



## **GENDER REPRESENTATION IN TEXTBOOKS: A LEVER FOR GENDER INEQUALITY**

**MitimaSachedva\***

Amity Institute of Education, Amity University, Lucknow Campus

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### **ABSTRACT**

Textbooks are the basic tools of education. Textbooks have economic and ideological implications. It has long been understood that textbooks are a basic vehicle of socialization, conveying knowledge and values. They have always been subject of numerous studies whether with a view to revise their content in order to improve learning, take better account of values held to be universal (such as peace and equality) or meet demands for technical assistance through the provision and distribution of teaching material. Textbooks enable the development of the technical and educational skills amongst the students. Today the goal of education for ALL and the priority given to GIRLS education has made textbooks even more important.

In any particular society and across the world, textbooks have an impact beyond the immediate confines of school and learning. Thus we must consequently take account of the extent of the impact of textbooks. The aim of this paper is to consider the overall environment of the textbooks in relation to gender inequality, and to explore the possibilities that how the textbooks can be used as a powerful lever of social change in propagating gender equality and universal values.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

A new report from UNESCO says that gender bias is rife in textbooks around the world, and is undermining girls' motivation and achievement in schools. In India, only 6% of the illustrations in primary English, Hindi, mathematics, science and social studies textbooks showed only females, while more than half showed only males, according to the report, not a single woman was shown as an executive, engineer, shopkeeper or merchant in six mathematics books used in Indian primary schools, said the analysis from the Global Education Monitoring Report at UNESCO, with men "dominating activities representing commercial, occupational and marketing situations". Some Indian textbooks "challenge students to identify gender bias in accompanying illustrations and urge them to discuss these stereotypes with their peers." said UNESCO.

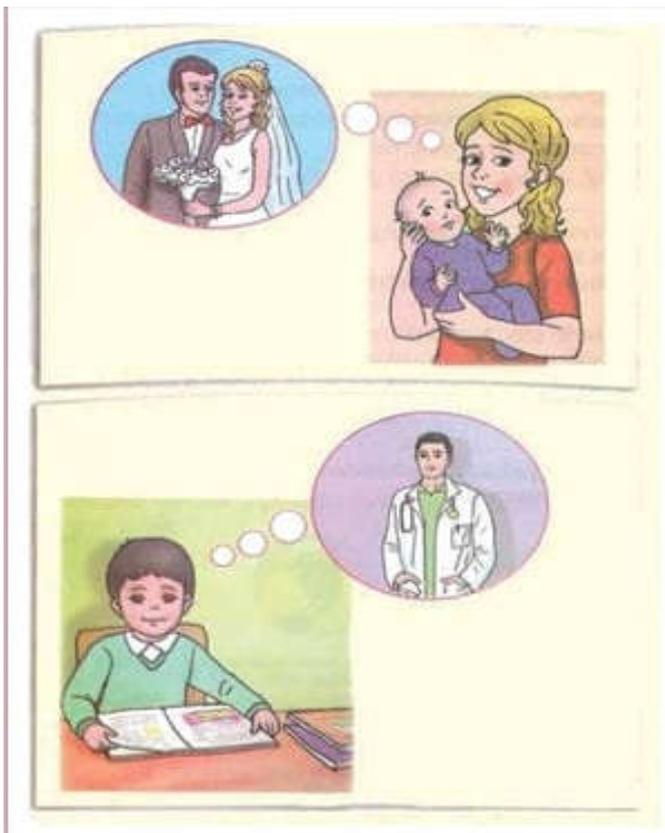
It is no longer just about how many children are in school, which is important, but also what is actually happening in the classroom. That's very difficult, but textbooks are a good entry point. Teachers who in some cases may not have been sufficiently trained at the very least, need tools to convey an accurate depiction of men and women, girls and boys, tools that provide the right background for equitable behaviour. If textbooks are filled with discriminatory moments, then that's not a good entry point.

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A landmark initiative was undertaken in 1986, with the enactment of the National Policy on Education (NPE) and its revised POA 1992. This philosophy has also been reflected in the National Policy on Empowerment of Women 2001. The policy focuses on promoting gender sensitive curriculum for addressing gender discrimination at all levels of education. The new draft of National Policy lays emphasis on "Encourage, Educate and Employ", all irrespective of their socio-economic background.

*\*Corresponding author: MitimaSachedva*

Amity Institute of Education, Amity University, Lucknow Campus



focus attention on gender disparities in education. The journey has been from concern to substantial inclusion.

### **An Attempt to Make the Textbooks Gender Free By Ncert**

A pioneering initiative was taken by NCERT's Women's Studies unit seminar (1975) to identify values which commensurate with the status of women in India. The proceedings of the seminar culminated in the publication of handbooks to guide textbook writers, teacher educators and teachers to make disciplines like Languages, Social Science, Sciences and Mathematics, gender inclusive. Some of the significant publications were- Status of Women through Curriculum: Elementary Teachers Handbook, 1982, Status of Women through Curriculum: Secondary and Senior Secondary Stages, 1984 and Status of Women through Teaching of Mathematics: A Teachers Handbook, 1984. The initiative of integrating gender concerns in curriculum continued in the 90s. Handbooks of teachers were revisited to make teaching learning processes gender inclusive by suggesting activities that would make Classroom transactions an empowering experience for all children girls as well as boys. Two publications that reflected this philosophy were - Women's Equality and Empowerment through Curriculum: A Handbook for Teachers at Primary Stage, 1996 and Women's Equality and Empowerment through Curriculum: A Handbook for Teachers at Upper Primary Stage, 1997. In addition, several biographies highlighting the contribution of women in the past and the present in different fields were published, during this period for sensitizing textbook authors, teacher educators and teachers. These specifically addressed issues of gender bias and stereotyping.

However, a landmark policy initiative for making the curriculum embodying principles of gender equality and equity was the enactment of the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, and Programme of Action (POA) 1992. NPE emphasized on the removal of all types of disparities and discrimination. Further, it focused on attending to the specific needs of those who had been denied equality. The NPE states that -Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well-conceived edge in favor of women. The National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision makers, administrators and the active involvement of educational institutions! (excerpts from National Policy on Education -1986, p.g.6).

The Programme of Action (POA) 1992, outlined action which needed to be taken to promote education for women's equality and empowerment. It specifically stated that the Department of Women's Studies, NCERT would intensify activities already initiated in the area of developing gender sensitive curriculum, removing sex bias from textbooks and training of trainers/teachers of SCERT and concerned State Level Boards and institutions to undertake similar work.

The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001, stated the importance of making the textbook gender sensitive and free of biases and stereotypes. The policy mentioned that gender sensitive curricula would address one of the causes of gender discrimination i.e., sex stereotypes.

**4 An Evening with Saikat's Family**

**A Look at the pictures and say what each person is doing.**

**A1 Read the following passage.**

Saikat lives with his parents in an apartment in Bogra. His father, Mr. Islam, is a banker. In his free time, Mr. Islam writes stories. He loves listening to music of old times, too. Saikat's mother, Maleka Begum is a housewife. She loves sewing in her free time. She makes dresses. She often gets orders from her friends and neighbours. Saikat reads in class five. He is a good student. He wants to improve his English. So he watches cartoons on TV and reads English story books everyday.

Gender concerns in education have also been reflected in curriculum frameworks developed by apex national organization like National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). In this regard curriculum frameworks of 1975, 1988, 2000 and 2005 have made specific efforts to

Justice Verma committee recommendation also mentions that gender equality needs to be integrated in the curriculum at all levels of school education and gender modules need to be developed for percolating issues of equity and equality in a sustained manner.

Despite the stated commitments to gender equality and Universalization of Education for All at the elementary level, the ground realities portray that gender discrimination and disparities which continue to exist in our society, get transmitted in the schooling processes. Gender discrimination begins from the household, gets reinforced in the schooling ethos and percolates in the society. Researches in the context of Classroom processes and outdoor Class activities have highlighted that gender biases and stereotypes get transmitted consciously and unconsciously by teacher educators and teachers, indelibly impacting the formative years of children. School textbooks and other related materials as well as a curriculum and the processes of its transaction, imbued with the principles of gender harmony and inclusiveness in all spheres are thus pertinent needs.

In the Indian context, field experiences have portrayed that the most popular repository of knowledge is the textbook that is largely accessed by children from multiple contexts. Therefore, there is a need to make textual material at different stages of school education, gender inclusive along with establishing linkages with the lived realities of learners and their experiences. The construction of knowledge in different disciplines, whilst instilling interest, creativity and imagination in children, should attempt to demystify notions of femininity and masculinity by suggestive activities that can jointly be done by all. The content, visuals and exercises should project gender inclusiveness in all spheres to promote human values of caring and sharing, mutual tolerance, respect for diversity, love and care for animals and preservation and conservation of environment, etc.

Textbook writers need to consciously address gender concerns so that the knowledge domain constructed in different disciplines reflects gender justice, equity and equality as mentioned in the Constitution of India. The National Focus Group Paper on Gender Issues in Education (2006) mentions that although the analysis of textbooks in the past have shown gender biases in the textual content and visuals, the initiatives undertaken by concerned individuals and organizations were marked by their limited understanding of gender, equity and equality. Analysis of textbooks undertaken by the Department of Women's Studies, NCERT, pertaining to different subject domains, too, had focused on quantitative aspects rather than qualitative by looking into the frequency of representation of women in content, visuals and illustrations. The term equality had been dealt with in a narrow sense and authors had attempted to highlight equality by merely increasing visual representation of girls and women in different disciplines, or by facilitating role reversals to depict equality among the sexes. Textbook authors also tried to incorporate concerns for girls and women by tokenistic representation of them in biographies. Achievements made by women were trivialized and their contributions were marginalized. The manner in which women role models belonging to different periods were stated reflected the myopic vision of THE authors. Trials and tribulation faced by women in their journey of achievement were hardly reflected. Sometimes, when the content focused on women achievers, their work in different areas was always

reflected in a relational manner i.e. *\_wife of\_*, *\_sister of\_*, *\_mother of\_* and *\_daughter of\_*. There was always an inherent comparison with the male counterpart. Women involved in combat were often treated as possessing masculine traits, for example Rani Lakshmbai and her courage in encountering British forces were valorized and she was referred in books as *'KhoobLadiMardaniWohTo Jhansi Wali Rani Thi'* (The queen of Jhansi, Rani Lakshmbai fought like a male). Narratives also depict women's contributions as collateral in different themes, for example, Rani Lakshmbai's contributions and Madam Curie's work were linked with their domestic roles. Their success, according to some authors writing about them, was because they did not neglect their household chores.

Studies by Kalia (1978), Kabira and Masinjila (1997), Nayar and Jaireth, Nayar and Srivastava, Nayar and Rani, Nayar and Devendra, (1997-98 & 2000), Bhog, Dipta *et. al.*, (2009) and Mehrotra and Ramachandran (2010), have shown that textbooks have, by and large, served to maintain the status quo in the larger socio-cultural context. To make textbooks gender inclusive there is a need to emphasize equality between sexes and bridge the gap between policy rhetoric and experiential reality. Construction of knowledge in different disciplines should reflect the contributions made by both sexes since historical times. Further, content and visuals in textual materials depicting women as having an equal opportunity to lead productive and self-fulfilling lives in their societies would help to recognize the status of women as individuals in their own right.

The language, illustrations and content of the textbooks should be able to introduce a change in existing value systems in the society, to improve the status of girls and women. The selection of themes of the textbook should ensure the spirit of co-operation, not confrontation between sexes, promotion of self-esteem and self- confidence, learning to live together, valuing the contributions of women as equal participants in all development initiatives and not only as beneficiaries. All the narratives related to different school subjects should reflect girls and women as active contributors to development in all spheres and not as passive recipients.

It is also important to understand the ideologies underlying the presentation of gender in textual materials to know how issues of inclusion and exclusion are mentioned and handled.

Textbook analysis from a gender perspective has been undertaken by the Department of Women's Studies since its inception. In the 80s and 90s, the Department included textbook evaluation in several training programmes wherein participants of the programme analyzed state textbooks. Also, evaluation studies were taken up to examine NCERT's primary and upper primary textbooks from the view point of gender bias and stereotypes. In 2011-12, the Department of Women's Studies undertook the analysis of NCERT, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh textbooks in the domain of Social Science, Science and Mathematics at the elementary stage of Classes VI to VIII. The present initiative of analysis of NCERT textbooks at the primary level of Classes I to V is continuation of the previous effort.

NCERT textbooks analyzed at the primary stage of Classes I to V have been based on the National Curriculum Framework (NCF)-2005 that emphasizes the values of equity, equality and social justice enshrined in our Constitution. It emphasizes, among other things, systemic changes as markers of curricula

reform. It recognizes the primacy of each child's experiences, her and his voices and the active involvement of all in the process of learning. Curricular transactions seek hands-on experiences and project based approaches. Concerns and issues pertaining to environment, peace oriented values, gender, SC & ST and minorities must inform various subjects and school experiences. The document reiterates that we need to reaffirm our commitments to the concept of equality, within the landscape of cultural and socio-economic diversity from which children enter into the portal of the school.

Textbooks of NCERT at the Primary Level have been examined from gender perspective. Textbooks of Environmental Studies, Maths, English and Hindi have been analyzed from the viewpoint of gender bias and stereotypes with the help of an evaluation tool developed by the Department of Women's Studies. In all, eighteen textbooks have been analyzed. NCERT faculty members drawn from different NIE Departments have undertaken this analysis work. Department of Elementary Education (DEE), Department of Languages (DOL), Department of Education in Science and Mathematics (DESM), Central Institute of Education Technology (CIET) and colleagues from Department of Women's Studies (DWS) were involved in this activity.

The NCERT textbooks at the primary stage of Classes I to V are mostly gender inclusive. The content and the visuals in all textbooks depict a joyful learning experience. Visuals and themes in the textbooks can be broadly classified as gender inclusive, gender neutral and those that are specifically related to different characters drawn from established Classics in English language and literature, historical events and from contemporary times.

The themes in all the textbooks encourage creativity, imagination and attempt to engage children in activities related to Mathematics, Languages and Environmental Studies. All the authors have tried to link the themes with the lived reality of the learner. Human values related to learning to live together, respecting diversities and differences, sharing and caring, valuing women's work, preservation and conservation of environment, religious tolerance and developing a critical perspective are all woven in the content portrayal and visual depiction.

Inspirational stories of women role models are specially mentioned in Environmental Studies Textbooks and few are also stated in language textbooks. A significant aspect of some of the textbooks is the questioning of customary practices such as child marriage, showing men/boys as emotional and boys/men sharing household chores, and in child rearing and caring practices. The visuals in nearly all the textbooks focus on continuity and change in terms of dresses, new and emerging roles of men and women and briefly also on use of communication technology. Culture and festivals as well as local games have also been referred to in the books related to Mathematics, Environmental Studies and Languages.

The Teacher's Pages attempt to develop inclusive environment in the Classroom by suggesting group work, project work, discussion and learning together while all the textbooks have attempted to highlight gender concerns there are elements of stereotypes in some textbooks. Men are shown mainly in a variety of professions whereas women are mainly shown as homemakers, teachers, nurses and doctors. In the English textbooks a large number of characters are men/boys. Animals in the different themes of the textbooks are gendered. The language used promotes stereotypical qualities of femininity and masculinity. Men and Women are shown in relational category in all textbooks.

In rectifying gender bias in our text books, a step to achieving a society that would enable not just women but men as well is required, because if the constraint of the stereotype limits and waste of women's potential for growth and development, men also do not escape its taint. Gender relations are a social construct, and the ways that women and men perceive each other are filtered through socially constructed lenses. Human potential, the gifts or talents that each individual, male or female, is born with, are not given on the basis of sex difference. If these God-given gifts are to be realized, we need to grow out of the shackles of these gender-based stereotypes.

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