

Gender portrayal in textbooks

Gender

By Dr Shahid Siddiqui

SCHOOLS act as effective social institutions to construct, validate and perpetuate stereotypes. These environments are also more conducive to the internalisation of such notions as young minds are rather susceptible to accepting granted 'truths'.

The process of validation derives its strength from two centres of authority in schools: (a) substantiation of stereotypes through textbooks and (b) affirmation of stereotypes by teachers through explicit and hidden curricula. It is important to note that both textbooks and the behaviour of teachers endorse the authenticity of stereotypes. Regrettably, most textbook writers happen to be male as are their reviewers — an aspect that only strengthens patriarchal power structures based on a skewed and incomplete worldview.

Research studies on content analyses regarding gender representation in books began to emerge in the last three decades and many discovered a huge difference between the number of male and female characters; female characters were only a small percentage of their male counterparts. This 'blackout' of female characters can be attributed to the politics of exclusion where dominant groups in society turn the marginalised into invisible entities.

This partial gender representation is largely due to the absence of women textbook writers and reviewers. A number of research reports on the quantitative representation of male and female characters merely scratched the surface, stopping short of identifying the real truth. The problem is deeper — it is the qualitative description that is of real importance. If we scrutinise these imaginative characters, the males emerge as strong, dominant, central and patronising, whereas females are submissive, dependent and peripheral.

Therefore, this early socialisation process impacts boys and girls in different ways — boys are made to believe that they possess positive attributes such as strength, generosity and aggression, whereas girls are often pretty, submissive, compliant, and naive. Girls then internalise these labels and begin to believe in male supremacy and hence, their defeatist outlook is a natural outcome that keeps a patriarchal environment alive.

There is a need to deconstruct the notion of male superiority. Dale Spender in her seminal book, *Manmade language*, makes a useful distinction between power and superiority. According to Spender, men enjoy power as they are in possession of most resources but this, in no way, makes them superior as power distribution and possession can be reallocated at different points in time.

Local textbooks effectively and successfully authenticate and perpetuate a world ruled by men, where men are important in all walks of life and judgments are passed according to the patriarchal principle. Also, teaching attitudes support textbook content and thus, gender stereotypes — roles, expectations and opportunities — are communicated to students with zeal through the pedagogy of transmission. In most mainstream schools in South Asia where teaching is based on the transmission perspective, stereotypes are seldom challenged or subverted. Thus schools, which should be places of transformation, sanction existing thought patterns and power structures without any queries.

How can we expect a change in our schools and society? The answer lies in overhauling the educational system including teaching materials, pedagogy and assessment. Textbooks need to provide a more balanced worldview by striving for gender equity in qualitative terms. Their language must become non-sexist and unbiased and their exploitation by instructors has to be restrained.

If a teacher practises critical pedagogy and develops critical thinking skills, a thinking environment where stereotypes are not accepted but challenged and emasculated can actually be created. The existing assessment system is based on the fundamental principles of memory and recall and does not require or encourage higher order thinking skills — students memorise chunks from books to reproduce them in examinations without exercising comprehension or reflection.

Schools can potentially be used to deconstruct, and eventually destabilise, gender stereotypes. If we expect a real change in our educational system in terms of transformation at personal and societal levels, we need to revisit our textbooks, attitudes and modes of instruction. Only then can we begin to expect a meaningful change in our lives and society. ■

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