

## ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY LEVEL TEXTBOOKS FROM GENDER LENS

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**Abstract:** When children enter the school environment, the portrayal of females and males in textbooks, shape their identity of gender roles and influence their aspirations. Analysis of grade V NCERT textbooks revealed that females are not only under-represented but both females and males have been depicted in stereotypical ways in textbooks. This reinforces the gender biases already existing in our society. Such portrayals can be detrimental to the construction of gender identity of young minds since they do not expose them to the diversity of roles that women and men play or can play in their real lives. The paper also attempts to put forth a few recommendations to remove stereotypes in language, visuals, depiction in occupation and overall representation of women and men.

**Keywords:** gender representation, gender socialisation, gender stereotypes, textbook bias.

### **Introduction: Gender roles and socialization:**

There are many agents involved in the socialisation process which transmit the traditional gender roles in children. Families act as the primary source and the schools play the second major role in socialising young children. Socialisation that occurs in schools can be instrumental in reinforcing or changing what has already been learned in families which usually interact with girls and boys differently. It is imperative for school curriculum to generate gender sensitivity among them to build a better future free of stereotypes.

The formal curriculum is implemented through the textbooks and learning material. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) document recognizes that: "We must use text books as one of the primary instruments for equality, since for a great majority of school going children, as also for teachers, it is the only accessible and affordable resource for education". The bias and stereotypical gender role portrayal in the textbooks used to impart the lessons of the curriculum cannot be ignored. Research has shown that "students spend as much as 80 to 95 percent of classroom time using textbooks and teachers make a majority of their instructional decision based on the textbook" (Sadker & Zittleman, 2007).

When children enter the school environment, the images of females and males portrayed in books, shape their concept about gender and consequently their own self-image, their behaviour, their aspirations and their expectations. If any change in the gender stereotypes is planned, serious and concerted efforts are required, firstly to analyse the learning material and secondly, to present those desired modified images (Mirza, 2006).

The content and the process of education found significant space even in the Millennium Development Goals Report 2005 which recognised that the textbooks could reinforce gender stereotypes by casting women in subordinate roles (UNDP, 2005).

Now we have moved to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to be achieved by 2030, SDGs 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) and 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) focus on gender equality. It supports the development of curriculum and textbooks free from stereotypes and discrimination since gender bias in textbooks can affect children's self-esteem, lower their engagement in schools and limit their expectations about their future opportunities, including career options.

**General Objective:** To identify the achievements and gaps in representation of gender in primary level NCERT textbooks of Delhi.

**Findings:** The textbooks analysed from gender perspective included English Language textbook 'Marigold' and Environmental Studies (EVS) textbook 'Looking Around' of grade V prepared by NCERT and published by Delhi Bureau of textbooks. Gender stereotypes were clearly visible in both of them in some form or the other as discussed under various domains.

**Visibility of females and males:** To start with, women were found to be invisible as compared to men particularly in English textbook. On thorough reading, it was found that there were merely 28% female characters as compared to 72% males represented in text. This included birds and animals which were assigned certain genders, mostly males. Only 29.5% females were represented in visuals as compared to 70.5% males.

It is to be acknowledged that the efforts have been made to represent females and males equally (50%) in the text in EVS textbook. However, only 39% females were represented in pictures as compared to 61% males. This disparity in the proportion of females and males in text and picture is largely because images of boys have been depicted in the area devoted to 'exercises, think tank, what we have learnt' table at the end of each chapter.

This underrepresentation of females in school textbooks seems to be a universal phenomenon from the review of literature done. Dipta Bhog (2002) looked at NCERT language textbooks for classes III, V and VIII. Out of 75 lessons that she reviewed, 34 i.e. nearly 50% had only male actors in text with no female characters in the narratives.

Merely looking at the equality or inequality in representation and visibility of females and males does not provide a complete picture of the gender inequality which is so rooted in each chapter of the textbooks in some or the other form. These have been elaborated using in depth parameters used for textbook analysis.

**Protagonist:** In English textbook, only 3 out of 21 chapters (14%) had female protagonist, 4 were neutral and the rest 14 had males as lead actors and central characters. Majority of chapters (67%) had male protagonist portrayed in various roles like ice-cream man, chef, barber, king, bridegroom, elder brother, and some hypothetical characters in stories. Even the animals in the stories were gendered. Geese, ant, lion, mouse, crab, cat, dog, wolf were all assigned male gender while only dove and dog were assigned female gender. There were only two chapters towards the end where women were shown to play significant and active roles. One was Malu Bhalu which was about a mother polar bear teaching her female baby to swim with the use of positive affirmative words for her daughter like brave, fearless and special. The second was a folk tale from Manipur, in which Sanatombi, a five year old daughter of a king and queen was made the ruler of their kingdom leaving behind their three sons in a competition. The strong female characters in these two short stories can provide good role models for young girls who are prone to making gender impressions in their raw minds.

In EVS, out of 22 chapters, merely 8 chapters (36%) had females as leading actors. Women in these were portrayed as Astronaut, basketball player, and engaged in adventure sports like mountain climbing. Review of the literature revealed other studies on analysis of NCERT school textbooks also indicating that women lack visibility in the official school curriculum and the lessons being largely male centric. Karlekar (2002), drawing on a 1986 study of the Hindi textbooks published by the NCERT, Delhi, showed that the ratio of boy-centric stories to girl-centric stories was 21:1. This huge difference in representation of men and women in textbooks can reinforce the beliefs of young girls and boys in the male dominated nature of society that we live in.

**Occupational Roles:** In English textbook, males were portrayed in a variety of roles and occupations including ice-cream man, milkman, mason, chef, painter, carpenter, electrician, hunter, soldier, barber, sailor, magician, driver, conductor, etc, while women

were only shown as taking care of their children or cooking for the family in the kitchen. No effort was made to depict women in contemporary occupations at all. The only occupation depicted outside their nurturing role at home that women could have is becoming teachers.

In EVS textbook too, males were portrayed in a variety of occupational roles such as Doctor, Brigadier, Colonel, Professor, Teacher, Motorcycle Traveller, Astronaut, Police, Government official, Farmer, Moneylender, Truck driver, petrol pump attendant, Barber, Contractor, Karate Coach, Painter, Chef, Labourer, School guard, Gardener, Traffic police, Sweeper, Dhobi and Artist to name a few. Men were even shown as engaged in leisure activities like watching TV. While females were shown as engaged in socially approved and sanctioned work such as Doctor, Teacher, Cooking at home, buying grocery, engaged in child rearing and looking after animals, fetching water from well, collecting wood for chulha, making mud cakes, milking cow, labourers, maids and homemakers.

Many other studies conducted in India and abroad reveal similar findings. A similar study conducted on Punjab board English language textbooks of classes VII to X in Pakistan also had pictures and exercises in which women were shown in traditionally allocated roles including cooking, cleaning and looking after children. The only knowledge and skills they required were their roles as mothers and good, obedient wives (Mattu & Hussain, 2003).

Another study in Pakistan investigated the representation of females in the textbooks of Urdu and English for secondary school classes. Men had been assigned a wide range of activities. The work associated with male images involved intellect, seeking knowledge, political and religious activities. On other side, female images were found to be associated with service-oriented work e.g., housewife, seeking knowledge, religious activities and very small proportion as working women (Khurshid, Gillani & Hashmi, 2010).

However, a few chapters did focus on contemporary roles that women take up in present times. For instance, Chapter 11, 'Sunita in Space' shared Astronaut Sunita Williams' experience of living in space with the young generation. Another one, chapter 17 'Across the Wall' discussed breaking the gender wall put by society by sharing experiences of a few female basketball players. Chapter 17 'Up You Go', shared experiences and challenges faced by a female teacher at the mountaineering camp. These three can provide good role models for young girls and expose both girls and boys to the fact that women play a variety of roles apart from their socially stereotyped role played as homemakers. Women can be good sportspersons, engage themselves in adventure

sports, and choose offbeat careers for themselves. However, even when women were shown to be engaged in adventure sports like mountain climbing, they were shown to be afraid and scared and the author had used expressions like 'tears in the eyes' to describe the events which could be avoided.

**Games, Sports and Physical Mobility:** In English textbook, females were shown in soft sports which do not require them to be physically strong like playing with dolls, solving jigsaw puzzle, playing sitar. They were depicted in indoor sports which do not require them to possess leadership skills and competitive spirit. Horse riding, basketball and relay race were the only outdoor sports that they were shown to be engaged in while males were shown playing a variety of outdoor sports including swimming, basketball, football, riding bicycle, playing cricket, flying kites, playing with ball, swinging, boxing, guli danda (game played with two sticks), scuba diving, kabaddi, volleyball, relay race, mountain climbing, boating, running, skiing, horse riding, shooting marbles.

The findings are in line with the findings of another similar study conducted in Tamil Nadu in which English textbooks from Standard I to IV were analysed and it was seen that textbooks reinforced gender stereotypes not only in occupations and language used but also in games. Boys were shown in outdoor games and activities that included more physical activity, team work and higher level of competition like football, cricket, hockey, etc. Team leadership, management, group leadership and tasks that involved physical strength were seen as men's domain, and these were reflected in these gender stereotyped plays. While girls were shown in more indoor games which were more sedentary or required less physical activities like blind folding, playing with pebbles, playing with sand and drawing. (Amruthraj, 2012). By perpetuating gender stereotyped games and activities, these textbooks promote gender discrimination and gender inequality giving the message that girls and boys have different gender roles.

**Firstness in Language used:** Firstness in language can provide evidence of gender imbalance. Although effort has been made to use gender neutral terms like children in Exercises in English textbook especially on Teachers' page, expressions like him/her, boys and girls, he/she in which male is addressed first and then the female- could be seen at four places in the textbook. If talking about firstness in terms of female, only at one place, the expression 'girls and boys' was used to address both the genders.

In EVS too, it was observed that even in chapters having female protagonists like basketball players, mountain climbers and astronaut, wherever both females and males had to be referred to, males were

referred first. Only at three places, expression 'girls and boys' was used in contrast to seven place where either 'boys and girls' or 'men and women' was used. At another place, while referring to relationships, uncle-nephews and brother-sister were given as examples reflecting upon the preference for male sex in the mindset of our society in general.

A similar study conducted on Punjab board English language textbooks also concluded that gender biases in school textbooks need to be addressed. The language used in the text of class VII textbook was gender biased itself. 'He' had been used in the examples to explain a point reinforcing in the minds of young children that women do not have an identity of their own (Mattu & Hussain, 2003).

This pattern followed in both the textbooks hence is a reflection of society's preference for males universally. It is a reflection of the superiority that is associated with being a 'man' which is ingrained in the mind-set of our population across the globe.

**Gender specific expression in Language:** Use of gender specific expression in language could be seen in English textbook with the use of terms such as policeman, ice-cream man, batsman and signalman.

In EVS textbook, at various places, gender specific expressions have been used in language. In the first chapter itself, in an exercise which attempts to engage students with their peers to learn about the concept of seeing and hearing, friend is referred to as 'him' i.e. the male sex. At other places, terms like craftsmen, uncle working at petrol pump to refer to a petrol pump attendant reflect and reiterate the gender stereotypes in professions so rampant in our society. In two chapters, expressions like 'from our great grandfather's time' and our 'forefathers' time were used to refer to professions certain caste engaged in for centuries.

**Conclusion And Recommendation:** Both invisibility of women and stereotypical portrayal were matters of concern in the textbooks analysed. There were significantly lesser number of females in the textbook and wherever present, they were shown to be in their traditional stereotypical roles of caretakers, mothers or teachers. It is difficult for young minds to find a female role model in the present textbooks since they did not focus on the range of roles that women and men play in our constantly evolving society. This is instrumental in shaping girls' and boys' visions of who they are and what they can become and such distorted images and portrayals can have a detrimental effect on the construction of gender identity among young children. In societies where they already enter the school environment with a pre-set belief about gender roles and occupations from their socialisation in families, the textbooks reinforcing their belief

system will further reiterate the gender biased ideology in their minds.

It is extremely important and necessary to remove such biases from the content, visuals and exercises from school textbooks beginning right from preschool till higher secondary level across all states and countries. If as a society, we want to broaden the potential for growth and development of both women and men, we need to address this issue at the earliest. In terms of language used, it can be recommended to pay attention to the 'firstness' in representation of gender. The textbooks need to address both females and males equally. It is important to substitute 'he' which is universally used with a more specific 'she' or 'he' depending on the context or use 'she/he' where both sexes are applicable in the subject.

In terms of appropriate representation of both the sexes in both visual and text, both women and men should be shown in realistic roles depicting a progressive society. Instead of constantly showing women in their traditional roles of nurturing and taking care of home, husband, children and in-laws, they should be shown in other economically productive professions such as doctors, engineers, lawyers, architects etc.

Teachers majorly rely on textbooks for imparting knowledge to their students irrespective of the grade and standard. Hence, the textbook authors need to be careful about all the above aspects. It is not just the visibility of women and girls which is important, but correct and fair representation of each gender is crucial.

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