

Visual Representation of Gender in English Language Textbooks

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Abstract

Education plays an important role in shaping students' lives, because students tend to uphold and practice what they learn in the classroom. Therefore, promoting gender equality in English language education is essential, as it not only influences students' attitudes, but also advances the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). In Sri Lanka, textbooks are the primary material used by teachers for teaching. Hence, textbooks have the potential to foster a positive self-image among students regarding gender. Visual representations, especially in school textbooks, play a vital role in shaping the perceptions and attitudes of students, and have an immediate impact on students rather than textual content. Gender stereotypes in the visual content presented in English language textbooks could perpetuate traditional gender roles and limit students' understanding of gender roles in society. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the representation of gender in these textbooks. This study aimed to explore how gender is visually represented in English language textbooks used at the secondary level (Grades 6 to 11) in Sri Lankan schools. This mixed-methods research employs content analysis to explore gender representation in the visual content found in English language textbooks published by the Educational Publication Department. This study specifically examines four specific aspects: the numerical representation of boys, men, and girls or women in visuals; the types of activities depicted visually for each gender; the portrayal of occupational identities illustrated through visuals; and the inclusion of great personalities in visual content. The findings revealed a clear imbalance in the visual representation of gender in the selected English language textbooks. Furthermore, this study highlighted the need for more gender-inclusive visuals in English language textbooks to promote gender equality in classroom learning.

Keywords: English Language, Gender, Representation, Sri Lanka, Textbooks, Visual

Introduction

Gender stereotypes are prevalent in Sri Lanka. Generally, in Sri Lanka, specific norms, rules, roles, emotions, practices, responsibilities, behaviour, and power relations are assigned to people of a very young age based on their gender differences. Societies' expectations related to boys, men, and girls or women are extremely different. Boys and men are mostly expected to be independent, brave, and confident. From childhood onwards, boys are associated with blue colour, superheroes, construction sets, soldiers, guns, outdoor activities, etc. They are steered towards action-packed toys and are expected to prioritise education or develop competencies to fulfil their role as breadwinners. In contrast, pink colour, dolls, kitchen sets, princesses, makeup items, jewellery, and indoor activities are associated with girls or women. They are encouraged to play with toys that emphasise domestic and nurturing roles. From early age, they are instructed to be compassionate, docile, sentimental and reticent, and are expected cultivate responsibilities such as doing household chores, safeguarding family honour, and taking care of family members, they will require as wives and mothers. Failure to conform to these expected gender norms and standards can give rise to societal disapproval.

Though there are some progressive ideas among the educated members of the country, gender biases, discriminatory practices, and stereotyping are prevalent. Women and girls in Sri Lanka encounter difficulties in workplace options, financial stability, political engagement and personal security due to structural barriers and cultural prejudices (IMPACT STORY: Sri Lankan Companies Advancing Gender Equality in the Workplace | UN Global Compact, 2024). The adverse effects of gender stereotyping influence people's behaviour and attitudes.

Purpose and Scope of the Study

This research hypothesises that Sri Lankan English language textbooks published by the Education Publication Department for the secondary level, from grades 6 to 11, contain gender stereotypes in visual representations, which may influence students' attitudes and perceptions toward gender roles. This study is limited to the analysis of textbooks from grades 6 to 11, and does not consider the workbooks issued alongside these textbooks. Additionally, the study focused solely on visual content and did not examine textual representations of gender.

Gender and Education

Students' understanding of gender roles is shaped by what they learn in their classrooms. They unconsciously absorb issues related to gender roles and occupational identities through the content and images in textbooks. If textbooks portray men as professionals, leaders, and decision-makers and women in family oriented, caretaking, and submissive positions, students may perceive these as expected norms. The use of gendered language, emphasising the accomplishments of one gender and minimising the contributions of the other gender, biased depiction of emotions and behaviours across genders, and misleading or implicit messages in illustrations may limit students' views about their ambitions, capabilities, and gender roles. Therefore, textbooks should be free from prejudice and stereotypes to ensure an equitable and inclusive learning experience.

Gender Issues in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka presents a complex picture of gender equality, characterised by both positive achievements and persistent challenges across various sectors. According to the World Bank, as of 2022, the adult literacy rate in Sri Lanka was 93.3% for men, 91.8% for women, and 97.6 % for girls, and 95.9% of boys completed lower secondary education (Sri Lanka, World Bank Gender Data Portal, n.d.). Nevertheless, the country is facing significant gender inequality. It ranks 71st out of 189 countries on the 2019 Gender Inequality Index and 102nd out of 153 countries on the 2020 Global Gender Gap Report due to low female representation in politics and the labour force, a high level of poverty in female-headed families, and gender violence (SDG Data Portal Sri Lanka, n.d.).

The country has made notable progress in education, literacy, and healthcare; however, persistent disparities remain in female political representation, labour force representation, and gender-based violence (Asian Development Bank & Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit [GIZ], 2015). Jayasinghe (2024) mentions that despite making history with the world's first female prime minister in 1960, Sri Lanka still has low female political representation. Sri Lanka's labour force participation rate, unemployment rate, and reliance on unpaid family labour disproportionately affect women (Department of Census and Statistics 2024). In addition, gender-based violence in Sri Lanka persists due to family privacy, shame, trivialisation of abuse, inadequate legal awareness, and limited victim support services (Asian Development Bank & Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit [GIZ], 2015).

Although the Sri Lankan government implemented several policies, national frameworks, legislation, and recommendations to address gender inequalities, gender disparities continue to exist.

Literature Review

Three Grade Eight textbooks published between 2001 and 2015 present stereotypical elements of women (Adjumain, 2024). A content analysis of language textbooks depicts a limited number of female characters, undervalued women's roles,

male-centric representations, and divisions of skills, spaces, and social roles by gender (Kuruville & Thasniya, 2015). Habib et al. (2020) conclude that senior high school English textbooks in Indonesia depict gender bias in the portrayal of firstness, dominance, especially in authoritative positions, social interactions and domestic roles, with male characters shown as having diverse athletic pursuits compared to women. In a study of Gender Construction in Visual Images in Textbooks for Primary School Students, Damayanti (2014) points out that men are represented as independent and women are often shown as observers who admire the activities performed by men. Gender representation in Romanian primary school textbooks and fairy tales feature the dominance of masculine roles and traditional portrayals (Cocorada, 2018). Similarly, Islam and Asadullah (2018) identified pro-male bias in English textbooks in government secondary school English textbooks from Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, where women are often featured in less prestigious roles, while men dominate professional spaces.

The impact of gender portrayal in illustrations from the Spotlight on English 1 presents more men than women, with female characters shown in commonly assigned jobs, such as educators and secretaries, whereas male characters are presented in more challenging professional positions (Abdelhay & Benhaddouche, 2015). A study of English language textbooks used in Bangladesh shows that they are male-centred, and these textbooks may affect students' perceptions of gender roles and societal expectations (Awal, 2024).

Mish'al and Nofal (2024) state that Jordanian high school textbooks show a gender imbalance, with male characters appearing twice as often as females, men dominating prestigious professions, and women having fewer social representations, but more diverse familial roles. Although Indonesian textbook writers promote gender fairness by using gender-neutral language and balanced imagery, gender stereotypes persist in academic roles, domestic chores, and hobbies. Therefore, textbook writers must be mindful of language-gender dynamics to minimise misconceptions (Suwarno et al., 2021). Wijetunga (2017) conducted a case study on G.C. E.

O/L English language textbooks points out gender disparities such as the dominance of male characters, depiction of women in stereotypical roles, a lack of female influential figures of inspiration, prioritization of male names, and significant presence of men in professional roles. Including gender issues in English language learning materials that highlight the lives and contributions of both men and women can foster a more gender-sensitive classroom (Qamariah 2024).

Although research findings and global efforts have addressed gender inequality, considerable work remains to be done to eliminate deep-rooted stereotypes (Huck 2022). Most studies argue that textbooks often promote traditional gender roles, under represent women, and portray them in stereotypical ways. Such biases can influence students' perceptions of gender norms and societal roles. Ensuring a balanced and inclusive presentation in textbooks fosters gender equality and empowers learners.

There is limited research on how gender issues are represented visually in the Sri Lankan English language textbooks used at the secondary level from grades 6 to 11. Most studies have focused on textual content and gender stereotypes. Usually, visual content leaves lasting impressions on students and can either reinforce or challenge stereotypes. Ultimately, they offer indirect notions of gender norms within a particular culture. Ensuring inclusivity and gender balance in these visual elements is essential to fostering a progressive mindset and promoting equality among students. Therefore, a critical review of the visual representation of gender in secondary level Sri Lankan English language textbooks is necessary to cultivate a more inclusive learning environment.

Methodology

Six English language textbooks were selected through purposive sampling. This study employed content analysis to examine the gender representation in the selected textbooks. The numerical representation of gender involves counting the number of males and females depicted in the visuals. Types of activities assigned to each gender in visuals are categorised into physical, adventurous, public, domestic, passive, caregiving, professional, expressive and artistic, and protective or leadership activities. The portrayal of

occupational identities includes identifying professions represented in visuals and determining whether males and females are depicted in specific occupational roles. The inclusion of great personalities is analysed by examining whether both genders are equally represented in the visual depictions of notable figures.

Findings & Discussion

Numerical Representation of Gender in Visual Contents

Grade 6 Pupil's Book

Grade 6 Pupil's Book consists of 11 units: Hello, Leisure, Where's Everything?, What Can You See?, Aunt Minoli's Kitchen, What Do We Do, A Fine Day, A Visit to Zoo, Sugar or Sand, Was it Yesterday? and Eco Friends. This textbook features 93 male (56%) and 73 female (44 %) visuals, showing a gender imbalance between male and female figures.



Figure 1 Grade 6 Pupil's Book

Grade 7 Pupil's Book

Grade 7 Pupil's book comprises 10 units: What You See, Friend Indeed, Pleasure, A Busy Day, Once Upon a Time, Better Safe than Sorry, Around the Country, Wonders Around Us, Our Beautiful World, and Future. With 117 male figures (64%) and 65 female figures (36%), this learning material demonstrated an uneven representation of gender.

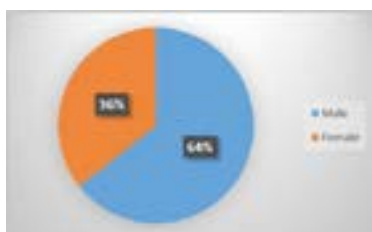


Figure 2 Grade 7 Pupil's Book

Grade 8 Pupil's Book

Grade 8 Pupil's Book encompasses 10 units: Plan the Work, Work the Plan, Winged Friends, Let's Be

Considerate, Mother Nature, Between the Miles, When We Are Together, The World of Children, It's a Small World, On the Top of the World, and Beyond the Classroom. A total of 82 visuals of male figures (54%) and 69 visuals of female figures (46%) in this textbook show an imbalance in gender representation.

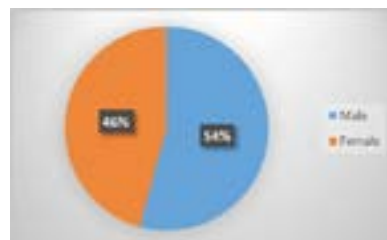


Figure 3 Grade 8 Pupil's Book

Grade 9 Pupil's Book

Grade 9: Pupil's Book features 10 units: Everybody is Good at Something, May I Help You? Meeting, Extinct Friends, A Second Chance, Called Tomorrow, Art, Where We Are? Success through Creativity, The Greatest Wealth, Be Happy, Be Bright, Be You!. The depiction of male figures 94 (67%) is almost double that of female figures 47 (33%). This indicates a remarkable variation in gender imbalance.

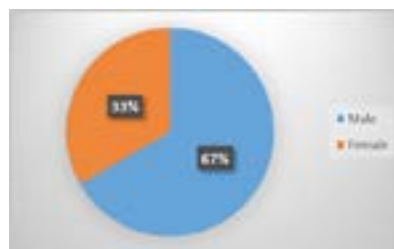


Figure 4 Grade 9 Pupil's Book

Grade 10 Pupil's Book

The Grade 10 Pupil's Book includes 14 units: People, On Your Way, Travel, Let's Talk, Best Practices, Information, Learning is Fun, Healthy Food, Nature, Personality, The Right Career, Success, Future, and Sports. Though this textbook contains more male figures 80 (57%) than female figures 60 (43%), the gender disproportion is smaller when compared to the Grade 7 Pupil's Book and the Grade 9 Pupil's Book.

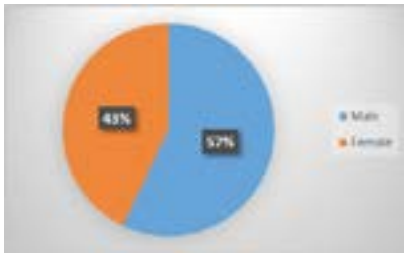


Figure 5 Grade 10 Pupil's Book

Grade 11 Pupil's Book

The Grade 11 Pupil's Book includes 10 units: Our Responsibilities, Facing Difficulties, Great Lanka, For A Better Tomorrow, Best Use of Time, A Moment of Fun, A Simple Living, Reading Is Fun, Enigma, and Choices In Life. Although the total number of visuals is smaller in the Grade 11 Pupil's Book, the overall visual representation of gender shows 30 male figures (65%) compared to only 16 female figures (35%), indicating a noticeable gender imbalance.

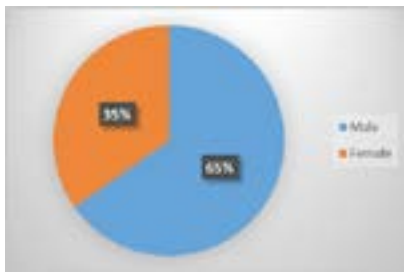


Figure 6: Grade 11 Pupil's Book

Types of Activities Assigned by Gender

Grade 6 Pupil's Book: Activity Analysis

The activity analysis of the Grade 6 Pupil Book indicated a noticeable gender divide in roles and responsibilities. Males are more frequently depicted as engaging in physical, adventurous, and public activities, such as playing sports, climbing, and selling ice cream. In contrast, females are often shown to play domestic or passive roles, including cooking, serving food, folding clothes, and watching others. Although some activities, such as playing badminton and dancing, depict both genders equally, their overall distribution reinforces traditional gender roles.

Male: doing homework, carrying a sports torch, climbing up a rope ladder, riding a pony, father

walking beside the boy who is riding the pony, playing cricket, selling ice-cream, cleaning the window, reading a newspaper, weeding the garden, juggling, whip-cracking, fireball acrobatics, flag bearing, drumming, playing a musical instrument, playing volleyball, gardening, cycling, picking up rubbish

Female: lighting an oil lamp, playing hopscotch, sliding down a slide, playing on a see-saw, feeding fish, mothers sitting on the grass and watching the children at play, sweeping, watering plants, skipping, folding clothes, watching the father and daughters at play, serving food, helping father to weed the garden, walking on the rope, cooking, driving, doing yard work, playing the violin, running, enjoying the night sky, drinking tea

Equal Representation: girls and boys play ball at the beach together, playing badminton, eating, singing, dancing, and flying kites.

Grade 7 Pupil's Book: Activity Analysis

The activity analysis of Grade 7 Pupil's Book shows men in more physically active and adventurous roles, such as rock climbing, boating, and driving, while women are shown in caregiving, social, and domestic activities, reinforcing traditional gender norms. The limited number of common activities suggests that gender-neutral roles are under-represented.

Male: driving a car, swimming, riding a bicycle, riding a horse, playing tennis, playing the guitar, skipping, drinking water, taking care of pets, rock climbing, climbing down a hill, climbing a tree, painting, boating, riding horse, engaging in adventurous activities, playing the piano, playing chess

Female: escorting an elderly person, escorting children, playing piano, cooking, washing fruits and vegetables, cleaning cooking utensils, delivering a speech, chatting, playing badminton,

Equal Representation: selling vegetables, buying vegetables, and playing musical instruments.

Grade 8 Pupil's Book: Activity Analysis

The activity analysis of the Grade 8 Pupil's Book features men participating in active, outdoor, and adventure-related activities, reinforcing traditional

masculinity. A shared activity such as riding a hovercraft suggests some level of gender-neutral representation, although such instances remain limited.

Male: boating, skating

Equal Representation: riding a hovercraft

Grade 9 Pupil's Book: Activity Analysis

The activity analysis of the Grade 9 Pupil's Book shows that males play a productive, income-generating role (selling vegetables), while females play a consumer role (buying vegetables), reinforcing traditional economic roles. Females are associated with expressive and artistic activities (dancing), while males are linked to musical performance, which could indicate a more active role in entertainment. Activities are not equally represented, highlighting the gender divide in the portrayal of roles.

Male: playing music, selling vegetables

Female: dancing, buying vegetables

Grade 10 Pupil's Book: Activity Analysis

The Grade 10 Pupil Book portrays men in physically demanding roles involving repairs, maintenance, and outdoor labour. Females are shown in household and decorative roles, reinforcing traditional responsibilities. Only one activity (travelling by a cable car) represented both genders equally, showing minimal effort in breaking gender stereotypes.

Male: pruning the bush, painting the wall, unloading things from the lorry, painting walls, washing the car, repairing the car

Female: polishing the floor, decorating cake, decorating the hall, setting the table, picking flowers, making kolam, sweeping the road

Equal representation: travelling by a cable car

Grade 11 Pupil's Book: Activity Analysis

The activity analysis of the Grade 11 Pupil's Book shows that men are depicted in protective and leadership roles, such as escorting elderly individuals and engaging in hiking, which align with traditional masculine traits. Women are depicted in physically

demanding and adventurous activities such as water rafting and pole vaulting, showing some progress in breaking gender stereotypes. This textbook promotes shared participation in extreme sports activities.

Male: escorting elderly, hiking

Female: water rafting, pole vaulting

Equal Representation: mountaineering, scuba diving

Portrayal of occupational identities

The key observations related to the portrayal of occupational identity are outlined below.

Traditional Gender Roles: Males are primarily assigned occupations related to physical labour, leadership roles, and technical or intellectual positions (e.g. astronauts, engineers, soldiers, postmasters, mechanics). These roles are traditionally viewed as more authoritative or demanding. Females, on the other hand, are more frequently assigned caregiving, supportive and nurturing roles (e.g., nurse, doctor, librarian, chef, attendant). This reinforces women's traditional gender norms in nurturing or supportive roles.

Overlap in Roles: Both men and women are portrayed as sports teachers and singers. This indicated a certain level of equality. In addition, there are few instances of men in traditionally female-dominated professions (e.g. nurse, librarian), and vice versa for women in male-dominated fields (e.g. engineer, soldier).

Leadership and Authority: Men are depicted in leadership roles (e.g. king, principal, soldier, and sage), reflecting societal norms, where men are often seen in positions of authority or power. By contrast, women are largely represented in caregiving or supportive roles (e.g. nurses, doctors, and librarians). Although women are seen as doctors and teachers, they are still perceived as having less authoritative roles compared to the positions assigned to men.

Stereotypical Roles: Men are represented in physical and adventurous roles (e.g. football player, astronaut, boatman, mechanic), often connected to strength and endurance; in contrast, women are portrayed more in nurturing or domestic roles (e.g. nurse, teacher, attendant, chef), which are more closely associated with femininity and care.

Male: football player, king, juggler, carpenter, teacher, astronaut, boatman, postmaster, hermit,

mechanic, car wash attendant, labourer, engineer, sage, principal, netball player, water rafter, mahout, and soldier.

Female: queen, tightrope walker, teacher, librarian, nurse, attendant, doctor, sweeper, chef, lab technician, journalist, magician, elle player, badminton player

Equal representation: singer, vegetable seller, sports teacher

The data reveal a clear gendered division in the types of occupations assigned to men and women, with men occupying roles traditionally viewed as more authoritative or physically demanding and women being represented in nurturing, supportive, and caregiving roles. The small number of gender-neutral occupations (e.g. singers and vegetable sellers) indicates a limited breaking of traditional gender roles. This analysis highlights the need for more balanced and diverse gender representations in textbooks to challenge stereotypes and to promote gender equality.

Inclusion of Great Personalities

The textbooks include the images of Dr. Abdul Kalam, Munidasa Cumaratunga, Ananda Samarakoon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Siddi Lebbe, Leonardo Da Vinci, Edison, Charles Spencer Chaplin, Lionel Messi, Michael Phelps, Usain Bolt, Michael Jordan, Mutiah Muralitharan, Sachin Tendulkar, Roger Federer, Charles Darwin, Mahatma Gandhi, Alexander the Great, Daniel Defoe and Sir Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle, Susanthika Jayasinghe, and Anne Frank. Twenty out of twenty-two images represent male figures. This significant gender imbalance reinforces the idea that males occupy prominent positions in sports, science and technology, history, education, linguistics and literary studies, politics, etc. and hinders students' awareness of the contribution of females to various fields. In addition, inadequate representation of relatable female icons as role models has a profound impact on students because the depiction of great personalities in textbooks shapes their ambitions and aspirations.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The visual representation of gender in Sri Lankan English language textbooks from Grades 6 to 11

reveals a consistent gender imbalance, with male figures outnumbering female figures across all grade levels. This disparity is most significant in grades 7, 9, and 11, where male figures dominate by a large margin. To promote gender inclusivity, textbook developers should ensure a balanced representation of both genders in their visuals.

To foster gender inclusivity, textbooks should provide a balanced representation of both genders across all activity types, portraying men in caregiving or domestic settings and women in active, leadership, and adventure-oriented roles. Textbooks should include both males and females in a varied range of physical and adventurous activities.

Textbooks should include both genders in their economic activities (buying and selling), artistic roles (dancing and playing musical instruments), and professional or intellectual activities to encourage a balanced portrayal of gender roles.

Roles for both genders should be diversified by depicting females in repair and maintenance tasks and males in decorative or household activities. Textbooks should feature shared responsibilities in textbooks, such as boys and girls setting tables, decorating, and performing maintenance work. Promoting gender-neutral depictions of labour to encourage equal participation in all areas of life.

Increasing gender diversity in adventure and leadership roles can be achieved by depicting both males and females in activities, such as hiking and escorting elderly individuals. It is important to encourage equal representation in outdoor activities by including images of both sexes engaging in water rafting, pole vaulting, and other sports. Furthermore, promoting gender-neutral depictions of care roles—such as including men in caregiving tasks and women in leadership roles – will help challenge traditional gender stereotypes.

To promote gender equality, textbook creators should ensure balanced representation of both genders in diverse professional roles. Encouraging the inclusion of women in leadership positions and technical fields and of men in caregiving roles can help break stereotypes. A more equitable portrayal of occupational identities in textbooks will foster broader and more inclusive career aspirations among students.

To rectify the imbalance in the inclusion of great personality content creators of English language textbooks used at the secondary level from grades 6 to 11 ensure that visual content reflects the accomplishments of both genders equally. By incorporating more diverse role models from various disciplines, such as sports, politics, science, literature, and the arts, students are exposed to a wide range of possibilities. As a result, they envision themselves in any profession or field they choose.

Integrating gender-transformative education, training textbook illustrators on inclusive visual representation, revising course content, improving teacher training, conducting regular reviews to find out visual bias, and including gender experts in the panel of textbook writers are key steps in addressing and reducing gender inequality. Textbooks play a vital role in shaping perceptions related to gender. Reforming the visual representation in English language textbooks in Sri Lanka will help educators foster more inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, improving the visual representation of gender in textbooks will support policymakers in strategically monitoring and refining educational materials to ensure that textbooks align with national goals and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals related to gender equality.

This study focuses on English language textbooks prescribed for Grades 6 to 11 in Sri Lankan schools and does not investigate supplementary material. In addition, it did not explore teachers' and students' views regarding the visual representation of gender in these textbooks. To promote gender equality in education, future studies should examine the evolution of the visual representation of gender in English language textbooks over time and integrate stakeholders' perspectives to bridge the gaps in the current literature.

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