opinion pieces. • Articles not available in full text.

The authors collected information from all the selected papers by following a systematic plan that included examining the topic, year of publication, publisher, focus, outcomes, and keywords. They reviewed each paper's topic and outcomes separately before organizing the data. The authors continuously checked all the papers throughout the review process to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Result and Discussion

Result

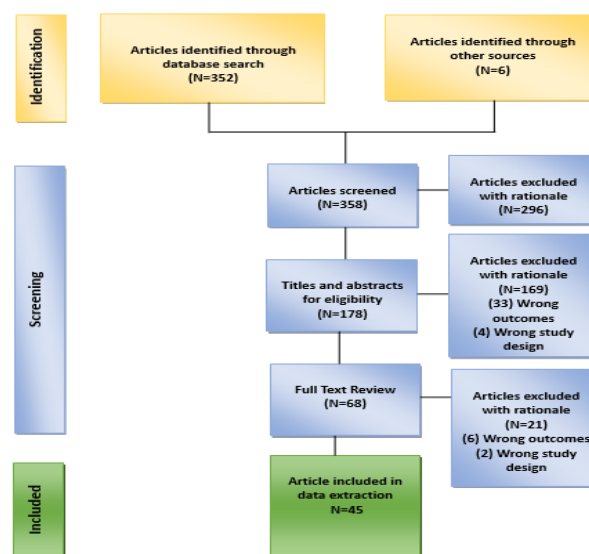


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram

The above figure 1 indicates the PRISMA diagram illustrates that the total number of articles was 358. 352 articles were identified through database searches and an additional 6 articles from other sources. After the screening of those articles, 296 articles did not meet the initial criteria and

were excluded. The remaining 178 articles was further screened based on title and abstract in order to determine if any of the articles met the inclusion criteria, of which 169 articles were excluded based on wrong outcome (33 articles) and wrong study design (4 articles). Through a series of subsequent screens, 21 more articles were excluded, 6 for wrong outcome and 2 for wrong study design. Ultimately, 45 articles met the criteria and were included in the final data extraction for the systematic review.

A Year-By-Year Overview of Various Types of Published Research Work and The Databases From Which These Studies Were Gathered

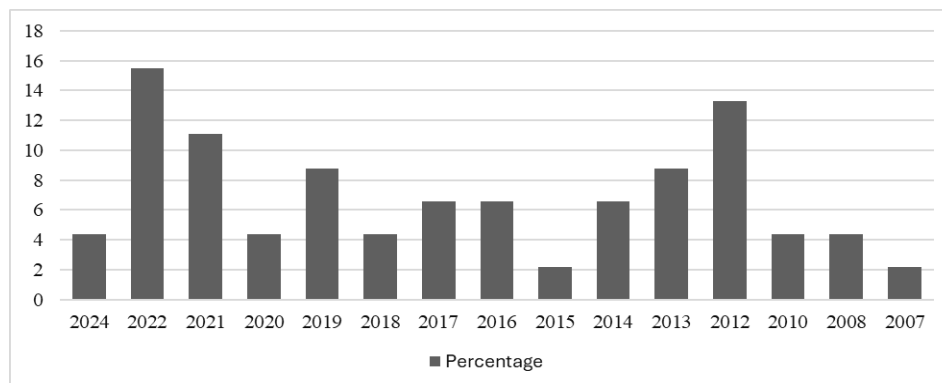


Figure 2. Year-by-year distribution of selected research work

The above figure 2 shows that of the 45 selected papers, in the early years, 2007 and 2015 had the fewest publications, each accounting for 2.2% of the total. Moderate increases were seen in 2008, 2010, 2018, and 2020, each with 2 publications (4.4%). The years 2013 and 2019 showed more significant contributions with 4 publications each (8.8%). A notable peak occurred in 2012 with 6 publications, representing 13.3% of the total. Steady contributions were observed in 2014, 2016, and 2017, each with 3 publications (6.6%). Another peak was in 2021 with 5 publications (11.1%), while the highest activity was recorded in 2022 with 7 publications, making up 15.5% of the total research. The year 2024 had a lower output with 2 publications (4.4%).

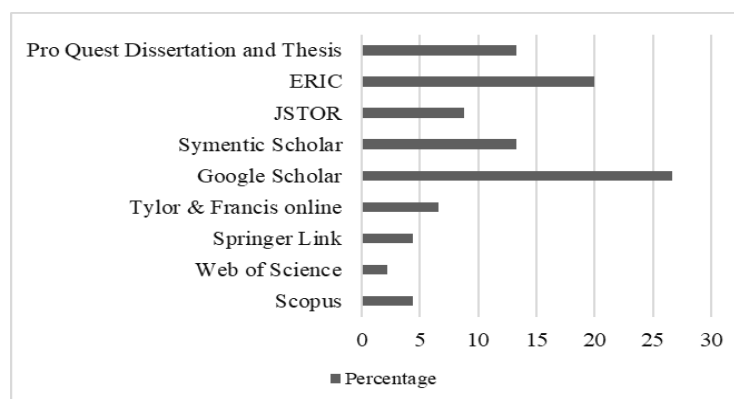


Figure 3. Different Databases of Selected Research Work

The above figure 3 shows that the 45 selected research works across various databases. Google Scholar accounted for the highest number of publications, contributing 26.6% (12 publications) of the total. ERIC followed with 9 publications, making up 20%. Semantic Scholar and ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis each contributed 6 publications, representing 13.3% each. JSTOR had 4 publications, accounting for 8.8%. Taylor & Francis Online contributed 3 publications, representing 6.6%. Scopus and Springer Link each had 2 publications, making up 4.4% each. Web of Science had the fewest publications, with 1 publication, accounting for 2.2% of the total. This

distribution reflects the varied research sources on this topic, highlighting the significant contributions of some databases over others.

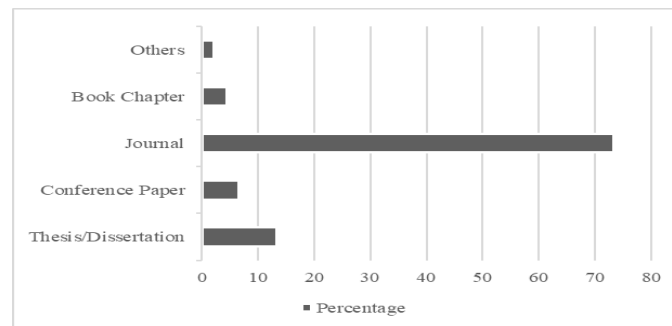


Figure 4. Different categories of selected research work

Figure 4 shows that the 45 selected research works across different categories show that most studies were published in journals, accounting for 33 publications (73.3%). Theses and dissertations contributed to 6 publications (13.3%), while conference papers made up 3 publications (6.6%). Book chapters represented 2 publications (4.4%), and other types of research work were minimal, with only 1 publication (2.2%). This distribution highlights the predominance of journal articles in analyzing gender bias and stereotypes in English textbooks.

Country of Publication As Well As The Methodology Applied In Those Papers

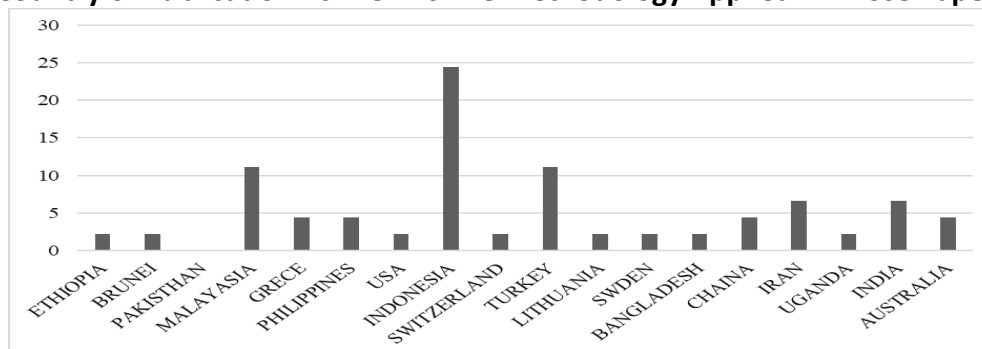


Figure 5. Countries of the selected publication

Figure 5 shows that the 45 selected research works across different categories of countries. Indonesia leads with 11 publications, accounting for 24.4% of the total. Malaysia and Turkey follow, each with 5 publications (11.1%). Iran and India each contribute 3 publications (6.6%), while Pakistan, Greece, Philippines, China, and Australia each have 2 publications (4.4%). The remaining countries, including Ethiopia, Brunei, USA, Switzerland, Lithuania, Sweden, Bangladesh, and Uganda, each have 1 publication, representing 2.2% of the total. This distribution shows a significant concentration of publications from Indonesia, with other countries contributing smaller but notable shares.

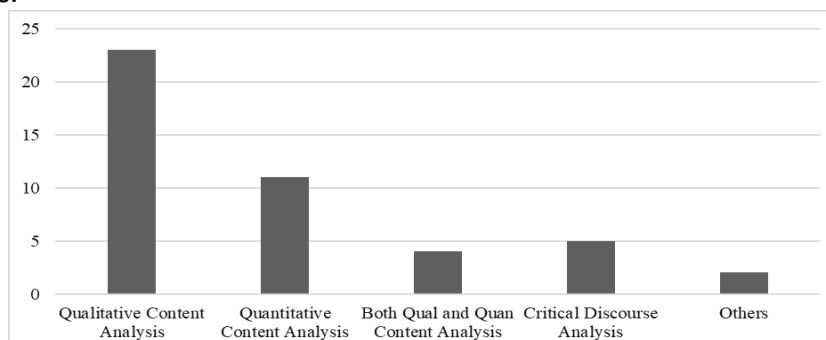


Figure 6. The Methodology Employed In Selected Research Work

Figure 6 shows that the 45 selected research works illustrate different methodologies used. Qualitative Content Analysis is the most prevalent method, used in 23 publications, accounting for 51.1% of the total. Quantitative Content Analysis follows, utilized in 11 publications, representing 24.4%. A combination of both Qualitative and Quantitative Content Analysis is employed in 4 publications (8.8%). Critical Discourse Analysis is used in 5 publications, making up 11.1%. Other methodologies are employed in 2 publications, comprising 4.4% of the total. This indicates a strong preference for qualitative approaches in the selected research work.

Table 2. Summary of Themes and Selected Research Work for Review

Category of theme	Journal Articles	Conference paper	Book Chapter	Thesis	Others
Portrayal of gender in language and terminological aspects	E8, E11, E1, E6 E18, E19, E23, E33, E34, E22, E34, E16, E19, E36		E15	E37, E12, E30	
Portrayal of gender in visual representation	E27, E4, E21, E32, E34, E14, E29, E31, E35, E33, E34, E22, E25, E28, E32, E24	E26, E9		E3, E13, E30, E12, E24	E33, E14
Portrayal of gender in professional, occupational, and working roles representation	E17, E18, E33, E34, E22, E34, E30, E12, E14, E6 E18, E19, E39		E20, E2		E33, E14
Portrayal of gender in games and leisure time activities	E10, E22, E32, E34, E21, E27, E4, E21, E3, E13, E38, E40, E42, E 44, E45	E5	E15, E7	E30, E12, E24	E14
Cultural and regional differences in the portrayal of gender in textbooks	E29, E31, E35, E23, E41, E43			E30, E12,	

Note: “E” is a code used to categorize each of the research work included in the review.

The above table 2 shows that out of the 45 publications, 18 (40 %) discussed the portrayal of gender in language and terminological aspects. 25 (55.5 %) of the published research focused on the portrayal of gender in visual representation, while 17 (37.7 %) addressed the portrayal of gender in professional, occupational, and working role representation. Additionally, 22 (48.8 %) of the publications examined the portrayal of gender in games and leisure time activities. Finally, 8 (17.7 %) of the research works discussed cultural and regional differences in the portrayal of gender in textbooks.

The result shows that most of the selected papers are from the year 2007 to 2024, also journal articles (70.4 %), as well as literature reviews (29.6 %), on gender stereotypes and bias in mathematics textbooks were the most reviewed in the study. This indicates that the review was thoroughly conducted with current and relevant publications. However, most of the countries represented gender stereotypes and biases presented in mathematics textbooks.

Discussion

Portrayal of Gender In Language And Terminological Aspects In Textbooks

The portrayal of gender in language and terminological aspects within textbooks is a crucial issue that reflects broader societal attitudes and biases. [Mebratu and Semela \(2022\)](#) highlight that textbook gender bias can perpetuate stereotypes from school to university contexts, affecting students’ perceptions and attitudes ([Mebratu & Semela, 2022](#)). Similarly, [Maulida \(2017\)](#) underscores that elementary school textbooks often exhibit gender bias through language and terminology, which can subtly reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes ([Maulida, 2017](#);

Blumberg, 2008; Evans & Davies, 2000; Sunderland, 2000; Porreca, 1984; Swann, 1992). Ali and Hussain (2019) further illustrate that primary-level textbooks in Pakistan demonstrate significant gender imbalances in representation, reflecting cultural biases and impacting students' understanding of gender roles (Ali & Hussain, 2019). Chandran (2002) finds similar issues in Malaysian textbooks, emphasizing that gender bias in educational materials often mirrors and reinforces societal gender norms (Chandran, 2002). These studies collectively reveal how language and terminology in textbooks contribute to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, shaping students' perceptions of gender roles from an early age (Blumberg, 2008; Evans & Davies, 2000; Sunderland, 2000; Porreca, 1984; Swann, 1992).

Portrayal of Gender In Visual Representation In Textbooks

The portrayal of gender in visual representations within educational materials often reflects and perpetuates existing societal biases. Studies reveal that gender bias is prevalent in textbooks, impacting how students perceive gender roles and stereotypes (Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012; Bahman & Rahimi, 2010; Brusokaite & Verikaitė-Gaigaliene, 2015; Lee & Collins, 2008; Sunderland, 2000). For example, Rong et al. (2021) highlight that English textbooks frequently reinforce traditional gender roles, which can limit students' understanding of gender diversity and equality. Similarly, Nilayam Mihira et al. (2023) review literature showing that English textbooks often depict gender inequality through stereotypical illustrations and narratives, reinforcing outdated gender norms. This issue is echoed by (Roohani and Zarei, 2013), who found that gender bias in Iranian textbooks impacts students' perceptions of gender roles by portraying women in secondary roles compared to men. The persistent depiction of gender stereotypes in visual elements of textbooks contributes to the reinforcement of gender biases, as emphasized by (Gharbavi and Mousavi, 2012; Bakker & Akkerman, 2014; Reilly, Neumann, & Andrews, 2015; Tiedemann, 2000), who argue that such representations reflect broader social inequalities. (Furthermore, Amini and Birjandi, 2012; Carvalho, 2014; Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2008; Pavlenko, 2004; Barton & Lee, 2005; Sunderland, 2000) note that gendered visual portrayals in textbooks can affect students' expectations and ambitions by perpetuating stereotypical views of gender roles. Thus, addressing these biases in educational materials is crucial for fostering a more equitable understanding of gender among students.

Portrayal Of Gender In Professional, Occupational, And Working Role Representation In Textbooks

The portrayal of gender in professional, occupational, and working roles within educational texts is a critical issue, as it shapes students' perceptions and expectations about gender roles in the workforce. Studies have consistently shown that gender stereotypes are prevalent in textbooks, often reinforcing traditional roles and limiting students' views on career possibilities (Fithriani, 2022; Huang & Liu, 2024; Rong, Xue, Zhang, & Zhou, 2021). For instance, gender representations in textbooks frequently depict men in leadership or technical roles, while women are shown in supportive or domestic roles, thus perpetuating stereotypes (Habib, Wija Putra, & Setyono, 2020; Skliar, 2007; Nilayam Mihira et al., 2023). This bias in role representation not only affects students' career aspirations but also contributes to broader societal inequalities by reinforcing outdated gender norms (Roohani & Zarei, 2013; Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012; Barton & Sakwa, 2012). Addressing these issues requires a conscious effort to include diverse and balanced representations of gender in educational materials, to ensure that students see a wide range of possibilities and opportunities regardless of their gender (Sedmak, 2022; Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2008; Ahmad & Shah, 2019).

Portrayal of Gender In Games And Leisure Time Activities In Textbooks

The portrayal of gender in games and leisure time activities within textbooks reveals significant disparities, reflecting broader societal biases. Studies have shown that textbooks often perpetuate traditional gender roles by associating certain activities with specific genders, thus reinforcing stereotypes. (Ahmad and Shah, 2019; Lee & Collins, 2008; Yang, 2011; Hellinger, 1980; Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009; Mikulecky, 2011) highlight that English textbooks in Pakistani schools frequently depict gender-specific leisure activities, with boys portrayed as engaging in sports and girls in domestic roles (Ahmad & Shah, 2019; Similarly, Amini and Birjandi, 2012; Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Bahman & Rahimi, 2010; Ghorbani, 2009; Rifkin, 1998) find that Iranian high school textbooks exhibit a gender bias in depicting boys participating in adventurous activities, while girls are shown in passive roles (Amini & Birjandi, 2012). This pattern is echoed in the findings of Arslan Ozer, Karatas, and Ergun (2019), who note that Turkish textbooks also reflect a gendered approach to leisure activities, thereby reinforcing gender stereotypes (Arslan Ozer, Karatas, & Ergun, 2019). Such portrayals not only limit the representation of gender roles but also affect students' perceptions and aspirations regarding gender-specific activities.

Cultural and Regional Differences In The Portrayal Of Gender In Textbooks

Cultural and regional differences significantly influence the portrayal of gender in textbooks, reflecting diverse societal norms and values. For instance, in Ethiopia, research indicates that gender biases in textbooks perpetuate traditional roles from schools to higher education (Mebratu & Semela, 2022; Hartman & Judd, 1978; Cunningsworth, 1995; Poulou, 1997; Renner, 1997; Shnookal, 2001). Similarly, in Indonesia, a study found that gender representation in English language textbooks often reflects entrenched stereotypes, affecting students' perceptions of gender roles (Maulida, 2017; Zahra, Inawati, & Ariffin, 2024). In Pakistan, the portrayal of gender in primary level textbooks has been critiqued for reinforcing gender stereotypes that limit students' understanding of gender equality (Ali & Hussain, 2019). These examples underscore how textbooks can both mirror and perpetuate cultural and regional gender norms, impacting educational outcomes and societal attitudes (Chandran, 2002; Shallaita, Nawawi, & Amin, 2021; Islam & Asadullah, 2016).

Conclusion

A review of literature on gender stereotypes and bias in textbooks reveals significant gender imbalances in education. The underrepresentation of women reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Language and illustrations in textbooks play a key role in shaping gender expectations, influencing students' perspectives and engagement with subjects. To address this, educational resources should challenge gender norms rather than reinforce them. Schools must update English curriculum books with materials that support both genders, breaking traditional biases. Textbooks should represent men and women equally, promoting gender equality and inclusivity for all students' empowerment.

This study contributes to the theoretical field of education, particularly in gender studies and social constructivism. It reinforces the understanding that textbooks are not merely tools for conveying knowledge but also instruments that shape social perceptions of gender roles. Theories such as social constructionism and gender role theory can explain how gender representations in textbooks influence societal expectations and perpetuate traditional gender roles. Furthermore, this research enriches the theory of inclusive education by illustrating how gender imbalances in educational content impact students' understanding of gender issues, potentially hindering the development of fair and equitable gender identities.

This study has several limitations, including its focus on English textbooks at the primary and secondary school levels, without exploring gender representation in textbooks at higher education levels or in other academic disciplines. Additionally, the study mainly addresses traditional gender biases and does not fully examine the representation of non-binary or transgender identities. Future research should expand the scope by analyzing textbooks in various languages and cultural contexts, and explore the long-term impact of gender biases on students' attitudes and behaviors. Further studies should also include more diverse gender identities and employ experimental or case study approaches in classrooms to assess the direct impact of inclusive materials on students' understanding of gender equality.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who have contributed to the success of this research. My deepest thanks go to my colleagues and academic mentors for their valuable insights and guidance throughout the process.

Author Contribution Statement

AN was responsible for designing the research, collecting data, and writing the initial draft of the manuscript. TH and TD contributed to data analysis, provided theoretical input, and edited and revised the manuscript to ensure methodological accuracy and coherence. Both authors collaborated on the conclusion and finalization of the manuscript.

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