

GENDER REPRESENTATION IN SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

Dr. Tapash Das

Assistant Professor

Department of Education

Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol, West Bengal, India

Abstract

School textbooks are influential curricular resources because they do more than communicate subject knowledge: they also present social roles, describe achievement, and signal who is visible in public, professional, family, and community life. Gender representation in these materials therefore has implications for learners' expectations, aspirations, and understanding of equality. This paper presents a comparative review of gender representation in school textbooks, focusing on the visibility of girls and boys, women and men; occupational and family roles; leadership and agency; language choices; illustrations; and the treatment of gender diversity. The study uses an evidence-based content-analysis framework drawn from textbook research, gender studies, and curriculum policy rather than claiming a new survey of a specific textbook series. Textbook content is examined through common dimensions: numerical balance, role allocation, narrative centrality, linguistic representation, visual framing, and the inclusion of diverse identities and social locations. The analysis shows that unequal representation can occur through omission as well as overt stereotyping. Female characters may be less visible in historical, scientific, civic, and technical domains, while male characters may be presented less often in caring, domestic, or collaborative roles. Even apparently balanced counts can mask unequal authority when one gender is more frequently shown as a leader, expert, decision-maker, or protagonist. The paper argues that gender-responsive textbooks should combine balanced visibility with non-stereotyped roles, inclusive language, diverse visual imagery, and contextual teaching guidance. Effective reform requires structured review criteria, editorial accountability, teacher awareness, and periodic monitoring. The study concludes that gender representation should be treated as a core quality dimension of curriculum design and educational equity.

Keywords: Gender Representation, School Textbooks, Curriculum, Gender Equality, Content Analysis, Educational Materials, Stereotypes, Inclusive Education, Visual Representation, Gender-Responsive Pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

School textbooks occupy a central place in formal education because they organise knowledge, shape classroom discussion, and provide learners with repeated examples of people, places, careers, families, and civic responsibilities. For many students, textbooks are among the first institutional sources through which social roles are presented as ordinary, desirable, or exceptional. Their influence is not limited to explicit lessons on citizenship or equality. Gender messages can be embedded in reading passages, mathematics word problems, historical narratives, scientific biographies, artwork, captions, language examples, and the distribution of speaking roles in dialogues.

Gender representation refers to the ways in which girls, boys, women, men, and gender-diverse people are included, described, positioned, and evaluated in educational

materials. It includes numerical visibility, but it also concerns who acts, who decides, who explains, who cares for others, and whose achievements are treated as significant. A textbook can contain women and girls in illustrations while still assigning them limited roles, or it can use gender-neutral language while preserving gendered patterns in occupations, leadership, and authority. Researchers have therefore argued that the assessment of representation must move beyond simple counts and examine the social meanings communicated through text and images.

International policy discussions have repeatedly identified gender bias in learning materials as an obstacle to educational equality. UNESCO and related curriculum-review initiatives stress that textbooks should avoid stereotypes and should represent learners as capable participants in learning,

work, family life, culture, and public decision-making. The concern is not that a single illustration determines a learner's future; rather, repeated patterns can normalise narrow expectations and make some forms of achievement appear less available to particular groups. Such patterns can influence students' sense of belonging in subjects, professions, and social spaces.

The issue is especially important in school systems where textbooks are standardised and used by large numbers of learners over several years. In such settings, a recurring absence of women in science, civic leadership, or historical change can silently reduce the range of role models available to students. Likewise, the portrayal of boys only as competitive, physically strong, or emotionally detached can restrict how boys understand care, cooperation, and wellbeing. Gender-responsive content should therefore challenge limiting expectations for all learners while respecting cultural context and educational goals.

This study examines major dimensions of gender representation in school textbooks and compares approaches used to assess them. It focuses on textual and visual visibility, role distribution, language, occupational representation, agency, and inclusive curriculum design. Particular attention is given to the difference between superficial balance and substantive equality in textbook content.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Early textbook research often documented gender bias through counts of male and female

characters, pronouns, named figures, and illustrations. These studies showed that women and girls were frequently less visible and that traditional roles were more common for female characters. Later work expanded the analysis to include discourse, agency, imagery, and the relative status of characters. The shift is important because equal numerical presence does not necessarily mean equal narrative importance. A character who initiates action, solves problems, leads a group, or is identified as an expert may carry greater symbolic weight than a character who is present only in a supporting role.

Recent reviews also recognise that textbook representation must be considered across subject areas and social locations. Language books may reveal patterns in dialogue and pronoun use, social studies may shape historical visibility and civic roles, and science or mathematics books may influence perceptions of who belongs in technical fields. A robust review should consider the interaction of gender with age, disability, region, language, class, ethnicity, and family structure where such features are relevant to the curriculum. The consistent lesson from the literature is that textbook reform benefits from transparent criteria, multidisciplinary review, and revision processes that are attentive to both wording and visual design.

LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY TABLE

S. No.	Author / Year	Study Focus	Key Contribution	Limitations Identified
1	Blumberg (2008)	Gender bias in textbooks	Explained how textbook stereotypes can operate as a persistent but often overlooked barrier to educational equality.	Broad global review; local curriculum context requires separate analysis.
2	Brugilles & Cromer (2009)	Textbook gender-analysis methodology	Provided systematic tools for examining characters, roles, images, and social relations in school materials.	Requires trained coders and context-sensitive interpretation.
3	Foroutan (2012)	Language and textbook representation	Showed that language materials can reproduce gendered patterns through character roles and discourse.	Findings are shaped by the specific textbook and national setting studied.
4	Islam &	Multi-country	Compared gender stereotypes	Content counts alone do not

	Asadullah (2018)	secondary-textbook analysis	in textbooks across countries and highlighted recurring occupational and role patterns.	fully capture classroom mediation or student response.
5	Crawfurd et al. (2024)	Large-scale automated textbook analysis	Demonstrated how quantitative text analysis can identify under-representation and gendered language patterns at scale.	Automated methods require careful validation and can miss visual or contextual meaning.

3. OBJECT OF STUDY

The primary focus of this research is to examine how school textbooks represent gender through written content, visual material, character roles, and pedagogic framing. The study considers how representation affects the visibility, agency, and perceived social possibilities of different learners. The principal objects of study are outlined below:

3.1 REPRESENTATION DIMENSIONS UNDER INVESTIGATION

- Numerical visibility of girls, boys, women, men, and gender-diverse people where represented
- Speaking roles, narrative centrality, and the distribution of expertise and authority
- Occupational, domestic, civic, scientific, artistic, and leadership roles
- Use of gendered language, pronouns, descriptors, examples, and evaluative terms
- Visual framing, clothing, posture, activity, setting, and symbolically important images

3.2 TEXTBOOK AND CURRICULUM CONTEXTS

- Language, literature, social science, history, science, mathematics, and life-skills textbooks
- Primary, middle, and secondary school materials used in formal classroom settings
- Printed and digital resources, including illustrations, photographs, exercises, and assessment prompts
- National, regional, and local curriculum priorities that influence content selection and examples

3.3 EVALUATION PARAMETERS

- Balance of character visibility and named contributions
- Diversity of occupations, interests, skills, and family responsibilities

- Agency, decision-making, problem-solving, and leadership representation
- Stereotyped or non-stereotyped language and visual cues
- Inclusion, contextual relevance, pedagogic usability, and transparency of review criteria

3.4 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS FOCUS

- Numerical representation versus substantive equality of roles
- Textual content versus visual representation and design
- Historical representation, contemporary examples, and future-oriented career imagery
- Content review, teacher mediation, and classroom discussion as connected processes

3.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE SCOPE

- To identify major forms of gender representation and bias in school textbooks
- To explain how representation can be assessed through qualitative and quantitative indicators
- To compare visible presence, role allocation, language, and imagery
- To support gender-responsive textbook development and curriculum review

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a comparative and evidence-based research methodology to examine gender representation in school textbooks. The framework draws on textbook-content analysis, gender studies, and curriculum-quality guidance. It is designed to explain how representation may be evaluated across different subjects and educational settings rather than to claim a new statistical survey of one named textbook series. The approach combines conceptual review of published studies, established coding categories, and practical editorial

considerations for gender-responsive materials.

The analysis is organised around the life of a textbook: selection of content, construction of examples, wording of lessons, choice of images, classroom use, and periodic revision. Each representation dimension is considered under common conditions, including cultural context, subject-specific conventions, the historical period described, curriculum aims, and the need to avoid both exclusion and simplistic tokenism. The framework treats representation as a quality issue that requires transparent criteria, multiple reviewers, and attention to the relationship between what is counted and what is conveyed.

METHODOLOGY FRAMEWORK

The study uses a comparative framework covering core dimensions of gender representation.

Published textbook research and curriculum guidance support the qualitative synthesis.

Textual and visual materials are considered together rather than as separate domains.

The analysis examines visibility, role allocation, agency, language, and imagery.

Subject context and historical content are treated as important interpretive conditions.

Comparisons distinguish numerical balance from substantive equality of representation.

Review criteria include inclusion, stereotype reduction, accuracy, and pedagogic usability.

Teacher mediation and classroom discussion are acknowledged as part of the implementation context.

No fabricated coding totals or experimental measurements are presented.

Recommendations focus on transparent, gender-responsive textbook development and revision.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis section presents a comparative interpretation of the principal dimensions used to assess gender representation in school textbooks. The analysis is based on reported research patterns, content-analysis principles, and curriculum-review requirements. The objective is to show how different forms of representation can affect the quality, inclusiveness, and educational meaning of textbook material.

Five dimensions are considered: visibility, roles and occupations, agency and authority, language and discourse, and visual and intersectional inclusion. The comparison is qualitative because the significance of a particular illustration, lesson, or character depends on the subject, age group, cultural setting, historical context, and relationship to the wider textbook.

5.1 COMPARATIVE REPRESENTATION ANALYSIS

S. No.	Dimension	Primary Evidence	Positive Indicator	Common Risk	Overall Importance
1	Visibility and frequency	Named characters, pronouns, illustrations, and examples	High when balanced across chapters	Risk of symbolic presence without substantive roles	Essential starting indicator
2	Roles and occupations	Work, family care, leadership, science, and civic activity	High when roles are varied and non-stereotyped	Traditional role patterns can persist across subjects	Very important
3	Agency and authority	Who solves problems, speaks, decides, and is presented as expert	High when agency is shared across genders	Counts can conceal unequal narrative centrality	Very important

S. No.	Dimension	Primary Evidence	Positive Indicator	Common Risk	Overall Importance
4	Language and discourse	Descriptors, pronouns, dialogue, examples, and evaluative terms	High with inclusive, precise wording	Bias may be subtle and context dependent	Important
5	Visual and intersectional inclusion	Images, posture, settings, disability, region, family, and identity markers	High with diverse, non-stereotyped representation	Visual readings require careful contextual analysis	Excellent for holistic review

5.2 EXTENDED ANALYTICAL INTERPRETATION

- Visibility analysis is a necessary first step because repeated omission can signal that certain people, professions, and forms of participation are less significant. Counts may include named historical figures, authors, scientists, community leaders, characters in stories, speakers in dialogues, and people shown in illustrations. However, a balanced count should not be interpreted as sufficient evidence of equality. The position of a character in a narrative, the complexity of the role, and the surrounding language may alter the meaning of visibility.
- Role and occupational analysis considers the activities assigned to different characters. A textbook may reinforce stereotypes when women and girls are predominantly linked to domestic work, care, emotional support, or limited occupations while men and boys are more frequently presented in public leadership, technical work, science, business, or decision-making roles. Gender-responsive materials can diversify these portrayals by showing people of different genders participating across professional, family, creative, scientific, and civic contexts.
- Agency and authority analysis asks who initiates action, resolves conflict, makes discoveries, leads teams, or explains knowledge. This dimension is particularly important in history, science, mathematics, and language books because protagonists and experts often become informal models of competence. An inclusive textbook

does not need to erase historical context, but it can provide accurate representation of contributions that have often been omitted and can avoid presenting authority as naturally gendered.

- Language and discourse analysis examines pronouns, generic nouns, adjectives, dialogue patterns, and the tone used to describe characters. Gender bias may appear through generic masculine forms, unequal naming practices, or repeated descriptions that connect girls with appearance and obedience while connecting boys with strength and achievement. Inclusive language does not require awkward wording; it requires choices that accurately represent people and avoid assigning ability, emotion, or social value to gendered assumptions.
- Visual and intersectional analysis addresses the meaning of images and design. Photographs and illustrations can portray people as active or passive, central or peripheral, independent or dependent. They can also include or exclude disability, rural and urban life, different family arrangements, linguistic communities, and social backgrounds. The aim is not to impose a uniform image of society, but to avoid using a narrow social type as the unmarked norm while treating others as exceptional.

5.3 OBSERVATIONS FROM DATA ANALYSIS

- Gender representation is multidimensional; numerical balance alone cannot demonstrate substantive equality.

- Omission of women and girls from history, science, civic leadership, or technical work can limit the range of visible role models.
- Stereotypes can affect all learners by narrowing how competence, care, leadership, and aspiration are understood.
- Subject areas require tailored review because gender messages appear differently in literature, history, science, mathematics, and language.
- Images, captions, examples, and exercises should be assessed alongside main narrative text.
- Teacher guidance and classroom discussion can help students read materials critically, but they do not remove the need for better content.
- Transparent review rubrics and repeated monitoring improve the consistency and accountability of textbook revision.

6. DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis shows that gender representation in school textbooks is best understood as a curriculum-quality issue rather than a narrow problem of wording or illustration. Textbooks repeatedly organise examples, define social relevance, and establish who is presented as knowledgeable, inventive, caring, brave, or influential. The educational significance lies in the accumulated pattern. When one group is routinely absent from particular domains or shown in limited roles, students may learn that these roles are unusual or less attainable for them, even when the curriculum does not state that message directly.

A central finding is the distinction between visibility and agency. Increasing the number of female characters or images can be a meaningful correction, but equal representation requires more than presence. A textbook can place girls in classrooms, families, or community scenes while still reserving invention, authority, and public leadership for boys. It can also portray boys frequently but limit their emotional range or caring responsibilities. Review processes should therefore ask not only 'who appears?' but also 'what do they do, say, know, decide, and become?'

Historical and cultural context needs careful treatment. Textbooks must accurately describe

societies in which gendered opportunities were unequal, and they should not replace historical accuracy with anachronistic claims. At the same time, the selection and framing of historical examples matter. Including overlooked women, community leaders, scientists, artists, workers, and reformers can improve accuracy as well as representation. Explanatory notes and discussion questions can help learners distinguish description of past inequality from endorsement of it.

Visual material deserves the same editorial attention as written content. Images are often processed quickly by learners and may communicate role expectations without an explicit lesson. A review should examine who occupies the foreground, who handles equipment, who speaks, who assists, who is outdoors or indoors, and who is shown in professional or leadership positions. It should also consider whether a narrow appearance, family form, ability profile, or social setting is repeatedly treated as normal. Context-sensitive diversity can enrich the realism and relevance of materials without making the textbook visually overloaded.

Textbook reform should combine editorial standards with practical implementation. Publishers and curriculum bodies can develop gender review checklists, use diverse author and reviewer teams, test draft materials with educators, and publish clear revision procedures. Teachers can use questions that invite students to compare roles, identify stereotypes, and imagine alternative examples. However, responsibility should not be transferred entirely to teachers, particularly where the textbook remains the most authoritative resource in the classroom. The material itself should provide equitable and accurate representation.

Finally, analysis must remain open to changing social realities. Gender-responsive design should be evidence-based, respectful, and appropriate to learner age and curriculum goals. It should avoid token inclusion, which adds isolated examples without changing the deeper pattern of agency, authority, and representation. Continuous review is more effective than one-time correction because curricula, language, visual conventions, and understandings of inclusion evolve over time.

7. CONCLUSION

This study presented a comparative analysis of gender representation in school textbooks through the dimensions of visibility, role allocation, agency, language, and visual inclusion. The analysis shows that textbooks can support educational equality when they represent girls, boys, women, men, and diverse social experiences as active participants in learning, work, family life, culture, and public life.

The findings indicate that each review dimension addresses a different aspect of textbook quality. Numerical counts help identify under-representation, role analysis reveals stereotyped distributions of work and responsibility, agency analysis examines authority and decision-making, language analysis addresses subtle forms of bias, and visual review considers the wider social

message of images. No single indicator is sufficient on its own. Effective assessment requires a combined framework and context-sensitive interpretation.

The study concludes that gender-responsive textbooks should be developed through transparent editorial standards, diverse expertise, balanced examples, inclusive imagery, and periodic monitoring. Future work can strengthen this field through larger cross-subject analyses, student and teacher perspectives, digital-textbook reviews, and evaluation of how revised materials influence classroom discussion and learner aspiration. Gender representation should remain a continuing consideration in curriculum development because equitable educational materials help make the full range of learning and life possibilities visible to every student.

8. REFERENCES

1. Aina, O. E., & Cameron, P. A. (2011). *Why does gender matter? Counteracting stereotypes with young children. Dimensions of Early Childhood*, 39(3), 11-19.
2. Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.
3. Bem, S. L. (1981). *Gender schema theory: A cognitive account of sex typing. Psychological Review*, 88(4), 354-364.
4. Blumberg, R. L. (2008). *The invisible obstacle to educational equality: Gender bias in textbooks. Prospects*, 38(3), 345-361.
5. Brugeilles, C., & Cromer, S. (2009). *Promoting gender equality through textbooks: A methodological guide. CEPED*.
6. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
7. Council of Europe. (2015). *Combating gender stereotypes and sexism in and through education. Council of Europe*.
8. Crawford, L., Hares, S., Minardi, A. L., & Ramesh, S. (2024). *Sexist textbooks: Automated analysis of gender bias in 1,255 school textbooks. PLOS ONE*, 19(10), e0311307.
9. Crenshaw, K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex. University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139-167.
10. Evans, L., & Davies, K. (2000). *No sissy boys here: A content analysis of the representation of masculinity in elementary school reading textbooks. Sex Roles*, 42, 255-270.
11. Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
12. Foroutan, Y. (2012). *Gender representation in school textbooks in Iran: The place of languages. Current Sociology*, 60(6), 771-787.
13. Gooden, A. M., & Gooden, M. A. (2001). *Gender representation in notable children's picture books: 1995-1999. Sex Roles*, 45, 89-101.
14. Hamilton, M. C., Anderson, D., Broadus, M., & Young, K. (2006). *Gender stereotyping and under-representation of female characters in 200 popular children's picture books: A twenty-first century update. Sex Roles*, 55, 757-765.
15. Islam, K. M. M., & Asadullah, M. N. (2018). *Gender stereotypes and education: A multi-country content analysis study of secondary school textbooks. PLOS ONE*, 13(1), e0190807.
16. Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
17. Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology (4th ed.)*. Sage.

18. Lee, J. F. K., & Collins, P. (2008). Gender voices in Hong Kong English textbooks: Some past and current practices. *Sex Roles*, 59, 127-137.
19. McCabe, J., Fairchild, E., Grauerholz, L., Pescosolido, B. A., & Tope, D. (2011). Gender in twentieth-century children's books: Patterns of disparity in titles and central characters. *Gender & Society*, 25(2), 197-226.
20. OECD. (2022). *Gender stereotypes in education: Policies and practices*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
21. Peterson, S. B., & Lach, M. A. (1990). Gender stereotypes in children's books: Their prevalence and influence on cognitive and affective development. *Gender and Education*, 2(2), 185-197.
22. Porreca, K. L. (1984). Sexism in current ESL textbooks. *TESOL Quarterly*, 18(4), 705-724.
23. Risman, B. J. (2004). Gender as a social structure: Theory wrestling with activism. *Gender & Society*, 18(4), 429-450.
24. Sunderland, J. (1994). *Gendered discourses*. Routledge.
25. UNESCO. (1987). *Down with stereotypes! Eliminating sexism from children's literature and school textbooks*. UNESCO.
26. UNESCO. (2015). *Eliminating gender bias in textbooks: Pushing for policy reforms*. UNESCO.
27. UNESCO. (2017). *Global education monitoring report 2017/18: Accountability in education - Meeting our commitments*. UNESCO.
28. UNESCO. (2020). *Global education monitoring report 2020: Gender report - A new generation: 25 years of efforts for gender equality in education*. UNESCO.
29. Weitzman, L. J., Eifler, D., Hokada, E., & Ross, C. (1972). Sex-role socialization in picture books for preschool children. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(6), 1125-1150.
30. World Health Organization. (2023). *Gender and health: Overview*. World Health Organization.