

Gender Portrayal in School Textbooks : A Study in Bhopal City

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Abstract

Education is recognized as one of the critical elements for national development efforts as it is a powerful tool to build a knowledge-based society for the 21st century. The awareness and commitment for attaining gender equality can be realized as being one of the most important development goals of India. Statistics indicate that the scenario of gender equality in education has made progress by leaps and bounds; however, a camouflaged form of gender inequality in the curriculum has gone unaccounted for. The current paper documents the extent of gender inequality in the curriculum and in the textbooks adopted by the schools in Bhopal. The study is limited to analyzing the curriculum/ textbooks of Hindi and English languages for Classes I - X through content analysis. The paper also makes an effort to understand the opinion of various stakeholders regarding the curriculum being "Gender Neutral" or "Gender Sensitive". The research will add value towards building literature related to the extent of gender differences in the curriculum. The study can provide the policymakers with relevant information to build a gender-neutral curriculum for schools so as to improve access to education along with equity and excellence in education. The study will provide literature for adoption of strategies for enhancing the relevance of education through curriculum reforms.

Keywords: gender portrayal, education, text books, socialization

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One of the millennium development goals (MDG 3) is the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women (Central Statistical Organization, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India - Millennium Development Goals- India Country Report, 2011). The MDGs also prominently talk about objectives of achieving universal primary enrolment and eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education. The foundation to these goals was laid in the Education for All (EFA) conference in Jomtein, Thailand in 1990. The conference fostered world's attention towards achieving universal primary education and closing the gender gap in education. The Education for All (EFA) Dakar Goals (2000) focused on "Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality. (World Education Forum, 2002). Various benefits of the education of the girl child have been suggested in various conferences.

India also initiated its efforts towards education for all with the National policy on education in 1986. The policy identified children to be a supremely important asset for the nation. It talked about free and compulsory education for all sections of the society like – girls, weaker sections, and so forth. India also introduced a Right to free and compulsory education (RTE) in 2009 in order to further its commitment towards equality in education. There has been manifold increase in the enrolment of girl children in schools. Growth in access to schooling has been matched by a steady increase in enrolment with the most dramatic upswing since 1990s in girl's participation levels. From 13.8 million boys and 5.4 million girls enrolled at the primary level in 1950-51; the number rose to 69.7 million boys and 61.1 million girls in 2004-05. At the upper primary level, the enrolment increased from 2.6 million boys and 0.5 million girls to 28.5 million boys and 22.7 million girls (Rath, 2008).

Though the numbers suggest a fair growth towards gender equality in the field of education, however, the paradox remains that there is still a substantial difference in the social and economic status of women. Not only the

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remuneration, but also the fields of study are still segregated on the basis of gender. The reasons for this segregation could be many, an important one being differences in the educational experiences by gender. Prior research suggests that educational experiences of girls and boys are not identical. The reasons cited range from differences in the attention received from teachers, differences in the socialization towards expected mannerisms for the girl child, implicit differences in the resources used for teaching, biasness in the curriculum, etc. Research suggests that education plays a very important role in shaping the values of the society. Schools, colleges, and universities have a critical role to play in shaping young minds. The things children experience in schools and colleges go a long way in shaping their behaviour.

Researchers suggest that there are differences in the socialization process which prompts and forms the behaviour of children towards gender. Theorists such as Sadker, M. and Sadker, D.M. (1982, 1994) and Hall and Sandler (1982) argue that femininity is not a natural condition, but the result of the inferior education given to women. According to Frazier and Sadker (1973), "Sitting in the same classroom, reading the same textbook, listening to the same teacher, boys and girls receive very different educations". At a later stage in life, it is this socialization process which prompts people to behave in a certain way (Best, 1989). Researchers argue that attention from teachers itself is not enough to bring about gender neutrality in classrooms. Another more important and the camouflaged aspect in gender bias in education is the portrayal of gender in the curriculum. Many a times, people argue that gender is portrayed in stereotypical roles in school textbooks and curriculum. Thus, it becomes imperative for researchers to understand how gender is portrayed in the curriculum followed in schools as this goes a long way in shaping the behaviour of the society. As stated by Calvanese (2007), it becomes important to be aware of any stereotype present in the curriculum so as to minimize it and ensure equality in the field of education.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the current research is to understand how gender is portrayed in the curriculum and textbooks adopted by Government schools of Bhopal. The study is focused towards finding gender related disparities in the text books and curriculum. The analysis is carried out by conducting a content analysis of the Hindi and English Literature textbooks (Both in CBSE and State Board schools). The present study considers language subjects for analysis due to the limited time availability and also as these subjects involve more of stories and fables that can have a wider impact on a student's mind. The research also attempted to understand the perception of the stakeholders involved. In order to understand the perception of teachers towards gender portrayal, we conducted focused group discussions. Student's reaction was also recorded with the help of the same. We also conducted personal interviews with parents in order to understand their point of view. The research will focus to cover the gap, by adding value towards building literature related to the extent of gender differences in the curriculum. The study can provide the policymakers with relevant information to build a gender-neutral curriculum for schools so as to improve access to education along with equity and excellence in education. The study also provides literature for adoption of strategies for enhancing the relevance of education through curriculum reforms.

Data and Methodology

The present paper focuses on analyzing the content of the school textbooks followed by schools in Bhopal city. Majority of the schools in the city are either registered with Madhya Pradesh Board of Secondary Education or Central Board of Secondary Education. Thus, we conducted an analysis of both the curriculums provided by the Curriculum Wing of the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) and Madhya Pradesh Rajya Shiksha Kendra Bhopal (MPRSKB).

Table 1: Details of the Analyzed Textbooks		
Subject	CBSE	MPBSE
English	15	10
Hindi	22	10
Source: Authors' Research		

❖ **Time Period of the Study :** The current study was undertaken to understand the content of school textbooks and its perception in the minds of the teachers and students. The time period for the research was chosen as February - March, 2013. The study is restricted to analyzing the textbooks of English and Hindi subjects. The present study considers language subjects for analysis due to the limited availability of time and also as these subjects involve more of stories and fables that can have a wider impact on a student's mind. A total of 57 textbooks from the two selected subjects: English and Hindi from Class I - Class X were analyzed using content analysis in order to determine the portrayal of gender in school textbooks. The Table 1 shows the details of the number of textbooks analyzed by us. The content of the school curriculum and the textbooks were analyzed on the basis of the following parameters:

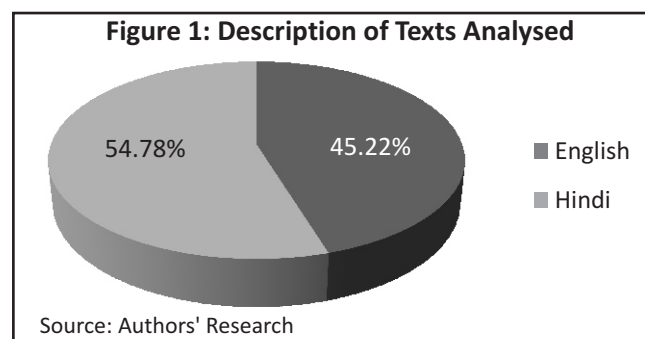
- ❖ Main Character,
- ❖ Writer,
- ❖ Attributes used on the basis of Gender,
- ❖ Role Models.

In order to solicit the opinion and perception of stakeholders, the authors conducted focus group discussions. The objective of the focused group discussions was to understand the perception of the teachers towards gender portrayal in textbooks. We conducted two focused group discussions - one for school teachers using textbooks of NCERT (Schools following CBSE curriculum) and another using MPRSKB (Schools following MPBSE curriculum). More information regarding the opinion of head teachers and teachers (from the selected five schools) towards textbook content was solicited through a series of questions in a personal interview. Two focused group discussions were also conducted for students, with one group entirely consisting of female students and another group consisting of both male and female students. The Table 2 describes the details of the FGDs (focused group discussions) conducted by us.

We faced the limitation of not being able to conduct more FGDs for both students and teachers as the study was carried out in the months of February and March, both months being crucial for a school academic year (as exams are

Table 2: Details of FGDs Conducted		
FGD	No. Of Participants	Description of Participants
FGD 1	8	Teachers FGD, Discussing NCERT curriculum
FGD 2	7	Teachers FGD, Discussing MPRSKB curriculum
FGD 3	10	Students FGD, Female Students discussing gender portrayal in text books
FGD 4	9	Students FGD, Male and Female students discussing gender portrayal in text books
Source: Authors' Research		

Table 3: Description of Texts Analyzed on the Basis of Language	
English	161
Hindi	195
Source: Authors' Research	



conducted in these months). Parents being an important stakeholder in a child's education, we also met a few parents and registered their opinions towards gender equality in general, and gender portrayal in school curriculum, in particular. The responses were registered through personal interviews.

Results and Findings

In order to understand the portrayal of gender in school textbooks, we conducted a content analysis of the curriculum. The study is restricted to language subjects – English and Hindi. Textbooks for the selected subjects for Classes I - X were analyzed on the basis of the following parameters:

- ❖ **Main Character,**
- ❖ **Writer,**
- ❖ **Attributes used on the basis of Gender,**
- ❖ **Role Models.**

The Table 3 describes the chapters analyzed on the basis of language. The number of chapters analyzed for English text books were 161 and that of Hindi textbooks were 195. The Figure 1 depicts that out of the total number of chapters

Table 4: Analysis of Main Characters in Textbook Stories on the Basis of Gender (MPBSE)	
Male	84
Female	38
Animal Characters	2
Nature related or other	41
Source: Authors' Research	

Table 5 : Analysis of Main Characters in Textbook Stories on the Basis of Gender (CBSE)	
Male	76
Female	35
Animal Characters	42
Nature related or other	29
Source: Authors' Research	

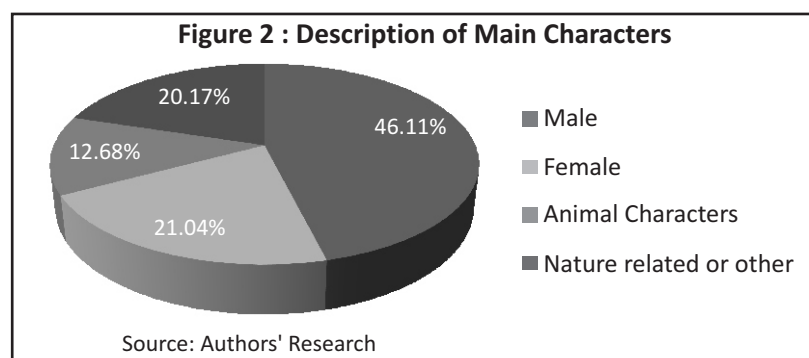
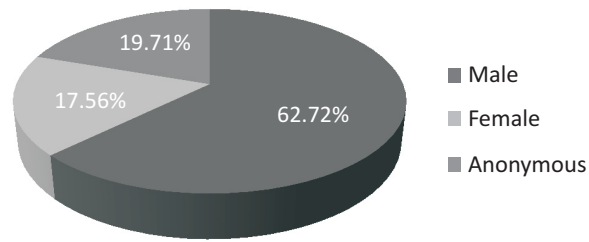


Table 6: Analysis of Text on the Basis of the Writer's Gender	
Male	175
Female	49
Anonymous	55
Source: Authors' Research	

Figure 3: Description of Writers on the Basis of Gender



Source: Authors' Research

Table 7: Commonly Used Attributes in Textbooks Based on Gender

Gender	Commonly used Attributes in Text
Male	Brave, Courageous, Intelligent, Fearless, Honest
Female	English - Kind, Beautiful, Courageous, Loving, Affectionate, Clever, Caring Hindi - Gunwanti, Sushil, Sundar

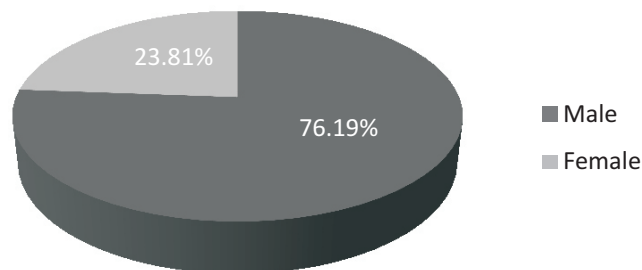
Source: Authors' Research

Table 8: Analysis of Prominent Personalities Mentioned in the Textbooks

Male	32
Female	10

Source: Authors' Research

Figure 4 : Description of Role Models on the Basis of Gender



Source: Authors' Research

analyzed by us, around 55% were in Hindi and 45% were in English. The Table 4 showcases the main characters in the stories in the textbooks of MPBSE. The analysis suggests that the number of male protagonists in the examined chapters were 84 in number, while the chapters with female protagonists were only 38, suggesting a lopsidedness in the numeric representation of females as main characters in the school curriculum. A similar analysis was carried out for CBSE textbooks. The Table 5 showcases the main characters in the stories of the CBSE curriculum, and the analysis revealed that the number of male protagonists in the chapters of CBSE textbooks were 76, and the number of female protagonists were only 35. Hence, in case of CBSE textbooks also, the numeric representation of females was lower than the male protagonists. The only difference visible in the two curriculums is that the CBSE textbooks showcase a lot of stories with animal characters as compared to the ones included in the textbooks of MP board. The reason for this could be to make the curriculum more gender neutral.

The analysis of the chapters on the basis of the gender of the writer indicates that as far as the numeric representation of the writers is concerned, the representation of male and females is indicated in the Table 6. The analysis suggests that the representation of females as writers was also minimal as compared to the male writers. The Figure 2 shows an

overall analysis of the main characters in both CBSE and MPBSE textbooks; this was done to understand the overall representation of the characters based on gender. Analysis of the chapters on the basis of attributes used for males and females also suggest a stereotypical approach towards gender. The Figure 3 depicts the representation of male and female writers in percentage terms. The female writers were represented in only 18% of the overall chapters studied as compared to the male writers' representation being 63%. The Table 7 provides a fair idea regarding the depiction of gender in school curriculum; it shows some standard stereotypical attributes used for gender in the textbooks. We also analyzed the portrayal of prominent personalities or role models in the chapters. The Table 8 describes the role models based on gender. The analysis suggests that the representation of women role models is also lesser as compared to male role models. The Figure 4 depicts a graphical representation of prominent personalities by gender included in the chapters in the studied textbooks. The representation seems to be lopsided here too, with males taking up around 76% of the representation, with the female representation being only 24%.

❖ **Focus Group Discussion of the Teachers :** The focus group discussion of the teachers indicated that in the first instance, teachers were unable to come up with specific indications towards the portrayal of gender in textbooks. However, when specific questions were raised, the teachers came up with the following opinions : The teachers indicated that in the English textbooks, the dressing pattern of the females has changed. For example, women are depicted to be dressed in 'modern' dresses like skirts and trousers as compared to the previous representation when the women were depicted to be dressed in saris and salwar kameez. However, they still felt that the change has been only minimal and still, a lot needs to be done. Teachers felt that the number of stories portraying girls or females as role models were less, the depiction is similar both in English as well as Hindi textbooks. There was not much of a difference in the perception of teachers in CBSE and MPBSE schools. The teachers felt that textbooks portray more of male historical characters than female characters. One of the teachers also made a statement: "Most of the jayanti's (anniversaries) that we celebrate in India for the birth or death of eminent personalities - none of them is in the name of a female personality, then how do we expect our girls to be motivated to do well in life?"

The teachers also felt that still, textbooks use a lot of stereotypical roles and attributes for different genders. Females are still depicted to be homemakers, teachers, nurses, doctors, and so forth. There seems to be not much of a difference in the way women are defined in the textbooks. The attributes used for describing males and females are also stereotypical; women characters are still portrayed as "*Sundar*," "*Sushil*," "*Sharmili*," and "*Gunwanti*". Still, the textbooks talk of the girl's parents being worried for her marriage, the mother teaching her girl child to be perfect in household work so that she can be a good homemaker and can earn the praise of her mother-in-law and the love of her husband, and the mother being very protective about the girl child. The teachers felt that the main characters in the school textbooks were mainly boys and men, and only a few stories presented females as main characters. Even stories of female role models are less in number as compared to the chapters depicting male role models. The teachers also felt that not only the textbooks present more examples of boys, but even teachers start with the example of "Boy" and "He," in the class while discussing the students in general. The teachers accepted that there needs to be a radical change if we want to make our education system gender neutral. In addition, the teachers observed that girl students are generally more active and take interest in the class activities as compared to their male counterparts. The teachers suggested that the girls were outnumbering the boys in results by earning more marks and achieving higher grades in class.

❖ **Focus Group Discussion of Students :** Focus group discussion of students was conducted in two parts; one focus group contained only female students, while another contained both male and female students. The FGD indicated that a majority of the girl students aspired to become doctors and teachers, while none of the girl students suggested fields like architecture, scientific research, and so forth as their likely career choice. The girl students suggested that the textbooks should include more of female role models and preferably, some representations from the field of business and other new professions should be included. One of the student's suggested: "One of our chapters is on the life and profession of Hafeez Contractor, by this we came to know more about architecture as a profession, and we would like to have more chapters on such people so as to understand their nature of work and we will get more knowledge about the profession". Another student commented : " My favourite chapter is the one which talks about Salim Ali, I came to know about ornithology and got interested in birds after reading the chapter".

❖ **Personal Interview of Parents:** Many parents were not much aware of the curriculum followed in schools, the reason being their children going for tuition classes or the parents not being so educated so as to help their wards with their lessons. However, some parents who were aware of the curriculum suggested the curriculum to be updated based on modern and present trends. The parents suggested to include more chapters on technology, computers, and so forth. The parents also wanted the curriculum to be an inspiration for their girls with the inclusion of chapters covering the biographic details of personalities like Chanda Kochchar and so forth. The suggestions of parents were found to be more broad and general in terms of including more moral values and practical skills.

Comparative Analysis: Curriculum Followed by CBSE and MPBSE

An analysis of the main character threw up interesting results when comparing the curriculum followed by CBSE vis-a-vis MPBSE as in both the curriculums, the representation of women as main characters was not at par with the male protagonists. However, it was also observed that in the CBSE curriculum, a majority of the main characters were represented by animal characters, while such a scenario was not repeated in MPBSE textbooks. The stories in MPBSE curriculum relate more with the local places in Madhya Pradesh than with animal characters as protagonists.

As far as the situation of writers is concerned, again, there seems to be a dominating number of male writers as compared to the female writers. The situation is almost the same in both the curriculums. Gender stereotyping is found in both the curriculums, with statements like “The Mother thought her child to be very beautiful, while the father being busy in his work did not have enough time to think about his child”. Sentences like “She is an obedient wife, will not question her husband's decision.” are apt examples of gender stereotyping present in the curriculum.

Conclusion

India boasts of increasing number of enrolments and reduction in the dropout ratio of females. Thus, from an educational perspective, the outlook for girls and women appears to be quite bright. Taken on numbers alone (which is done quite often), the achievement in the field of equality in education seems to be a dream coming true in the near future. The story of education for all has definitely shown an unmistakable progress as far as numbers are concerned. The girls have outnumbered boys in class results by achieving higher grades in almost all the subjects. There is a manifold increase in the number of girls taking part in sports activities. All these figures suggest a reduction in the gap in gender bias in school education.

However, a deeper look at the curriculum suggests a camouflaged form of gender bias, wherein females are still portrayed carrying out stereotypical roles and responsibilities - “household work,” “domestic chores” etc. One of the statements used in the text is an example of this – “*Chauka Poora Kar*”. We also found examples where the women were perceived to be good if they followed the orders of their husbands – “*She is an obedient wife, she will never question my decision.*” Apart from a few negatives, we also found some positive changes in the textbooks - women are shown as the Sarpanch of a village, being involved in agricultural activities, and female characters described as saviours and care takers clearly depict the reversal in roles, with the females being depicted in the position of power and acting as decision makers. The chapters also gave importance to the girl child and her education by using statements like “*Betiya Bhavishya ki Nirmata,*” “*....wahi sab ladkiyon mein padhi likhi samajhdar thi isi liye wah aage aakar boli*”.

In case of prayers or patriotism, both male and female characters are portrayed using pictures. We want to draw the attention of the Government and the drafting committees of the school curriculum both at the State and the National level to incorporate more chapters with female role models, as this will motivate more girls to perform better and better, and compete with the boys in their respective fields. Some girls' academic performance drops once they reach high school or even middle school, and they abandon previous interests in subjects, as disclosed by teachers and parents. This may be one of the important causes of non - realization of gender specific needs. Some girls stop speaking up in class. The dropout rates of the girl child are shooting up, so hypothesizing this as one of the main reason for the gender imbalance in school curriculum, we would like to request the concerned authorities to modify the curriculum so as to make it more gender neutral. This would eliminate obstacles towards gender equality and would ensure fairness in the field of education. This may be done by providing all children with gender-neutral education. By doing so, schools would not only ensure fairness, but would also increase the pool of skilled workers, which would greatly benefit the society as a whole.

Suggestions

The principle of equality of men and women was recognized in the United Nations (UN) Charter in 1945 and the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948; the majority of the development planners and implementers did not fully address women's position in the development process. They were working with the assumption that what would benefit one section of the society (males) would trickle down to the other section as well (females). The ways of defining women's position in development has changed through the years. Development is never neutral. The policy, planning, and implementation of developmental programmes involve many complex processes. The issues concerning women and their role in the development process have been increasingly examined over the years. In this line, we would like to suggest that textbooks form an important tool in the developmental process of children.

Many authors also came up with similar conclusions like Bailey (1996) stated that a critical aspect of social development that our culture has traditionally assigned to women is equally important for men. Schools must help girls and boys acquire both the relational and the competitive skills needed for full participation in the workforce, family, and community. Thus, if camouflaged biasness will be shown, then it would certainly hinder the growth and developmental process of all sections of the society. It is argued that women do not participate in the developmental projects also, as there is a lower representation of women at the top management levels (Sharma & Mukherjee, 2013). However, it is important to understand that women's participation will not happen automatically. It needs to be planned, processed, and integrated. Cornwall (2003) concluded that "community-driven development, participatory planning, and other fine sounding initiatives that make claims of full participation and empowerment can turn out to be driven by particular gendered interests, leaving the least powerful without much choice." Thus, developmental projects necessitate a conscious gender focus in all stages. Showing men in advantageous positions as compared to women, depicting examples of males in the classroom would certainly hinder the growth pattern and would keep on bringing social and economic constraints. The devaluation of women will have to be checked at a very early stage, when the child's behaviour is at a moulding stage. An effort towards this would be gender sensitization and change in socialization practices at school, where children spend the most valuable and constructive time of their lives.

Policy Implications

The concept of gender refers specifically to men's and women's socially determined roles and responsibilities. It is distinct from men's and women's biological and reproductive characteristics because it is shaped by historical, cultural, economic, political, and educational constructs. By definition, then, gender constructs can be changed and may permeate institutions as well as influence individual actions. Thus, changes in the educational curriculum can definitely help in bringing about changes in the manner in which women are portrayed. We suggest the following policy implications based on the present research :

- ❖ Develop a curriculum which meets and secures the educational needs of both the genders in the form of equality in content and language used.
- ❖ Encourage contribution in curriculum by female writers to ensure better representation of male and female writers.
- ❖ Develop a curriculum that best describes the society today i.e. also include lessons on female entrepreneurs and role models.
- ❖ Encourage positive inter gender attitude and behaviour promoting empathy and non violent relationships through the curriculum.
- ❖ Discourage the use of stereotypical images and attributes in describing genders.
- ❖ Inclusion of gender training as a mandatory component in teacher education programs to ensure equality in teachers' behaviour towards students.
- ❖ Installation of gender equality panels in all primary and secondary boards to ensure gender neutrality in curriculum, and redressal of complaints, if any.

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