

# A Review of Studies on Gender Representation in English Textbooks in the 21st Century: Insights from Literature Indexed in Google Scholar

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## Abstract

This paper systematically reviews studies on gender representation in English Textbooks indexed in Google Scholar. Employing the systematic literature review method, it particularly examines how the female and male genders have been represented in English textbooks since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Findings revealed recurring patterns in gender representation in English textbooks, including: (1) males outnumbered females; (2) males are more powerful than females; (3) males are overrepresented linguistically, visually, and socially; (4) low female visibility; (5) females are less represented through language use, and (6) bias in gender representation. Moreover, results also showed that the dominance of males and male characters had persisted in textbooks used by diverse learners from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century up to 2024. In addition, despite some awareness of neutrality to avoid biases, some textbooks were still written and developed with minimal consideration of gender representation that can shape how learners perceive the roles of males and females in society. Addressing these biases requires a more balanced representation of both females and males in textbooks. With this in mind and recognizing that the evaluation of instructional materials (textbooks) must take gender balance into account, this review offers valuable insights for material designers, authors, teachers, and students.

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## Introduction

The World Health Organization (2019b) defines gender as the socially constructed characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys. These characteristics also encompass the norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or even a boy. Meanwhile, sex is based on biological and physiological characteristics that are only divided into male and female (Kaufman *et al.*, 2021). These characteristics classify human beings as males and females.

Moreover, gender representation pertains to how different genders are portrayed in terms of social, political, and cultural contexts. Yang (2014) states that representation occurs in spoken, written, and visual texts. In both spoken and written texts, gender can be represented through word choices, such as adjectives, nouns, or noun phrases, and verbs. In visuals, gender presentation is associated with the

depiction of males and females, along with the frequency and prominence of these portrayals. Likewise, gender biases pertain to the behavior towards men and women, where the former receives more favors than the latter (Rothchild, 2007).

Santika (2023) claims that gender representation found in English textbooks has been an interesting topic to study, yet there are few studies done as far as the topic is concerned. In line with this, Santika (2023) conducted a study to identify similarities and differences in gender representation in the following: parts of the text, gender representation in visuals, and gender roles in the occupation. Findings revealed that the two English textbooks for Grade Eight in Indonesia, from different authors and publishers, portrayed male roles in occupations as larger in number of occupations compared to female

roles in occupations. Moreover, it was concluded that male characters were more represented than female characters in parts of the text, visuals, and roles in occupation for the two selected textbooks.

Martin and Beese (2017) explores the issue of gender bias in education by taking a closer look at textbooks, lessons, language, curriculum, and the teachers' interactions with the students. It was then concluded that students were receiving unequal education amidst the ongoing sexist hidden curriculum. One of the recommendations listed is to reduce the amount of gender bias in learning materials like textbooks.

Chan (2021) discusses the hidden curriculum in a "commercial English listening and speaking textbook" published by Cambridge University Press in 2008. The analysis focuses on gender. In particular, Chan (2021) used quantitative content analysis to explore the five manifestations of gender inequality according to Lee (2014). These manifestations include gender stereotyping, female and male visibility, use of gender-biased language, asymmetrical address titles, and male firstness. Their findings revealed an imbalanced representation of males and females in professional work. Specifically, there was a unit from the textbook in which all the nurses were labeled as females. In terms of female and male visibility, results showed no significant male-first ordering due to the balanced male-female representation. Furthermore, only three male addresses and one female address were observed throughout the textbook. With this, gender equality is seen in the textbook through balanced female and male visibility, gender-neutral language, and asymmetrical address titles and firstness. Chan (2021) claims that the study was small-scale and used only one textbook for analysis. As a result, the researcher encouraged further research to investigate how types of educational materials may affect the depictions of gender.

Textbooks, on the other hand, assist teachers in attaining the learning objectives. Muslich (2010) mentions that textbooks support learning programs in schools, while AbdelWahab (2013) advocates the textbook's ability to offer a framework that can guide teachers in the attainment of objectives in learning. Several researchers have analyzed textbooks, and one of them is Gunantar (2017). In their study, some textbooks used in one of the junior high schools in Indonesia were analyzed with a focus on the cultural perspective. Findings revealed the presence of Indonesian culture in those textbooks. This suggests that textbooks can be studied and evaluated in many ways.

Roohani and Zarei (2013) evaluated pre-university English textbooks used in Iran using content analysis. The

evaluation examined gender bias, gender neutrality, male generics, and firstness in the texts, instructions, exercises, and illustrations. Findings revealed that these textbooks are male-oriented and gender-biased as far as names, nouns, and firstness are concerned. This goes to show that gender biases are not limited to behaviors but can be present as well in instructional materials like textbooks.

The researcher became interested in this topic based on the belief that the evaluation of instructional materials like textbooks intended for learners must also look into the balanced representation of females and males. While topics, activities, and references are important, an in-depth examination of fairness and neutrality is equally essential in materials used and studied by learners whose minds and behavior are shaped by what they often see, read, and use in schools. Hence, this paper explores the representation of female and male genders in English textbooks since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 21<sup>st</sup> century, in this context, refers to the period starting from January 1, 2001, up to the present.

### Research Questions

1. How are females and males represented in English language textbooks in the following periods?
  - 1.1. 2001-2010
  - 1.2. 2011-2020
  - 1.3. 2021-2024
2. What are the recurring patterns in the representation of females and males in English language textbooks?
3. In what ways can gender biases in textbooks be addressed?

### Materials and Methods

This study employed a systematic literature review method of scientific papers concerning gender representation in textbooks in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Dewey and Drahota (2016), systematic literature review focuses on the identification, selection, and evaluation of research to address a precisely defined question. The papers were sourced from Google Scholar based on the belief that this database offers: (1) broad coverage of disciplines; (2) free and accessible; and (3) easy-to-use interface with keyword-based searching.

To begin with, the researcher used inclusion and exclusion criteria to select scientific papers suitable for the current study. After the inclusion and exclusion criteria were finalized, the researcher inputted keywords such as gender representation in textbooks and gender representation in English textbooks. After reading some

studies and checking their relevance to the current study based on the criteria set by the researcher, the researcher proceeded to the review. Findings mainly reflect mixed regions comprising both western and asian settings.

**Table 1.** Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for the Selection of Scientific Papers

Parameters	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Type of Research	Published primary research in peer-reviewed journals and scientific papers	Unpublished primary research in peer-reviewed journals and scientific papers, and reviews of articles.
Results of the Study	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Research articles or scientific papers that focus on gender representation in English Textbooks.</li> <li>2. Results can address all the research problems of the present systematic literature review.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Research articles or scientific papers that do not focus on gender representation in English Textbooks.</li> <li>2. Results cannot address all the research problems of the present systematic literature review.</li> </ol>
Language	Research articles or scientific papers written in English	Research articles or scientific papers not written in English
Database	Google Scholar	Other databases
Time Frame	Research articles or scientific papers published from 2001 to 2024	Research articles or scientific papers not published from 2001 to 2024

Table 1 shows the inclusion and exclusion criteria in selecting studies that are relevant to the current study. Specifically, only five parameters are included with a focus on both inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria encompass types of research, results of the study, language, database, and time frame. For the results, only the papers that are appropriate to answer the research questions received a close reading. Furthermore, the language used and database were also considered. Lastly, research articles and scientific papers that formed part of the current study are those published from 2001 to 2024.

## Results and Discussion

The representation of female and male genders in English language textbooks since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was identified through a study of results from 2001 to 2024.

### 1. The representation of females and males in English language textbooks across three periods:

- 1.1. 2001-2010
- 1.2. 2011-2020
- 1.3. 2021-2024

**Table 2.** Representation of Females and Males in English Textbooks

Period	Female Overrepresentation	Male Overrepresentation	Conclusion	
			Balance	Imbalance
2001-2010	0	2		/
2011-2020	0	8		/
2021-2024	0	5		/

Table 2 indicates the number of studies from each bracket (2001-2010, 2011-2020, and 2021-2024) and the conclusion on how females and males were represented in several textbooks. Among the 15 studies that formed part of this systematic literature review, no study claimed that there was an overrepresentation of female or female characters in their selected textbooks. Instead, males remained overrepresented. Although some studies showed that females were visible, their visibility was still incomparable to that of males and how they were represented. With this, the following findings were identified.

#### 1.1. Representation of females and males from 2001 to 2010

##### a. Males outnumbered females

Mukundan and Nimehchisalem (2008) discovered that females were unable to initiate conversations because males often did in their selected Malaysian textbooks. However, amidst the bias that exists between males and females, it seemed that most of the negative traits were associated with males as they spoke more, talked more often than females, and excluded females from conversations they were having with the same gender.

##### b. Males are more powerful than females

The study of Tajeddin and Janebi Enayat (2010) revealed that males were portrayed as more powerful than females, given their representation in three textbooks. Specifically, Tajeddin and Janebi Enayat (2010) shared that they were represented to be more active, competent, socially important, breadwinners, and even powerful. On the other hand, women were seen as less active and more reactive, objects to be scrutinized and of desire, breadwinners, and socially less powerful. For the record, they examined American English Language Teaching (ELT), British ELT, and Iranian ELT, such as *Top Notch Textbook* (elementary level), *New Headway Textbook* (elementary level), and Iran Language Institute Textbook (Elementary 3).

## 1.2. Representation of females and males from 2011 to 2020

### a. Males are overrepresented linguistically, visually, and socially

Nofal and Qawar (2015) found that there was a 1:3 ratio of females to males in texts and illustrations within the Jordan textbook they studied. In addition, males are associated with more social roles than females. Based on the results of their study, male characters are overrepresented linguistically, visually, and socially. The examination of the textbook showed that female characters are experiencing a lack of representation concerning socially significant gender items and linguistically gendered items (Qasim, 2018). Based on the investigation of Esmaili and Amerian (2014) on three English Language teaching textbooks of Iran, findings reveal that males were presented more than females.

Meanwhile, Parham (2013) found that females had equal visibility in discussions concerning the following: (1) number of participants, (2) frequency of turns, and (3) duration of those turns. However, females were seen to initiate conversations 30 % more often than males. Furthermore, the examination of illustrations in the latter section supported earlier findings that women were less represented in children's literature. In the study of Dabbagh (2016), it was found that prominence and power were associated with males rather than females. In addition, no female character in the images was depicted as sparsely and lightly clothed, even if both men and women were represented as fully clothed.

In the examination of the 23 most recently published Philippine English language textbooks for Junior High School, the use of generic terms referring to both genders as "man" remained apparent. The repeated use of the term "man" indicates that males continued to hold a dominant and prominent position in society (Briones, 2019).

### b. Low female visibility

Ahmad and Shah (2019) found that the Punjab (Pakistan) textbooks they analyzed were highly biased against gender by representing more males than females. Furthermore, the textbooks appeared to have been crafted to reinforce male supremacy both subtly and overtly. Similarly, Lee and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei (2020) found that there was a continued lack of female representation in recently published Iranian English

language textbooks, as they aimed to examine whether the gender bias observed in earlier textbook studies, which served to sustain Islamic gender ideology, was replicated.

## 1.3. Representation of females and males from 2021 to 2024

### a. Females are less represented in language use

Based on the result of their study of higher secondary textbooks published by the STB, Mahmood *et al.* (2024) claimed that male characters were more prominent in various roles and professions compared to female characters. Additionally, it was noted that writers tended to use more masculine nouns and pronouns, including he, she, him, and her, to represent both genders in general. Similarly, Suchana (2024) discovered in their study of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks in Bangladesh that female characters were less represented than male characters through language usage. In particular, there were significantly more masculine nouns and pronouns compared to their female counterparts in many cases. Biased language, on the other hand, was employed when referring to females.

### b. Bias in gender representation

Fikri and Irwandi (2024) examined several elements of gender representation in Nusantara EFL textbooks such as visibility, initial representation, generic constructions of femininity and masculinity, activity, and profession. The findings of their research indicated a bias in gender representation between males and females in the textbook. Likewise, after investigating gender representation in grades 6, 7, and 8 English textbooks used in public schools in Punjab, Malik *et al.* (2021) learned that female characters were both underrepresented and misrepresented.

The said bias was evident in eight distinct ways including (1) lessons that do not focus on female characters, (2) a lower number of female characters in the literature, (3) the frequency with which those characters are mentioned, (4) how those characters are depicted (including the descriptors used for them), (5) the specific roles assigned to those characters, the number of gendered illustrations, (5) the messages conveyed through those illustrations, and (6) the prominence of those illustrations (regarding their size and placement). Yanti and Wirza (2022) investigated gender representation in the Indonesian EFL textbook for vocational school students and found that there

was an inequality in terms of gender representation, where females are underrepresented in the textbook. Furthermore, the results of this recent research highlighted the representation of males and females in the Indonesian EFL textbook.

## 2. The recurring pattern in the representation of females and males in English textbooks

**Table 3.** Recurring patterns in the representation of females and males in English textbooks

Inclusive Years	Pattern
2001-2010	a. Males outnumbered females b. Males are more powerful
2011-2020	a. Males are overrepresented linguistically, visually, and socially b. Low female visibility
2021-2024	a. Females are less represented through language use b. Bias in gender representation

Based on the findings of the studies and answers to research problem number one, males were found to be dominant in terms of gender representation in textbooks. In addition, the underrepresentation of female characters was evident over the last two decades, as shown in the findings of each study.

## 3. Addressing gender biases

**Table 4.** Addressing gender biases

Inclusive Years	How?
2001-2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthened material developers and stakeholders' awareness of gender biases.</li> </ul>
2011-2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give both genders a more balanced representation by ensuring that they are equally represented.</li> <li>Improve the quantity of female writers, and equip facilitators of learning about gender discrimination.</li> </ul>
2021-2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Textbook authors must create textbooks that consider gender.</li> <li>Facilitators of learning must find ways to integrate gender-neutrality within the classroom setting.</li> </ul>

Table 4 shows that the dominance of males and male characters from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century up to 2024 remained evident in textbooks used by various learners. In addition, despite some awareness of neutrality to avoid biases, some textbooks were still written and developed with minimal consideration of gender representation. With this in mind, some ways to address gender biases, according to the previously conducted

studies, were compiled, summarized, and presented in the table above. To put it briefly, these biases can be summarized by having a more balanced representation of both females and males in English textbooks.

## Conclusion

Given the results of the review of selected studies, it is concluded that both men and women are represented in English textbooks. However, they are not being represented equally. Hence, it is suggested that gender representation in textbooks must be considered by material developers and writers. Moreover, a wider scope of review and investigation must be conducted in the future to further strengthen the call for a more neutral gender representation in English textbooks.

The implications of this study are substantial. While textbooks cannot be neutral tools all the time amidst the presence of biased representation that may influence children's perspectives, the need for a more expansive review of textbooks' content is essential to consider gender representation in content creation. Future researchers may also explore the perceptions of learners regarding these representations.

## Ethical Statement

This study did not involve human participants.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the conduct and publication of this research. All procedures followed were in accordance with institutional and ethical standards, and there were no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the outcomes of this study.

## Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the authors utilized Grammarly for improving word choice while avoiding unintentional plagiarism. Following the use of this tool/service, the authors conducted a review and made necessary modifications, assuming full responsibility for the content of the publication.

## Data Availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are available within the paper.

## Author Contributions

**LQM:** Conceptualization, Writing (Original Draft, Review and Editing), Project Administration; **JCR:** Supervision

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