Gender stereotypes and bias in english language school textbooks: Reflection from literature review across different countries

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article information	Abstract
	Textbooks significantly influence student learning, shaping values, beliefs, and cultural perspectives. They convey gender roles, social norms, and biases, making it crucial to create gender-neutral materials. This requires a thorough review of existing textbooks to ensure they are free from gender bias. The purpose of this study is to examine five specific aspects of selected previous research: gender representation in language and terminology, visual representation, representation of professional roles, occupations and jobs, leisure activities and play, as well as cultural and regional differences in gender portrayal in textbooks. A comprehensive strategy was employed to search and identify research papers from Web of Science, Scopus, Springer Link, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and ERIC. The selected papers span from 2007 to 2024. From 358 results, 68 publications representing 45 selected papers were analyzed and discussed, investigating stereotypes and gender bias in English textbooks at the school level. The findings reveal that illustrations are dominated by male figures, often in active leadership roles, while females are underrepresented or shown in passive roles. Boys are depicted in adventurous activities, whereas girls are portrayed in domestic settings, with textbooks consistently minimizing women's achievements across various cultures and regions. This study contributes to the understanding of gender bias in textbooks, highlights the unequal representation of male and female roles, and provides a foundation for developing more inclusive and equitable educational policies in shaping children's social perceptions from an early age.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender stereotypes and biases in English language school textbooks are a significant issue as they perpetuate harmful assumptions and restrict students' opportunities and aspirations. Pavlenko (2004), Barton & Sakwa (2012), Mukundan & Nimehchisalem (2008), and Barton & Lee (2005) emphasize that teaching materials often display patterns of bias that shape how students perceive themselves. Furthermore, Zhou et al. (2021), Ullah, Ali, & Naz (2014), and Halimatussakdiah et al. (2021) show that such biases reinforce rigid traditional gender roles. As highlighted by Ali & Hussain (2019), Amini & Birjandi (2012), Blumberg (2008), Sunderland (2000), Sadker & Zittleman (2009), and Ullah & Skelton (2013), this situation can influence students' self-perception and career choices. In addition, Gharbavi & Mousavi (2012), Barton & Sakwa (2012), Sleeter & Grant (2017), Lee & Collins (2008), and Nousiainen et al. (2020) find that stereotypes are reflected in the content, illustrations, and language of textbooks, often marginalizing female students and affecting their academic performance and self-esteem. Moreover, Pimentel (2010), Taylor (2003), Mukundan & Nimehchisalem (2008), Ahmad & Shah (2019), and Khurshid (2015) criticize the lack of representation of diverse gender identities, which creates a narrow perspective of gender that excludes non-binary and transgender individuals. To address these issues, Lalor (2017), Dominguez (2003), Paechter (2000), Brugeilles & Cromer (2009), and Kobia (2009) stress the importance of comprehensive review and reform of educational materials to better promote gender equality and inclusivity.

Recent studies by Saleem & Zubair (2013) and Arslan et al., (2019) highlight that gender stereotypes and biases remain strongly embedded in English language school textbooks. According to their findings, these biases reflect traditional gender roles and contribute to the reinforcement of gender inequality. Lee & Collins (2008), Yang (2011), Hellinger (1980), Brugeilles & Cromer (2009), Mikulecky (2011), Ariyanto (2018), and Sever (2004) similarly argue that despite ongoing efforts to promote gender equality in education, such biases continue to appear and shape students' perceptions of gender roles and expectations. Furthermore, Cunningsworth (1995), Hartman & Judd (1978), Poulou (1997), Renner (1997), and Shnookal (2001) found that male characters are often depicted in more active and diverse roles, whereas female characters tend to be portrayed in passive, domestic, and subordinate positions, thereby limiting women's representation in professional and leadership fields. In addition, Ansary & Babaii (2003), Barton & Sakwa (2012), Bahman & Rahimi (2010), Ghorbani (2009), and Rifkin (1998) emphasize that the linguistic features used in textbooks, such as pronouns and occupational terms, often privilege males, reinforcing notions of male superiority and female inferiority.

The existing literature reveals that many studies have examined gender stereotypes in English language textbooks, focusing mainly on unequal representation between male and female characters. However, most prior research has been limited to specific countries or regions, providing fragmented insights rather than a comprehensive global perspective. Furthermore, these studies have primarily highlighted the dominance of male characters in active roles and the marginalization of females in domestic roles, while less attention has been paid to the broader implications of such portrayals on students' perceptions, career aspirations, and self-esteem. Another gap lies in the lack of exploration of how textbooks neglect non-binary and transgender identities, which narrows the understanding of gender diversity. This study addresses these gaps by conducting a cross-country literature review and offering recommendations for inclusive, gender-sensitive educational policies and materials.

The purpose of this study is to analyze and identify gender stereotypes and biases in English school textbooks, as well as their impact on students' perceptions and attitudes toward gender roles. It seeks to evaluate how unequal gender representations in educational materials reinforce inequality and influence students' career aspirations and self-esteem. Additionally, the study aims

to examine the ways text books construct narrow views of gender by excluding non-binary and transgender identities. The findings of this research are expected to yield important benefits. Academically, it contributes to the body of knowledge on gender representation by providing a broader and more critical analysis across diverse contexts. Practically, it raises awareness among educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers regarding the persistence of stereotypes and their negative consequences. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of inclusivity, offering recommendations for reforming textbooks and creating equitable, gender-sensitive materials that support inclusive learning environments and global education policies promoting gender justice.

The presence of gender stereotypes and biases in school English textbooks significantly affects students' perceptions of gender roles, which can reinforce gender inequality and limit their career aspirations. Textbooks that contain biased gender representations, such as the selection of active roles for male characters and passive roles for female characters, have the potential to shape students' views of rigid and traditional gender roles. This can result in female students' lack of confidence in taking on leadership roles or pursuing careers in male-dominated fields. In addition, the underrepresentation of non-binary and transgender gender identities in textbooks can also hinder the development of gender inclusivity awareness among students. It is hoped that by identifying and examining these biases, solutions can be found to create textbooks that are more inclusive and promote gender equality.

METHODS

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to analyze gender stereotypes and biases in school mathematics textbooks. According to Moher et al. (2009), the SLR method provides a comprehensive, transparent, and reproducible analysis of existing literature, while Tranfield et al. (2003) emphasize its importance in ensuring methodological rigor and reliability. In line with these perspectives, this study focused on previous research on gender stereotypes and biases in textbooks, both in India and globally. To maximize relevant findings, databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, Semantic Scholar, and Springer Link were selected, using search terms related to gender stereotypes, bias, representation, and equality in school textbooks.

The authors compiled the selected information into a spreadsheet and began by manually screening the titles and abstracts of papers before reviewing the full texts. This process ensured that only studies meeting the review criteria were included. The selection emphasized papers that formally investigated gender stereotypes and biases in school English textbooks, while also considering sources from organizations, institutions, Departments of School Education, and government agencies. The focus was on research addressing key themes such as gender discrimination in textbooks, visual bias in illustrations, gender issues in curricula, and the extent of gender bias in mathematics textbook literature.

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
● Studies published between 2007 and 2024. ● Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and reports. ● Studies focusing on gender representation in school textbooks, particularly English textbooks. ● Articles available in English.	● Studies not directly related to gender stereotypes or biases in textbooks. ● Non-peer-reviewed articles, editorials, and opinion pieces. ● Articles not available in full text.

The authors collected information from all the selected papers by following a systematic plan that included examining the topic, year of publication, publisher, focus, outcomes, and keywords. They reviewed each paper's topic and outcomes separately before organizing the data. The authors continuously checked all the papers throughout the review process to ensure accuracy and consistency.

RESULT and DISCUSSION
Result
Study selection and screening process

The study selection process followed the PRISMA framework to ensure transparency and accuracy. A total of 358 articles were initially identified, with 352 from database searches and 6 from other sources. After screening and eligibility checks, most articles were excluded for not meeting the criteria. Finally, 45 articles were included for data extraction, representing the most relevant studies for this systematic review on gender stereotypes in English textbooks.
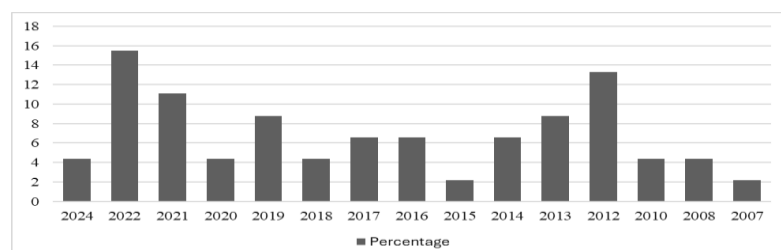
Figure 1
PRISMA diagram
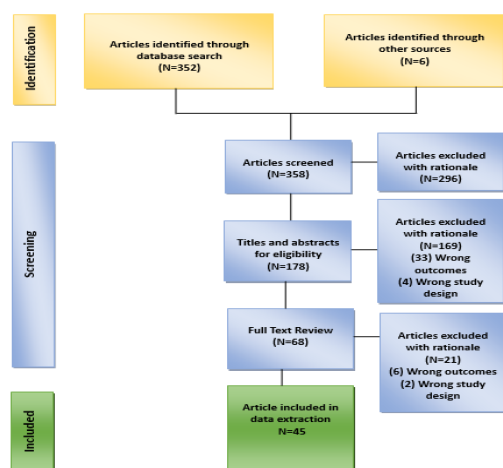
The above figure 1 indicates the PRISMA diagram illustrates that the total number of articles was 358. 352 articles were identified through database searches and an additional 6 articles from other sources. After the screening of those articles, 296 articles did not meet the initial criteria and were excluded. The remaining 178 articles was further screened based on title and abstract in order to determine if any of the articles met the inclusion criteria, of which 169 articles were excluded based on wrong outcome (33 articles) and wrong study design (4 articles). Through a series of subsequent screens, 21 more articles were excluded, 6 for wrong outcome and 2 for wrong study design. Ultimately, 45 articles met the criteria and were included in the final data extraction for the systematic review.
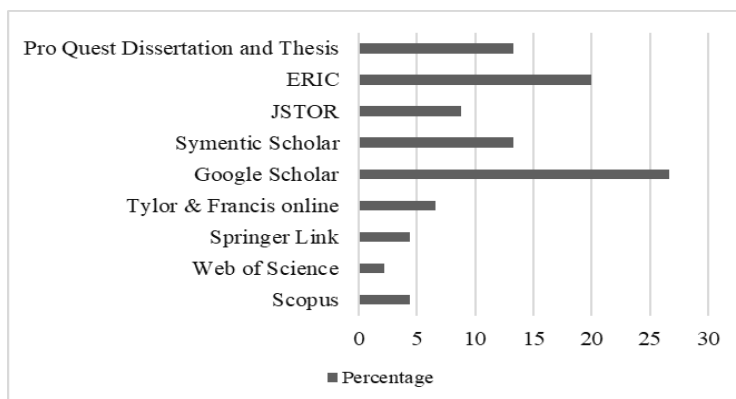
Figure 2
Year-by-year distribution of selected research work

The above figure 2 shows that of the 45 selected papers, in the early years, 2007 and 2015 had the fewest publications, each accounting for 2.2% of the total. Moderate increases were seen in 2008, 2010, 2018, and 2020, each with 2 publications (4.4%). The years 2013 and 2019 showed more significant contributions with 4 publications each (8.8%). A notable peak occurred in 2012 with 6 publications, representing 13.3% of the total. Steady contributions were observed in 2014, 2016, and 2017, each with 3 publications (6.6%). Another peak was in 2021 with 5 publications (11.1%), while the highest activity was recorded in 2022 with 7 publications, making up 15.5% of the total research. The year 2024 had a lower output with 2 publications (4.4%).

Figure 3
Different Databases of Selected Research Work

The above figure 3 shows that the 45 selected research works across various databases. Google Scholar accounted for the highest number of publications, contributing 26.6% (12 publications) of the total. ERIC followed with 9 publications, making up 20%. Semantic Scholar and ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis each contributed 6 publications, representing 13.3% each. JSTOR had 4 publications, accounting for 8.8%. Taylor & Francis Online contributed 3 publications, representing 6.6%. Scopus and Springer Link each had 2 publications, making up 4.4% each. Web of Science had the fewest publications, with 1 publication, accounting for 2.2% of the total. This distribution reflects the varied research sources on this topic, highlighting the significant contributions of some databases over others.

Figure 4
Different categories of selected research work
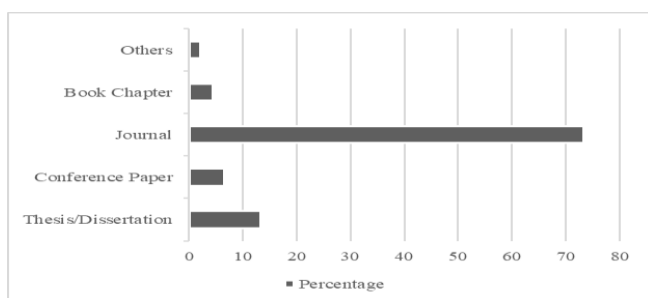
Figure 4 shows that the 45 selected research works across different categories show that most studies were published in journals, accounting for 33 publications (73.3%). Theses and dissertations contributed to 6 publications (13.3%), while conference papers made up 3 publications (6.6%). Book chapters represented 2 publications (4.4%), and other types of research work were minimal, with only 1 publication (2.2%). This distribution highlights the predominance of journal articles in analyzing gender bias and stereotypes in English textbooks.

Figure 5
Countries of the selected publication
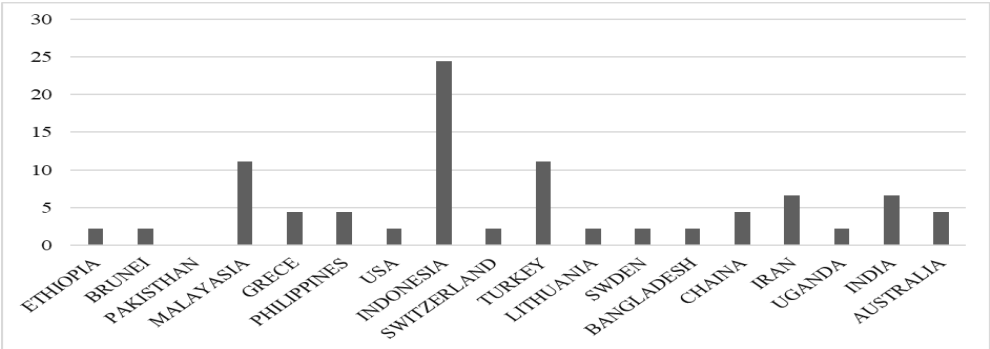
Note: Country of Publication As Well As The Methodology Applied In Those Papers

Figure 5 shows that the 45 selected research works across different categories of countries. Indonesia leads with 11 publications, accounting for 24.4% of the total. Malaysia and Turkey follow, each with 5 publications (11.1%). Iran and India each contribute 3 publications (6.6%), while Pakistan, Greece, Philippines, China, and Australia each have 2 publications (4.4%). The remaining countries, including Ethiopia, Brunei, USA, Switzerland, Lithuania, Sweden, Bangladesh, and Uganda, each have 1 publication, representing 2.2% of the total. This distribution shows a significant concentration of publications from Indonesia, with other countries contributing smaller but notable shares.

Figure 6
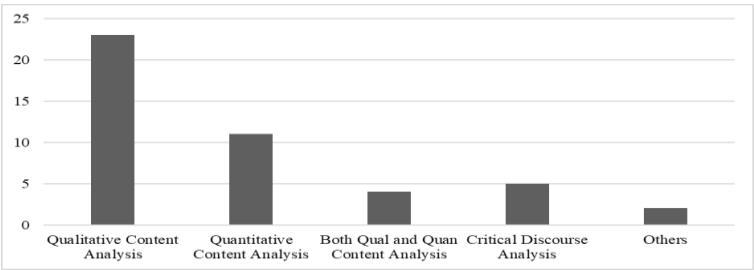*The Methodology Employed in Selected Research Work*

Figure 6 shows that the 45 selected research works illustrate different methodologies used. Qualitative Content Analysis is the most prevalent method, used in 23 publications, accounting for 51.1% of the total. Quantitative Content Analysis follows, utilized in 11 publications, representing 24.4%. A combination of both Qualitative and Quantitative Content Analysis is employed in 4 publications (8.8%). Critical Discourse Analysis is used in 5 publications, making up 11.1%. Other methodologies are employed in 2 publications, comprising 4.4% of the total. This indicates a strong preference for qualitative approaches in the selected research work.

Table 2
Summary of Themes and Selected Research Work for Review

Category of theme	Journal Articles	Conference paper	Book Chapter	Thesis	Others
Portrayal of gender in language and terminological aspects	E8, E11, E1, E6 E18, E19, E23, E33, E34, E22, E34, E16, E19, E36		E15	E37, E12, E30	
Portrayal of gender in visual representation	E27, E4, E21, E32, E34, E14, E29, E31, E35, E33, E34, E22,	E26, E9		E3, E13, E30, E12, E24	E33, E14

	E25, E28, E32, E24			
Portrayal of gender in professional, occupational, and working roles representation	E17, E18, E33, E34, E22, E34, E30, E12, E14, E6 E18, E19, E39		E20, E2	E33, E14
Portrayal of gender in games and leisure time activities	E10, E22, E32, E34, E21, E27, E4, E21, E3, E13, E38, E40, E42, E 44, E45	E5	E15, E7	E30, E12, E24	E14
Cultural and regional differences in the portrayal of gender in textbooks	E29, E31, E35, E23, E41, E43			E30, E12,

Note: "E" is a code used to categorize each of the research work included in the review

The above table 2 shows that out of the 45 publications, 18 (40 %) discussed the portrayal of gender in language and terminological aspects. 25 (55.5 %) of the published research focused on the portrayal of gender in visual representation, while 17 (37.7 %) addressed the portrayal of gender in professional, occupational, and working role representation. Additionally, 22 (48.8 %) of the publications examined the portrayal of gender in games and leisure time activities. Finally, 8 (17.7 %) of the research works discussed cultural and regional differences in the portrayal of gender in textbooks. The result shows that most of the selected papers are from the year 2007 to 2024, also journal articles (70.4 %), as well as literature reviews (29.6 %), on gender stereotypes and bias in mathematics textbooks were the most reviewed in the study. This indicates that the review was thoroughly conducted with current and relevant publications. However, most of the countries represented gender stereotypes and biases presented in mathematics textbooks.

Discussion
Portrayal of gender in language and terminological aspects in textbooks
The portrayal of gender through language and terminology in textbooks reflects broader societal attitudes and remains a critical concern. Scholars argue that such linguistic representations are not merely descriptive but actively construct and reinforce gendered identities. For instance, Mebratu and Semela (2022) suggest that gender bias in textbooks extends across educational levels, shaping students' perceptions well beyond primary schooling. In line with this, Maulida (2017) observes that elementary school textbooks often embed gender bias in subtle linguistic forms, echoing earlier findings by Blumberg (2008), Evans and Davies (2000), Sunderland (2000), Porreca (1984), and Swann (1992), who collectively demonstrate that biased terminology perpetuates traditional roles. Comparative studies also show that such patterns are not context-specific. Ali and Hussain (2019), examining Pakistani textbooks, identify significant gender imbalances rooted in cultural norms, while Chandran (2002) highlights similar dynamics in Malaysian contexts. Taken together, these findings illustrate a consistent global trend: biased language in textbooks functions as a powerful medium for transmitting and legitimizing gender stereotypes, shaping students' understanding of gender roles from an early age.

Portrayal of gender in visual representation in textbooks
The portrayal of gender in visual representations within educational materials often mirrors and reinforces prevailing societal biases. Scholars broadly agree that textbook illustrations serve as a subtle yet powerful medium in shaping students' perceptions of gender. Gharbavi and Mousavi (2012), Bahman and Rahimi (2010), and Lee and Collins (2008) argue that visual depictions frequently normalize stereotypes, thereby embedding unequal gender roles in learners' minds. Rong et al. (2021) expand on this by showing that English textbooks regularly reproduce traditional

gender roles, narrowing students' exposure to gender diversity and equality. In a similar vein, Nilayam Mihira et al., (2023) synthesize existing literature to demonstrate that stereotypical illustrations and narratives remain dominant, reinforcing outdated norms. This resonates with Roohani and Zarei's (2013) findings in Iran, where women are systematically represented in secondary roles compared to men. Comparative perspectives reveal that such patterns transcend regional boundaries, with Bakker and Akkerman (2014), Reilly et al., (2015), and Tiedemann (2000) emphasizing how these portrayals reflect broader social inequalities. Furthermore, Amini and Birjandi (2012), Carvalho (2014), and Mukundan and Nimehchisalem (2008) argue that gendered visuals do more than reproduce stereotypes they shape students' aspirations and limit their imagined futures. Collectively, these studies underscore that addressing visual bias in textbooks is crucial to challenging entrenched inequalities and fostering a more inclusive understanding of gender.

Portrayal of gender in professional, occupational, and working role representation in textbooks

The representation of gender in professional, occupational, and working roles within educational texts plays a pivotal role in shaping students' perceptions of the labor market and their own career aspirations. Scholars consistently argue that textbooks often reinforce gender stereotypes by reproducing traditional divisions of labor. Fithriani (2022) and Huang and Liu (2024) highlight how persistent stereotypes in educational materials narrow students' understanding of possible career paths. Rong et al., (2021) similarly point out that men are frequently portrayed in leadership or technical roles, while women are relegated to supportive or domestic positions, a trend also identified by Habib et al., (2020), Skliar (2007), and Nilayam Mihira et al. (2023). Such portrayals, as Roohani and Zarei (2013) and Gharbavi and Mousavi (2012) argue, not only constrain individual aspirations but also legitimize broader social inequalities by normalizing outdated gender hierarchies. Barton and Sakwa (2012) further stress that biased occupational depictions reinforce perceptions of male superiority in professional contexts. In response, Sedmak (2022), Mukundan and Nimehchisalem (2008), and Ahmad and Shah (2019) advocate for more diverse and balanced representations to ensure that students, regardless of gender, are exposed to equitable possibilities and inspired to pursue a wider range of careers.

Portrayal of gender in games and leisure time activities in textbooks

The portrayal of gender in games and leisure activities within textbooks reveals persistent disparities that mirror and reinforce societal biases. Scholars argue that such depictions function as subtle tools of socialization, shaping students' understanding of acceptable gendered behaviors. Ahmad and Shah (2019), along with Lee and Collins (2008), Yang (2011), and Brugeilles and Cromer (2009), demonstrate how textbooks frequently link boys with sports and outdoor activities while positioning girls in domestic or passive leisure roles. Similarly, Amini and Birjandi (2012), Ansary and Babaii (2003), and Ghorbani (2009) note that Iranian textbooks consistently portray boys as adventurous and active, whereas girls are marginalized to secondary, less dynamic roles. This pattern is not limited to South Asia; Arslan Ozer et al., (2019) identify comparable trends in Turkish textbooks, emphasizing the cross-cultural persistence of gendered leisure representations. Collectively, these findings suggest that biased depictions in recreational contexts not only reinforce traditional gender norms but also restrict students' perceptions of what activities and aspirations are socially acceptable for each gender.

Cultural and regional differences in the portrayal of gender in textbooks

Cultural and regional contexts play a decisive role in shaping how gender is portrayed in textbooks, with representations often reflecting deeply rooted societal norms and expectations. Mebratu and Semela (2022) argue that in Ethiopia, gender biases in educational texts persist

across levels, from schools to universities, thereby institutionalizing traditional roles. This aligns with earlier observations by Hartman and Judd (1978), Cunningsworth (1995), and Poulou (1997), who noted that such portrayals consistently marginalize women in educational content. In Indonesia, Maulida (2017) and more recently Zahra et al., (2024) highlight that English language textbooks remain steeped in entrenched stereotypes, shaping students' early perceptions of gender roles. Ali and Hussain (2019) make a similar case in Pakistan, where primary textbooks reinforce narrow views of gender equality, constraining children's social imagination. Comparative perspectives also extend to Malaysia, where Chandran (2002) underscores how textbooks mirror prevailing cultural norms, a concern echoed by Shallaita et al., (2021) as well as Islam and Asadullah (2016), who emphasize that educational materials frequently reproduce local inequalities. Collectively, these studies reveal that while the form of bias may vary across contexts, the function is strikingly similar: textbooks serve as cultural mirrors that reinforce existing gender hierarchies, with profound implications for both education and social attitudes.

CONCLUSION

A review of literature on gender stereotypes and bias in textbooks reveals significant gender imbalances in education. The underrepresentation of women reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Language and illustrations in textbooks play a key role in shaping gender expectations, influencing students' perspectives and engagement with subjects. To address this, educational resources should challenge gender norms rather than reinforce them. Schools must update English curriculum books with materials that support both genders, breaking traditional biases. Textbooks should represent men and women equally, promoting gender equality and inclusivity for all students' empowerment.

This study contributes to the theoretical field of education, particularly in gender studies and social constructivism. It reinforces the understanding that textbooks are not merely tools for conveying knowledge but also instruments that shape social perceptions of gender roles. Theories such as social constructionism and gender role theory can explain how gender representations in textbooks influence societal expectations and perpetuate traditional gender roles. Furthermore, this research enriches the theory of inclusive education by illustrating how gender imbalances in educational content impact students' understanding of gender issues, potentially hindering the development of fair and equitable gender identities.

This study has several limitations, including its focus on English textbooks at the primary and secondary school levels, without exploring gender representation in textbooks at higher education levels or in other academic disciplines. Additionally, the study mainly addresses traditional gender biases and does not fully examine the representation of non-binary or transgender identities. Future research should expand the scope by analyzing textbooks in various languages and cultural contexts, and explore the long-term impact of gender biases on students' attitudes and behaviors. Further studies should also include more diverse gender identities and employ experimental or case study approaches in classrooms to assess the direct impact of inclusive materials on students' understanding of gender equality.

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