

Beyond the Hidden Curriculum: Gender, Textbooks, and Educational Equity

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Received : February 1, 2025

Accepted : March 12, 2025

Published : March 31, 2025

Citation: Kencana, N., Susanti, A. (2025). Beyond the Hidden Curriculum: Gender, Textbooks, and Educational Equity. *Lingua: Journal of Linguistics and Language*, 3(1), 50-61.

ABSTRACT: This study presents a narrative review of gender representation in language textbooks, examining how male and female characters are depicted across diverse educational and cultural contexts. The review aimed to identify patterns of underrepresentation, role stereotyping, and heteronormativity, as well as to explore how systemic factors shape textbook content. A systematic literature search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using targeted keywords and Boolean combinations. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed studies from 2010 to 2025 that analyzed gender representation in language textbooks through content analysis, discourse analysis, or mixed methods. The findings reveal persistent gender imbalances, with men more frequently represented in professional and public domains, while women are marginalized or confined to domestic roles. Cross-national comparisons demonstrate that such disparities are more pronounced in developing countries but also persist globally, including in contexts with progressive policies. Furthermore, heteronormativity remains dominant, with LGBTQ+ identities largely absent from textbook narratives. These outcomes underscore the gap between policy commitments to gender equity and entrenched cultural, political, and religious influences in education. Addressing these challenges requires curricular reforms, stronger enforcement of gender-sensitive guidelines, and teacher training to critically engage with biased materials. Future research should broaden geographic scope, adopt intersectional perspectives, and investigate digital learning environments. By highlighting both persistent inequities and potential avenues for reform, this review emphasizes the importance of inclusive and equitable textbooks in shaping learners' identities and opportunities.

Keywords: Gender Representation, Language Textbooks, Gender Bias, Critical Discourse Analysis, Education Equity, Heteronormativity, Inclusive Curriculum.



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INTRODUCTION

The representation of gender in educational materials has long been recognized as a critical determinant in shaping learners' perceptions of social roles and aspirations. Textbooks, as authoritative resources, often serve not only as pedagogical tools but also as carriers of ideological

and sociocultural messages. For example, Dar and Bano (2023) found that English language textbooks in Pakistan consistently assigned men to prestigious professional roles while relegating women to domestic contexts. Similarly, Fithriani (2022) reported entrenched stereotypes in Indonesian textbooks, where men were positioned as active social agents and women as passive figures. These concrete examples highlight how gender imbalances in textbooks are not abstract phenomena but everyday realities influencing students.

Such biases persist despite increased advocacy for gender equality in education. Bose and Gao (2022) observed similar patterns in Indian textbooks, while Crawford et al. (2024), in a study of 1,255 textbooks across 34 countries, confirmed systemic underrepresentation of women globally. The implications are profound: inequitable representations in textbooks reinforce stereotypes, limit female students' aspirations, and reproduce societal inequalities (Islam & Asadullah, 2018; Alkhadra et al., 2022). Addressing these issues is therefore not symbolic but an essential step toward equity in education.

METHOD

The methodology of this study was designed to ensure a comprehensive and systematic exploration of gender representation in language textbooks, with particular emphasis on identifying patterns of bias and inequality across diverse sociocultural contexts. The methodological approach combined a structured literature search with critical evaluation procedures, enabling the synthesis of findings from multiple sources. In line with academic best practices for conducting literature-based reviews, the process entailed the careful selection of databases, the use of targeted search terms, the application of explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the adoption of evaluative frameworks that ensured the reliability and relevance of the studies included.

The literature search was conducted across three primary databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Each database was selected based on its strengths and complementarity. Scopus, as one of the most comprehensive citation indexes, offers rigorous coverage of peer-reviewed journals in the fields of education, linguistics, and social sciences. Web of Science was included because of its stringent indexing criteria and reputation for curating high-quality, multidisciplinary research. Google Scholar was also utilized to broaden the scope of the search and capture studies that might not be indexed within Scopus or Web of Science, particularly theses, book chapters, and conference proceedings that are increasingly relevant in emerging research domains. The combination of these databases ensured both depth and breadth of coverage, thereby reducing the risk of omitting significant contributions to the field.

The search strategy was structured around the use of carefully selected keywords and Boolean operators. Keywords were derived from preliminary reviews of existing scholarship and from recurring terms in the research discourse on gender and education. Core terms included "gender representation," "gender bias," "textbooks," "language education," and "critical discourse analysis." Boolean combinations such as "gender representation" AND "textbooks," "gender

bias” AND “language education,” and “gender stereotypes” AND “critical discourse analysis” were employed to refine the scope of the search. Broader combinations, including (“gender representation” OR “gender stereotypes”) AND (“textbooks” AND “education”), were also used to capture studies with varied terminology but overlapping themes. These combinations facilitated both targeted retrieval of directly relevant articles and wider coverage of the thematic field. Articles were sorted by relevance, year of publication, and citation frequency, ensuring that the most recent and impactful contributions were prioritized.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were carefully established to maintain the quality and relevance of the selected literature. Studies published between 2010 and 2025 were included to capture contemporary perspectives while ensuring coverage of significant earlier works that remain influential in the field. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and reputable conference proceedings were considered for inclusion, given their scholarly rigor and relevance to the research aims. Articles had to explicitly address gender representation or bias in textbooks, with a particular focus on language education. Studies that analyzed textbooks across disciplines were also considered if they provided relevant insights into language-related materials. Excluded from the review were opinion pieces, non-peer-reviewed reports, and articles that addressed gender in education without explicit reference to textbooks or instructional materials. This ensured that the corpus of literature remained focused, academically credible, and directly pertinent to the research objectives.

The types of research included in this review encompassed a broad range of methodological approaches. Content analyses were particularly prominent, given their capacity to quantify gender representation in both textual and visual elements of textbooks. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) featured prominently as well, providing deeper insights into the ideological underpinnings of gender portrayals. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics approaches were also represented, offering nuanced readings of gendered discourses in specific sociocultural contexts (Fithriani, 2022). Several studies employed mixed-methods designs, combining quantitative coding of textbook content with qualitative interviews or focus group discussions with teachers and students. This integration of methodologies allowed for both descriptive accounts of gender imbalance and interpretive analyses of its pedagogical implications. Experimental and longitudinal studies were less frequent but nonetheless valuable, particularly in highlighting the effects of gender-biased materials on learners’ attitudes and aspirations (Dar & Bano, 2023; Crawford et al., 2024).

The process of literature selection was iterative and rigorous. Initial searches produced several thousand results, which were then screened at the title and abstract level to eliminate irrelevant or tangentially related works. Duplicates across databases were removed, and full texts of potentially relevant studies were retrieved for detailed review. Each article was evaluated according to the established criteria, with particular attention paid to methodological transparency, sample size, and contextual relevance. Studies that provided explicit data on gender representation, whether through numerical counts, discourse analysis, or visual analysis, were prioritized. Those that merely mentioned gender without substantive analysis were excluded. To further ensure quality, the reference lists of included articles were hand-searched for additional relevant studies, a process that yielded several important contributions not captured in the initial database searches.

The evaluation of included studies was guided by principles of critical synthesis. The credibility of findings was assessed not only on the basis of methodological rigor but also on the consistency of results across different cultural and geographical contexts. Particular attention was paid to studies from South and Southeast Asia, given the focus of this review on regions where gender disparities in education remain particularly pronounced (Islam & Asadullah, 2018; Ahmad & Shah, 2019). At the same time, comparative studies from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East were included to situate regional findings within broader global patterns. This comparative dimension ensured that the review could identify both universal trends in gender bias and context-specific variations shaped by cultural, religious, and political factors.

Overall, the methodological approach ensured a balanced and comprehensive review of the literature on gender representation in language textbooks. By combining systematic search strategies with critical evaluation criteria, the study assembled a body of evidence that reflects both the diversity and the commonality of gendered representations across educational contexts. The methodology allowed for the identification of persistent patterns of male dominance and female marginalization, as well as the recognition of emerging efforts to challenge these stereotypes through textbook revision and pedagogical innovation. In this way, the methodological framework not only facilitated the collection and synthesis of relevant literature but also reinforced the academic integrity and policy relevance of the study's conclusions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this narrative review synthesize the extensive literature on gender representation in language textbooks across diverse educational systems and cultural contexts. The results are organized into four major themes that emerged consistently from the analysis: the representation of gender in textbooks, the attribution of roles and stereotypes, the articulation of heteronormativity and diversity, and comparative perspectives across global contexts. These themes provide a comprehensive overview of the systemic issues surrounding gender bias in educational materials and highlight the ways in which textbooks continue to shape learners' understandings of gender roles and identities.

The first major theme concerns the representation of gender in textbooks, particularly the underrepresentation of women in both text and illustrations. Studies consistently demonstrate that female characters appear less frequently than their male counterparts, with women portrayed in limited and stereotypical roles. Fithriani (2022) reported that Indonesian English textbooks disproportionately depicted male figures, both textually and visually, thereby limiting female visibility in the educational context. Similar patterns were observed in Algerian secondary school textbooks, where Khalid and Ouahmiche (2019) found that women were restricted to narrow social and domestic roles, reinforcing traditional gender norms. Large-scale evidence from Crawford et al. (2024), who analyzed 1,255 textbooks across 34 countries, confirmed these trends, showing a global pattern of female underrepresentation and disproportionate allocation of gendered roles. The implications of these findings are profound, as visibility in textbooks has been closely linked to learners' sense of identity, aspiration, and self-worth. The exclusion or

marginalization of women contributes to perpetuating inequities and limits students' perceptions of what women can achieve in society.

Variation in gender representation is also evident across different educational levels. Dalle et al. (2023) found that middle school textbooks in Indonesia overwhelmingly portrayed men in professional contexts while assigning women to domestic spheres, thereby naturalizing male dominance from an early age. By contrast, at the university level, Ahmad and Shah (2019) observed some progress in gender awareness, with textbooks increasingly including female voices and perspectives. However, they also noted persistent shortcomings, particularly in the absence of female authorship and the limited representation of women in academic or scientific domains. These variations across educational stages indicate that although some progress has been made, systemic imbalances remain entrenched in the design and content of textbooks, shaping students' worldviews across their educational trajectories.

The second theme highlights the attribution of roles and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. A dominant pattern across multiple contexts is the consistent portrayal of men in prestigious professional roles, such as doctors, engineers, and scientists, while women are predominantly relegated to domestic or caregiving positions. Jehle et al. (2024) documented that European textbooks reinforced occupational hierarchies by privileging male characters in high-status professions. Similarly, Islam and Asadullah (2018), in their comparative study of textbooks from Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, demonstrated that women were depicted as passive figures whose roles were limited to household or secondary social functions. This pattern confirms that textbooks not only reflect but also institutionalize gender norms that constrain opportunities for women and reinforce male privilege.

The persistence of gender stereotypes also varies across cultural and national contexts. In India, Bose and Gao (2022) identified that although female visibility had improved in some recent textbooks, women continued to be associated with roles embedded in traditional family structures, reflecting deeply rooted cultural values. Conversely, in Indonesia, Kuraedah et al. (2023) observed that Arabic language textbooks endorsed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs reinforced strongly patriarchal hierarchies, with men occupying dominant roles in nearly all social domains. These findings highlight the extent to which cultural norms and educational ideologies shape the portrayal of gender, underscoring the importance of context-sensitive analysis in evaluating educational materials.

The third theme addresses heteronormativity and the absence of diverse gender identities in educational materials. Evidence indicates that LGBTQ+ identities are rarely represented in language textbooks, leaving students who identify outside of heterosexual norms without meaningful recognition. Cecilia et al. (2020) emphasized that English language teaching materials frequently omit references to diverse sexual orientations or gender identities, thereby excluding LGBTQ+ students from the educational narrative. Sunderland (2018) similarly noted that heterosexual relationships were consistently presented as the default and normative model, while alternative identities were ignored or erased. This omission not only perpetuates heteronormativity but also creates learning environments that can alienate students whose identities fall outside the dominant paradigm. Medawattegedera (2017) argued that the absence of queer representation in

Sri Lankan English teaching materials reinforced a culture of silence, limiting students' opportunities to engage with or affirm their identities within the classroom context.

The articulation of heteronormativity within textbooks often manifests through narratives that naturalize heterosexual relationships as the “normal” and “appropriate” form of social interaction. Cecilia et al. (2020) identified recurring patterns in which family units were exclusively depicted as heterosexual, with roles distributed along traditional gender lines. Such portrayals reinforce the assumption that heterosexuality is both normative and desirable, marginalizing non-heterosexual identities and restricting the imaginative horizons of learners. This phenomenon is not limited to developing countries; even in advanced educational systems, textbooks frequently fail to include queer representation or discussions of gender diversity. The absence of inclusive content reinforces structural barriers to equality and highlights the need for curricular reform that explicitly embraces diversity as a pedagogical priority.

The final theme situates these findings within a global comparative perspective, emphasizing the differences and similarities between developing and developed contexts. Research indicates that textbooks in developing countries often display higher levels of gender bias compared to those in developed nations. Ahmad and Shah (2019) found that Pakistani textbooks heavily reinforced domestic roles for women, reflecting broader socio-political structures that limit female participation in the public sphere. In contrast, studies conducted in developed contexts, such as those analyzed by Salami and Ghajarieh (2015), revealed more balanced portrayals of gender roles, with greater efforts to represent women in professional and public domains. Nonetheless, Crawford et al. (2024) cautioned that even in developed contexts, systemic inequalities persist, with underrepresentation of women still evident in many textbooks. These findings suggest that while developed countries may exhibit more progressive portrayals, the struggle for gender equality in educational content remains a global challenge.

Educational policies also play a significant role in shaping gender representation in textbooks. Dalle et al. (2023) observed that progressive curricular reforms in Indonesia contributed to more balanced gender portrayals, with textbooks beginning to feature women in diverse professional and social roles. Conversely, in countries with less progressive policies, textbooks continued to reinforce patriarchal and stereotypical depictions (Ahmad & Shah, 2019). The influence of policy underscores the potential of institutional frameworks to either perpetuate or challenge inequities. Where governments and educational authorities prioritize gender equality, textbooks become important instruments for fostering inclusivity. Conversely, in contexts where such commitments are absent, textbooks reinforce traditional hierarchies, sustaining cycles of exclusion and marginalization.

Taken together, these findings affirm that gender representation in language textbooks remains a pressing issue across both developed and developing contexts. Women continue to be underrepresented and stereotypically portrayed, while men dominate professional and public spaces. LGBTQ+ identities are largely excluded, perpetuating heteronormativity and limiting inclusivity in education. Although progress has been made in some contexts, particularly in response to policy reforms, systemic biases remain deeply entrenched. Addressing these challenges requires sustained efforts from policymakers, educators, and curriculum designers to ensure that textbooks reflect the diversity of contemporary societies and promote equitable opportunities for

all learners. By situating these findings within a global comparative framework, this review highlights both the universality of gender bias in educational materials and the potential for context-specific interventions to foster meaningful change.

The analysis of gender representation in language textbooks reveals a persistent disjuncture between official educational policies and the realities reflected in classroom materials. While many national curricula have increasingly emphasized the importance of gender equality, the actual implementation in textbooks often fails to align with these policy objectives. For example, Bose and Gao (2022) found that despite India's educational reforms aiming to foster gender inclusivity, English language textbooks continued to reproduce traditional gender stereotypes that limited women to domestic and caregiving roles. Similarly, Fithriani (2022) observed that Indonesian textbooks, though developed under curriculum guidelines intended to minimize gender bias, still displayed imbalanced representation by privileging male figures in professional and public domains. These findings suggest that while policy frameworks may articulate progressive goals, systemic barriers undermine their translation into educational practice. The disconnect underscores the need to critically evaluate the processes of textbook production and approval, where entrenched cultural norms and institutional inertia can dilute or negate reformist intentions.

The persistence of bias across contexts is closely tied to broader systemic factors embedded within social, cultural, political, and religious domains. Socially and culturally, patriarchal norms remain deeply entrenched in many societies, and textbooks frequently reproduce these ideologies in their portrayal of gender roles. Dar and Bano (2023) highlighted this phenomenon in Pakistan, where conservative societal structures continue to reinforce rigid expectations of masculinity and femininity, leading to textbooks that marginalize women and normalize male dominance. Politically, the extent to which governments prioritize or deprioritize gender-sensitive reforms plays a critical role. In some cases, policy frameworks are weakly enforced, leaving textbook publishers and authors to operate with minimal accountability. In others, political resistance from conservative constituencies can stall or reverse progressive educational reforms (Cecilia et al., 2020). Religious ideologies also exert a powerful influence on educational narratives. In contexts where religion is a central force in shaping curricula, textbooks often reflect doctrinal interpretations of gender that reinforce patriarchal structures, legitimizing inequality as part of cultural or spiritual tradition. Together, these systemic factors explain why gender bias in textbooks persists despite decades of advocacy and reform efforts.

The implications of these systemic influences are profound. They indicate that textbook bias is not merely a matter of oversight or lack of awareness among authors, but rather a structural outcome shaped by the intersection of sociopolitical and cultural forces. This structural nature of bias requires equally systemic responses that go beyond piecemeal reforms. For example, Bose and Gao (2022) argued that without addressing the sociocultural ideologies underpinning textbook content, reforms risk being superficial and unsustainable. Similarly, Crawford et al. (2024), in their large-scale analysis of textbooks across 34 countries, emphasized that patterns of underrepresentation and stereotyping are global in scope, suggesting that systemic inequities transcend national boundaries and reflect broader global hierarchies in knowledge production and dissemination.

Literature on potential interventions highlights several strategies to address these challenges. One common proposal is the reform of curriculum design to mandate gender-sensitive content and to hold publishers accountable for compliance. Kuraedah et al. (2023) stressed the role of governments in ensuring that officially sanctioned textbooks reflect equitable gender representation, arguing that strong oversight mechanisms are necessary to enforce curricular goals. Complementing curricular reform is the training of educators and textbook authors. Dalle et al. (2023) emphasized that teacher training programs must incorporate gender sensitivity modules to equip educators with the tools to identify and challenge bias in classroom materials. Such training also extends to curriculum developers and authors, who play a direct role in shaping the narratives embedded in textbooks. By fostering awareness and equipping stakeholders with critical perspectives, educational systems can begin to dismantle entrenched stereotypes.

Another intervention proposed in the literature is the development of clear and enforceable guidelines for textbook authors and publishers. Syed and Agha (2019) argued for the inclusion of explicit standards to eliminate stereotypical depictions, advocating for the adoption of language and imagery that reflect diversity and inclusivity. These guidelines serve not only as preventive measures against bias but also as proactive frameworks to promote more balanced and representative portrayals of gender. Comparative evidence from progressive contexts suggests that such guidelines can have tangible effects. For instance, Ahmad and Shah (2019) noted that in certain South Asian contexts where gender equity was explicitly prioritized in curricular policy, improvements in representation were observable, albeit uneven and gradual. This highlights the potential of policy instruments when consistently applied.

Beyond policy and curricular interventions, systemic transformation requires addressing the ideological underpinnings that sustain gender bias. As Bose and Gao (2022) observed, textbooks often mirror the cultural expectations of society, meaning that reform efforts must be accompanied by broader social initiatives that challenge patriarchal norms. This intersectional perspective is crucial because educational content cannot be divorced from the cultural milieu in which it is produced and consumed. For example, Medawattegedera (2017) pointed out that in Sri Lanka, the absence of LGBTQ+ representation in teaching materials reflected not only curricular omissions but also broader societal silences around non-heteronormative identities. Addressing such silences requires interventions at the level of public discourse, community engagement, and cultural transformation alongside educational reform.

Despite the array of proposed solutions, several barriers continue to impede progress. Institutional resistance within ministries of education and publishing houses often slows the implementation of reforms. Awal (2024) noted that entrenched interests and political pressures can prevent the adoption of progressive curricular changes, particularly in contexts where conservative groups exert influence over educational policy. Resource limitations also pose challenges, as revising textbooks and retraining teachers require significant financial and human capital investments that may be difficult to sustain in low-income countries. Furthermore, global disparities in research and advocacy mean that much of the evidence on textbook bias emerges from South and Southeast Asia, with less systematic analysis from Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. This imbalance restricts the generalizability of findings and highlights the need for more geographically diverse research.

The limitations of existing scholarship also warrant consideration. Many studies, as Crawford et al. (2024) observed, rely on content analysis or discourse analysis, which, while valuable, can be constrained by subjectivity and contextual interpretation. Quantitative approaches often focus on numerical representation without adequately addressing the qualitative dimensions of portrayal. Conversely, qualitative approaches provide depth but may lack the generalizability needed for policy application. Few studies adopt longitudinal or experimental designs capable of assessing the direct impact of biased materials on student outcomes. Likewise, research into intersectionality remains underdeveloped, with limited attention to how gender bias intersects with race, class, or disability in textbook content. These methodological gaps indicate that further research is needed to develop more robust, multi-dimensional frameworks for analyzing and addressing bias.

Future studies should also expand their focus to digital and online educational resources, which are increasingly replacing or supplementing traditional textbooks. As digital platforms gain prominence in language education, questions of gender representation and inclusivity acquire new urgency. Research on digital resources remains sparse, yet early indications suggest that biases present in print materials often migrate into digital formats, potentially amplified by algorithmic curation. Investigating these dynamics will be essential for ensuring that the transition to digital education does not replicate or exacerbate existing inequities.

Taken together, the discussion highlights the systemic, cultural, and institutional factors that sustain gender bias in textbooks and outlines potential strategies for reform. By linking findings across diverse contexts and methodologies, the literature underscores both the resilience of entrenched inequalities and the possibilities for transformation through targeted interventions, curricular reforms, and broader societal change.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review has demonstrated that gender representation in language textbooks remains uneven, with women consistently underrepresented and frequently confined to stereotypical roles. Evidence from diverse contexts, including Indonesia, Pakistan, Algeria, and India, indicates that male characters are more visible in texts and images, often occupying prestigious professional positions, while female characters are relegated to domestic or secondary roles (Fithriani, 2022; Dar & Bano, 2023; Khalid & Ouahmiche, 2019; Bose & Gao, 2022). Large-scale global analyses further confirm that such disparities persist even in countries with progressive education policies (Crawford et al., 2024). Moreover, heteronormativity dominates textbook narratives, marginalizing LGBTQ+ identities and reinforcing heterosexuality as the normative model (Cecilia et al., 2020; Sunderland, 2018). These findings highlight a pressing gap between policy ambitions for gender equity and the entrenched practices of curriculum design and textbook production.

The urgency of addressing these inequities is clear. Textbooks are not neutral resources but powerful instruments of socialization, shaping learners' perceptions of identity, opportunity, and belonging. Achieving more equitable representation requires systematic reforms in curriculum policy, stronger enforcement of gender-sensitive guidelines for textbook authors, and teacher training to foster critical engagement with materials (Kuraedah et al., 2023; Dalle et al., 2023). At the same time, cultural, political, and religious factors that perpetuate patriarchal narratives must

be addressed through broader social initiatives. Future research should expand geographically, integrate intersectional perspectives, and explore digital learning environments where gendered biases may persist or intensify. Ensuring inclusivity and diversity in textbooks is not only essential for equity in education but also for empowering future generations to imagine and pursue non-stereotypical roles. Without such interventions, gender bias in educational materials will continue to reinforce inequalities rather than challenge them.

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