# Reading Between the Lines: A Critical Analysis of Representation in English Textbooks for Telangana State Government Schools

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the presence of gender bias in English textbooks used in government schools in Telangana, South India. The analysis covers various aspects, including the representation of male and female characters, social and domestic roles assigned to them, the order of appearance in phrases, and the visual representations in illustrations. The key findings include an uneven distribution of male and female characters, with males predominating. Males are assigned a wider range of social roles, while females are often portrayed in stereotypical domestic roles such as homemakers. The order of appearance in phrases tends to favor males. In visual representations, females are shown more frequently engaging in housework, while males are depicted more often in activities outside the home, suggesting a gender imbalance. The biased and stereotypical gender representation in the textbooks may influence young learners' perceptions and contribute to gender disparity in society. Hence it is recommended that instructional materials may be revised to provide quality education without biases.

**Keywords:** textbooks, English, gender, roles, stereotypes

**Introduction**

The Preamble of India promises its citizens equality of status and of opportunity. Article 51(A) urges Indians to give up any practice which is derogatory to the dignity of women. Gender equality is stressed upon in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble and Fundamental Rights, a provisions and rights that are also borne out by the UNESCO 2007, as well noting that learning materials promote gender equality in education.

According to Ruddick (2010), among the educational tools used in the classroom, the textbook is the most widely used one. As per Sadker and Zittleman (2007) and Baldwin and Bladwin (1992) teachers and students spend more than eighty percent of the class time on a textbook. This, in turn, leads to their instructional decisions. Moreover, it is imperative to remember that young learners prioritize and assign a significant role to the coursebooks as they try to embrace a textbook usually almost unconditionally. For, arguably, the textbook is the most respected printed word. Thus, it can be said that the textbooks influence learners to a large extent, more so the young learners. It follows that the textbooks also are at the core of shaping learners' perceptions about gender (Kobia, 2009). Young minds are affected not only by the pictorial/visual representations (Peterson and Lach, 1990), but also by the linguistic messages imparted through the texts (Lee and Collins, 2008). Textbooks also restrict and influence learners' impressions of

'who they are and what they can become' (Blumberg, 2008). Thus, a gender-biased textbook might result in producing learners with biased mindsets. This can lead to conflicts among the genders (Mukundan and Nimehchisalem, 2008). Sumalatha (2004 cited in Wu & Liu, 2015) avers that instructional materials, in this case, coursebooks are one of the most powerful instruments that shape beliefs, attitudes and values of young learners.

Gender bias is defined as "different treatment because of gender: unfair difference in the treatment of men or women because of their sex" by the Bing English Dictionary (Bing, 2010). This view is supported by Verikaite (2012) who defines gender bias as differential treatment because of gender: unfair difference in the treatment of men or women because of their sex, also referred to as sexism. If in a textbook one sex dominates the other, it is a gender-biased text. Disparity in gender is generally represented in the form of roles assigned to the gender in the society or the use of generic masculine pronouns such as *man, father, brother,* and so on or *he, his,* and *him* or instances where men are presented of greater importance in comparison to women, or the frequency of appearance of male characters vs female characters. Put differently, masculine terms form the unmarked usage for human beings.

Verikaite, (2012), opines that young children obtain their perception of gender roles through several channels, but one of the most important channels is the textbooks whose 'hidden curriculum' affects learners' perception of roles that gender plays. Studies by several scholars in the domain such as Gupta and Lee (1990), Hunter and Chick (2005), Ansary and Babii (2003) and others report gender role stereotyping and sexism in instructional materials. Ellis (2002) and Ahmed (2006), report of stereotyping gender roles in Indian textbooks. Ellis' (2002) analysis of textbooks of History and Geography highlights that representation of women in the text and visuals in these books is unacceptable. Similarly, Ahmed (2006, cited in Verkaite 2012) notes that although the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has been working towards balancing gender disparities in textbooks, it has not been able to do so completely.

Textbooks in the subjects of Science, Social Studies, English or Hindi portray women doing mostly menial jobs. It is important to note that representation of gender in textbooks can negatively influence the cognitive and behavioural development of young minds as found in studies from the 1980s till date. Finds of several studies during this period aver that portrayal of gender in the textbooks influence the development of self-esteem and attitude towards sexes amongst young learners. ELT instructional materials have been examined for gender representation by Johansson, 2009, Paivandi, 2008, Stockdale, 2006, Muto-Humphrey, 2005, and Stanley, 2001. These studies support the claim that coursebooks are potential sources of instilling ideologies of a society. Thus, textbooks not only provide inputs on the content and language but also perpetuate the perceptions and ideologies of the material writers. To be fair, this is a universal phenomenon ingrained into children almost from infancy. A male child will be play the doctor, and the female child is expected to play nurse.

With the above background in mind, this article aims to examine the representation of gender in texts and visuals in English textbooks. Five textbooks, from Classes I-V, of the Telangana State Board, prescribed for students studying in government schools of the Telangana State were analysed following Lee and

Collins' (2009) content- and linguistic analysis supplemented partially by Fairclough's three-dimensional model (2001).

According to Fairclough (2001) there are three dimensions to a text—description, interpretation, and explanation. Description refers to the formal features of a text such as the gender of the characters, the social- and domestic roles they play, the activities they are engaged in, and the visual representation of gender in pictures in the textbooks.

In addition to Fairclough's three dimensions mentioned above, Lee and Collins's (2009) *omission,* and *order of appearance* were also investigated in the study. Omission refers to 'a quantitative imbalance in the appearance of women and men, with the former being less frequently mentioned and thus implicitly presented as being of lesser importance' (Lee & Collins, 2009). 'The conventional practice of putting male names first in paired expressions (*Romeo and Juliet)* reflects the traditional notion of male superiority' (ibid). Pauwels (1991) (mentioned in Lee and Collins, 2009) recommends that the order in which men and women are represented be altered.

**Methodology**

Five textbooks prescribed for students of Classes I-V in government schools of Telangana, South India were analysed. Learners, mostly six-year olds, are introduced to English in Class I. The set of materials claim that 'The new textbooks in English have been developed based on the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 and A.P. State Curriculum Framework (SCF) AP 2011 and are in tune with the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009. They envisage a shift in the teaching paradigm in the sense that the focus is on knowledge and language construction rather than the reproduction of a given set of information. 'The textbook for Class I 'contains seven units each unit dealing with a specific theme but all the units together making a story…Most of the questions/activities given on the pages are meant for eliciting the perception and divergent thinking of the learners…the vocabulary activity ends up with evolving a concept map on themes such as family, vehicles, places, animals, birds, things I like, etc. 'The coursebook prescribed for learners of Class II 'contains eight units. Each unit deals with a specific theme and has same characters throughout'; the textbook for Classes III, IV and V contain eight theme-based units which are within the experiential orbit of the children'.

All lessons from each of the five books were analyzed for their content and language use. A systematic recording and tabulation were made of the characters and mentions of women and men in each lesson. The researcher counted

a. the number of female- and male characters (the character being checked once; regardless of the number of times s/he has appeared in the lesson)
b. social roles attributed to the female and male characters
c. domestic roles of female and male characters (for instance, father, mother, brother, sister)
d. occurrences of generic *they,* generic *he,* and paired pronouns *s/he*
e. order of appearance of female and male characters when mentioned in a single phrase.
f. illustration/visual representations—the focus was on the number and proportion of women and men in the pictures; the kind of activity undertaken by the female/male characters in each picture

Illustrations were scrutinized to understand whether they enhanced students' learning processes, the proportion of female and male representations and the activities undertaken by them in each of the pictures. Domains such as home and outside home where they were represented in the coursebooks were analyzed. Apart from these, the order of appearance of females and males in the textbooks were also counted.

To validate the analyses, items were cross-checked and reviewed, where necessary.

**Results and discussion**

**1. Female and male characters**

As mentioned above, the number of female and male characters and the number of mentions of each of them was counted in each lesson in all the five textbooks.

Gender representation found in this study conforms to those observed in previous studies across the globe. Males predominated in the lessons analyzed. The ratio for the total number of female characters to male characters in all these textbooks was 43 and 157 respectively and the average ratio of female to male mentions was 1:3.6. These ratios were not evenly distributed across the textbooks. The table given below substantiates the findings:

| Textbook for | Characters | | Frequency | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Men | Women | Men | Women |
| Class I | 28 | 8 | 176 | 39 |
| Class II | 19 | 8 | 139 | 62 |
| Class III | 16 | 8 | 115 | 40 |
| Class IV | 40 | 8 | 209 | 35 |
| Class V | 54 | 11 | 217 | 37 |
| Total | 157 (78.5%) | 43 (21.5% | 856 (80.07%) | 213 (19.9) |

Table 1

As can be seen from the above table, while the distribution of women characters is more or less the same in coursebooks I-IV, it is not the case with male characters. The figures are uneven across the books, with maximum appearances favouring females are in books prescribed for classes IV and V.

*2. Social and domestic roles attributed to female and male characters*

Each lesson was carefully scrutinized to study various roles attributed to female and male characters in the five prescribed textbooks. The findings are given below in Table 2. Details of social roles assigned to both the sexes are presented first.

2a. Social roles

| Class | Women | Men |
|-------|-------|-----|
| I | 1 | 3 |
| II | NIL | 8 |
| III | 1 | 5 |
| IV | 1 | 17 |
| V | 1 | 19 |
| **Total** | **4** | **53** |

**Table 2a**

Results displayed in the above table indicate that males have been assigned a wide range of social roles in the five textbooks. The findings also reveal that women have not been assigned any of the social roles. Some of the social roles portrayed by the men include that of a shopkeeper, village head, town head, grocer, sellers of a bale of hay/sticks/bricks, judges, farmers, owner of an eating joint, magistrate, traveler, cricketers, fisherman, miller, trader, fruit seller, merchant, king, jester, guard, doctor, executioner, principal, minister, scientists and physicist, to mention a few.

Findings of this study concur with that of Lee and Collins, 2009, who note that '…males have a wider range of social roles.' Furthermore, women occupy stereotypical roles such as teachers and doctors.
It is a disturbing representation of roles, with males receiving 92.98% and females receiving only 7.02%.

A further examination of the domestic roles assigned to the females and males indicates that the texts and the visuals/illustrations in the five textbooks portray a stereotypical role of a woman as a homemaker and mother. Details of analysis are presented in Table 2b below.

| Domestic role | Male | Domestic role | Female |
|---------------|------|---------------|--------|
| Father | 12 | Mother | 07 |
| Husband | 05 | Wife | 03 |
| Son | 23 | Daughter | 03 |
| Brother | 12 | Sister | 03 |
| Uncle | 14 | Aunt | 0 |
| Grandfather | 08 | Grandmother | 04 |
| Grandson | 09 | Granddaughter | 02 |
| | | Homemaker | 29 |

**Table 2b**

Throughout the five textbooks women play the stereotypical/traditional roles of a homemaker and mother; chiefly responsible for taking care of the family. Further, visuals and illustrations portray females as the ones engaged in domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, plaiting the hair of young girls, and so on while men do not share these responsibilities.

## 3. Order of appearance of female and male characters when mentioned in a single phrase

All the five textbooks that were reviewed indicated a higher tendency for males to be mentioned first. In the five books, male firstness occurred 46 times as opposed to female firstness which was merely 10. The results are shown in Table 3 below:

| Class | Women first | Male first |
|-------|-------------|------------|
| I | 3 | 16 |
| II | 2 | 15 |
| III | 1 | 04 |
| IV | 3 | 02 |
| V | 1 | 09 |
| Total | 10 | 46 |

**Table 3**

The textbook includes multiple examples of the use of phrases such as 'all the boys and girls', 'Rohith and his mother', 'Father and mother', 'Abhi and his father', 'Sidhu and Snoopy', to mention a few.

## 4. Illustration/visual representations—the focus was on the number and proportion of women and men in the pictures; the kind of activity undertaken by the female/male characters in each picture

All the five textbooks include a large number of visuals—pictures/illustrations. However, in this study they were grouped together. All the visuals were analyzed for the kind of activities females and males were engaged in (this included boys and girls as well). An analysis of the visuals indicated that the characters engaged themselves in housework, work outside the home, at school, at a playground, socializing, and relaxing. Details of the analysis are presented below in Table 4:

| Class | Gender | Doing Housework | Working | Studying/ At school | Playing | Relaxing | Socializing | Others | Total |
|-------|--------|-----------------|---------|---------------------|---------|----------|-------------|--------|-------|
| I | M | - | 14 | 17 | 42 | 18 | 05 | 33 | 129 |
|   | F | 11 | 02 | 07 | 10 | 08 | 02 | 14 | 55 |
| II | M | - | 14 | 18 | 57 | 06 | -- | 11 | 106 |

|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|     | F   | 06  | 01  | 12  | 27  | 02  | --  | 06  | 54  |
| III | M   | -   | 13  | 28  | 10  | 29  | --  | 08  | 88  |
|     | F   | 13  | 04  | 11  | 03  | 05  | 02  | 14  | 52  |
| IV  | M   | -   | 23  | 19  | 13  | 07  | 02  | 51  | 115 |
|     | F   | 04  | 03  | 09  | 05  | 01  | --  | 27  | 49  |
| V   | M   | 01  | 34  | 17  | 52  | 21  | 08  | 47  | 180 |
|     | F   | 10  | 02  | 07  | 11  | 09  | 06  | 19  | 64  |

**Table 4**

In the visuals, females performing chores of housework is shown 44 times while it is only once for the males. However, when it comes to a representation of working outside the house, the illustrations/pictures show females only 12 times while males are shown 98 times. Likewise, whether it is studying at the school or playing boys are represented predominantly (99 and 174 times versus girls shown only 46 and 47 times respectively). Furthermore, visuals that depict the characters relaxing or socializing portray males (81 and 15 times) in contrast to females (shown in 26 and 8 visuals). Even in visuals that do not describe the above activities but are general in nature, females appear only 82 times but males appear 150 times. There are a total 892 visuals in the five textbooks out of which boys/men are shown in 618 (69.28%) and girls/women in 274 (30.72%). The ratio of males is to females thus is 2.3:1

**Conclusion**

It is thus evident from the analyses presented above that the gender represented in the prescribed textbooks is biased and stereotypical, though a defence of social facts may be mentioned . The gender representation found in these books conformed to the studies conducted by Arnold-Gerrity, D. (1978), Ansari, H & Babaii, E. (2003), Michio Mineshima, (2008), Narendra Nath Kalia (1980), Mustapha, A.S. (2014), Birjandi and Anabi, (2006), Gharbavi and Mousavi, (2012), Ross and Shi (2003), Zhang (2003), Zhao (2002), to name a few. As stated in the majority of these articles, research on gender representation in textbooks dating back to the 1960s indicates that language textbooks are "biased against femininity, painting men in a brighter light of importance in occupations, public/social life, decision makers in corporations and government bodies, whereas women are rendered invisible, or represented far less than men" (Mustapha, 2014).

While the governmental policies lay emphasis on educating the girl child and providing her equal opportunities and space in not only in the educational system but also in the society at large, textbooks, which are the core sources of representation of culture, unfortunately do not seem to be subscribing to these views to the point of committing themselves to achieve these aims. Additionally, such a biased/skewed representation of roles of females and males in the textbooks subconsciously tune the mind of the young learners to the roles that they are supposed to play in the society, which is harmful to everyone, including men, and to every field of study including science. The books seem to convey a message that women contribute majorly to household work while men are the breadwinners. This is found

not only in the narratives but also in the visuals, which are a powerful media for the young minds to observe and internalize. A major concern regarding the biased representation in the textbooks is that it might affect the perceptions of the young minds and thereby foster gender disparity in the society at large. Hence this study recommends the revision of instructional materials so as to provide the young learners quality education that will prepare them to perform their roles in the society without any biases.

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