

Gender Biases and Stereotypes in School Texts*

AAMNA MATTU AND NEELAM HUSSAIN

However state rhetoric regards women's rights and the need to provide women with equal educational and job opportunities, state-sponsored textbooks continue to reinforce gender-biased stereotypes. As the mainstreaming of women in social, economic, and political life, and recognition of their rights as equal citizens depend predominantly on how society perceives and defines women, reinforcing such stereotypes constitutes not only a serious lapse in implementing state policy but also raises questions regarding production of these texts.

Among the most obvious observations after reading Punjab Textbook Board texts are the following:

- The producers of textbooks feel that policy statements on women's rights etc. are purely rhetorical and need not be taken seriously.
- Patriarchal precepts of gender are so deeply rooted in the ways we see and experience the world that it is difficult—even if the political will to do so is there—for academics and policymakers to be self-critical or to envisage, even if only in books, a social order that recognizes the humanity of women and men alike.
- No clear guidelines exist on representing women in school texts.
- Even when guidelines are provided the producers of the texts fail to see the connection between negative and/or stereotypical representation of a class or group and the representation's impact on percep-

tions and attitudes of students, whether male or female, rich or poor.

- The producers are content with male and female stereotypes because these are what the producers have been publishing for years, and continuing to do so is easy in terms of workload, etc.
- The producers are resistant to women's rights and believe in the status quo.

If the prevalent gender biases in our school texts are to be addressed and countered, at least some of these problems must be solved. We will look at the following: (i) education policies, briefly examining the aims and objectives of past education policies in representing women in school texts; and (ii) content analysis of school texts, conducting a semiotic analysis of the language and images used to represent men and women. The material analyzed is from English-language texts from classes 7 to 10. We highlight the links between disempowerment of

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women and their subordinate status as citizens, and stereotypes that operate within the false division of the domestic, which is aligned with women, and the public, which belongs solely to men.

National Education Policies since 1959, and the Status Quo

The first education conference was held in November 1947, when the Ministry of Education attempted a comprehensive survey of education to prepare the Six-Year Educational Development Plan (1952–1958). However, no comprehensive approach to education existed before 1959, when the Commission on National Education was convened to define the philosophy of education.

Although it has changed somewhat since 1959, the essential structure defined in the Report of the Commission on National Education (1959) remains the same. This in itself is significant. Not only were the foundations of the education system laid during the first long non-representative government, no serious attempt has been made since then to rethink or reformulate this policy in the light of Pakistan's realities. This says much not only about the state of education and the value systems that policymakers subscribe to, but also explains the continuing existence of the gender bias in school texts.

Although stressing the importance of education in formulating a "national character," the report reinforced the class divisions of Pakistan, thus ensuring that individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds could be trained for roles commensurate with their class position. Not surprisingly, women fell foul of this policy, as did the poor and the working class.

Obviously geared to preserve the status quo, the report follows a skewed and reductive logic—because those in positions of power (policymakers, members of the ruling class, educationists, etc.) are predominantly upper class and male, only upper-class males should be al-

lowed to claim a superior intellect and the positions they hold. Those who fall outside class, caste, and gender boundaries do so not because of lack of opportunity or because of poverty or other social and economic problems, but because such people lack the capacity to be anything other than poor, working class, or female.

Especially significant is the relegation of females and the working class to similar categories based on a grossly biased estimate of competence. Commenting on this document, Rubina Saigol writes:¹

...according to this Report, members of the working class are, "expected to perform manual, concrete and mechanical and lower order tasks which do not require much thinking or conceptualization, but are based on repetitive actions, rote memorization and constant drill or practice. This kind of task division assumes that some people are *naturally* more talented, intelligent, capable of abstract and conceptual thinking and creative, while others are *naturally* more prone to ...following [rules mechanically as] required by lower level repetitive tasks."

The report consistently emphasizes clear-cut gender roles regarding "feminine" skills that will ensure domestic bliss—women have no right to bliss of any kind in other areas—such as needlework, home crafts, embroidery, and "other suitable work of an artistic kind." Obviously referred to here are economically privileged women as most working class women are too busy working in the fields, on construction sites, and domestic labor, to name only a few areas of work, to have either the time, money, or energy left from 14-hour working day to indulge in "artistic" work or even "home crafts and embroidery."

Also during the 1960s, home economics colleges were set up in major cities and became popular among girls' parents if not among the girls themselves. These colleges allowed traditionalists to concede to the demands of moder-

nity *vis-à-vis* the importance of school or college education for girls while enabling them to remain within the bounds of patriarchal norms of femininity. As stated in the report, this subject "... provides a young woman with the knowledge and skills and attitudes that will help her to be a more intelligent and effective wife and mother and improve the health, happiness and general well-being of her family."²

Motherhood continues to be seen as the central and all-encompassing role of a woman. Mothers are granted the "esteemed" status of nation builders, with the ability to mold their children into loyal and productive citizens. Glorified and exalted, motherhood is presented as a woman's only, ultimate, and legitimate goal.

Women who failed or refused to subscribe to this myth fell outside the purview of the feminine or, at best, were relegated to the margins of licit space, among them unmarried women, working girls, divorcees, and the childless. That dissent is looked upon unfavorably is borne out by the report, which states unequivocally, that "it is she who must accept the obligations that her position at home imposes upon her."³

These examples show that government policy meant to keep women in traditional roles and to allow women only the knowledge and skills that would aid them as mothers and good, obedient wives. That these images had little to do with reality when more and more women were entering hitherto male professions did nothing to influence policymakers. Subsequent school texts relied solely on patriarchal myths of the feminine and had little to do with the diversity of women's lives in a society divided by class, caste, gender, and ethnicity.

The report was uncritically and unabashedly geared to maintain the status quo, and that it did so is not surprising. After all, one of the recurrent themes of the Ayub era⁴ was that Pakistanis were inherently unfit for democracy. If the playing field was to be left clear for the ruling elite, then women had to be housebound and the vast majority precluded from decision

making. Convergence of patriarchal authoritarianism with military rule could only serve the interests of those in power.

Although Nusrat Bhutto⁵ attended the 1975 UN Women's Conference in Mexico, where the world plan of action regarding women's position and status in society was announced and much emphasis placed on women's rights, a democratic government under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto did not bring about any radical change in women's representation in school texts. Policy documents of the 1970s granted the same importance as the 1959 report had to the learning of "feminine" skills and enhancing "natural" female qualities such as obedience and steadfastness. Equal importance was also given to the role of women as "perfect" wives and mothers. Whether this was a conscious policy decision or merely an unconsidered response of probably the same bureaucrats and "educationists" who had formulated the 1959 report, the outcome—the presence of gendered stereotypes in school texts—was the same.

The return to martial law in 1977 and the subsequent alliance between the army and an ascendant fundamentalist group brought about significant and regressive changes. In a bid to consolidate its power, this new ruling class, as opposed to the earlier Eurocentric elite, set out to capture the existing socioeconomic discourses and rewrite them in accordance with its own needs. Educational institutions, school texts, and the media were powerful and effective means for bringing this about.

Women were transformed into markers of national morality, and notions of the licit and illicit were charted across their bodies. Not only were earlier stereotypes reinforced, but the entire process was also orchestrated at every level, ranging from the promulgation of sexist and gender-biased laws to public exhortations to women to dress modestly and wear the *chadar*.⁶

While following overall guidelines that texts should produce patriotic Muslims, school texts produced in the Zia era underwent a visible change.

Textbook policies are formulated by the curriculum wing of the Federal Ministry of Education and implemented by the provincial textbook boards. If deemed “suitable” by the ministry, manuscripts are incorporated into the relevant texts. The textbook boards followed the pattern established by the 1959 report and responded to policy directives to develop student’s patriotism and awareness of being Muslim and part of the Ummah.⁷ The textbook boards—never famous for producing books capable of engaging students’ interest—now plunged to an all-time low of pedantic pedagogy that continues to not only strengthen gender biases but also marginalize non-Muslim minorities, heighten intolerance, and destroy students’ intellectual curiosity.

That the policymakers in the Ministry of Education and those engaged in production of school texts have much to answer for is borne out by the texts to which our unsuspecting children are subjected. When education should enable them to discover and take joy in their own God-given potential and the rich diversity of human cultures, children are being straight-jacketed into rigidly defined gender roles.

Textbooks

This section briefly looks at the social science texts of the Zia years to show that little has changed: school books still perpetuate gender biases. Nasrene Shah’s findings seem especially pertinent:⁸

From the very first language books for five year olds, traditional stereotypes with regard to male/female role models are established, and they are reinforced and elaborated in subsequent readers. One of the first illustrations is that of a girl helping her mother with household chores... Never is the male shown helping in the house, whether it is in the urban or rural setting. Yet it is interesting to note that in the description of the Holy Prophet, peace be upon him, that there was

no task, howsoever humble, (sweeping, mending, washing up) that he regarded as being beneath his dignity. The policy makers apparently do not wish to make the connection between the example set by him and the need for men to share the mundane tasks that are the woman’s lot. Similarly, the introductory social studies text tells us that the respect accorded to the mother is due to the fact that she cooks, cleans and cares for the family. Clearly, her role and place are delineated within the context of the family unit. That she contributes to the economy and nation building activities is not recognized.

Except for the early readers, girls are never shown playing outdoor games. Sport it seems is outside the domain of young women... [A]s a girl grows towards adolescence, she becomes increasingly unobtrusive and, except within clearly demarcated parameters, is neither seen nor heard... Boys on the other hand are active, curious, ready to take the initiative in moments of crisis. Only a boy is allowed to dream of... the future... The message is insidious and powerful—a woman’s fulfillment and ultimate destiny, even if she is educated, must lie within the family—her future is not in her own hands.

Not a single woman is included in the social studies series on popular personalities. In the Urdu books, space has been conceded to two women only... Miss Fatima Jinnah and Begum Mohammad Ali. (Their) claim to eminence, is their relationship to men. (Miss Jinnah)... is depicted as (the) nurse, helpmate and support (of her brother). The fact that she was a candidate in a Presidential election is considered a matter not important enough to mention. What the writer felt more pertinent was that (she) always dressed ‘modestly’...

Begum Mohammad Ali is portrayed as the mother of the famous Ali brothers... deeply rooted in the religious and social traditions of Islam. Nothing is ever mentioned of her work in the Freedom Movement, nor do we

hear of the fact that she discarded the 'veil' at a public meeting. And although she stressed the need for women's education, textbooks warn the 'weaker sex' to beware the pernicious influences abroad. It is imperative, the writer says, that women should preserve eastern traditions (these are not spelt out) and not lose her balance... no similar caution is issued to men.

These examples sufficiently highlight how gender biases, predicated on stereotypical femininity, served the ideological and strategic needs of the Zia government. A look at contemporary language texts shows that little has changed in gender stereotyping in school texts.

Language Texts

Other than women's invisibility and/or absence in language exercises dealing with sports, etc., certain lessons consistently highlight women's subordinate or referential position. A chronological analysis of the stories and exercises in this text will show the consistent articulation of a single unified message: (i) women have a subsidiary status in society, and (ii) their only legitimate role or function is to perform the household tasks of nurturing and caring for the family. The lesson, "Family Relations," shows that a woman's identity is subsumed to that of her husband as she is no longer known by her own name but as "Mrs." So-and-So. Remarkably boring as it reiterates this point ad nauseum, the lesson also passes on a message about the subordinate status of a woman within the family. While one concedes that perhaps the writer is not aware that "Mrs." is now recognized as a gender-biased term, the selection of this topic to highlight relationships points to his or her own gender bias.

A lesson on relationships could be interesting if, for example, presented in story form, using a situation to highlight family bonds, responsibilities, happy moments, etc. There are a host of ways to make the tone humorous or

serious. The lesson in Book 7 uses none of these, but only comprises a string of relationships highlighting women's subsidiary and referential status. The very baldness of the narrative leaves little room for ambiguity of its gendered message. Given the fact that in ordinary language "he" often stands in for both men and women, this kind of text reinforces the perception that women do not merit an identity of their own.

Next comes the story of the "Lost Bag," a dull story of a rickshaw driver who finds a bag left by an unknown passenger. He assumes that it must have belonged to a male passenger, thus affirming the generally held perceptions about women's mobility and their absence in public space—that as the domestic sphere alone is the woman's legitimate space, then it is highly unlikely that a female passenger would leave her bag in the rickshaw.

The next story, "A Surprise Visit," has little to it either as a story or as an exercise in rational behavior. It is noticeable, however, that even when much of the action takes place in a home where one would expect women, none are present in the story except for a reference to absent sisters. The message is clearly one or all of the following: (i) even inside the home women remain behind the scenes, (ii) women do not exist or are irrelevant, and (iii) women have no part to play in family life other than cooking, etc. It would seem that no space, public or private, justifies women's visibility.

"Going on a Holiday" comes next. Other than being full of grammatical errors—reprehensible in a language text—this story reinforces the binary division of male as the active/rational and female as passive/irrational. Thus, the father decides to go on a family holiday, the mother makes tea, the brother flies kites, and the sister whines, complains, and makes silly requests.

Following the pattern of including "heroic" or important historical figures in language texts, the book contains a brief, hyperbolic sketch of Tariq bin Ziad. Women who have played im-

portant parts in history are almost always ignored, and the Punjab Textbook Board books are no exception. Seldom acknowledged are Razia Sultana, the first woman ruler of the Delhi Sultanate and the first to get the people's mandate for her rule, and Gulbadan Begum and Zebunnissa, both highly educated women, the former a biographer and the latter a poet and philosopher.

The gender bias is not limited to stories prepared for these books but appears in the exercises as well. In an earlier lesson, women's exclusion is clear: girls are absent in "Cricket Match," a lapse somehow later rectified through one brief sentence that tells us that Mary knows how to swim. The message, however, is much more insidious, for while the sentence concedes that women are capable of swimming, the girl's name channels attention in another direction. It is Mary who can swim, not Jamila or Shakila, thus indicating that swimming is not permissible or recommended for Muslim girls. This time religion is used to set limits on women's activities, a clever ploy based on the logic that if the text cannot ignore an unpalatable fact, then the best thing to do is to associate it with another culture or religion. This is not the only instance of its kind. Workingwomen are undermined in an exercise in Book 8, in which we come across Mrs. Brown who works as an airhostess. Her name enables the text to acknowledge and deny in the same breath the fact that not only do women work, they also do jobs that bring them into constant contact with males. The fact that Mrs. Brown is a European or possibly a non-Muslim not only places her job beyond the pale of the morally permissible, it also criminalizes all Pakistani airhostesses and other working women who come into contact with the opposite sex during work.

A gender-based division of roles is woven into almost all the exercises and stories in these books, thus the constant references to men performing active and/or heroic roles, and women engaged in passive activities, and often minor roles: "Pakistani soldiers are among the bravest

in the world." "My brothers work in a factory." But "...their sisters wash clothes." "Imrana made some tea." "She was combing her hair." Ignored is the fact that (i) countless brave women appear in history, and large number of women form the workforce in factories; and (ii) men also comb their hair and have been known to make tea and wash clothes.

These randomly selected examples from English texts for different levels bear evidence to the consistent presence of a strong gender bias in our schoolbooks. Though reference is made only to some English texts, it does not mean that other social science texts are free from sexist biases. Even the most superficial reading shows that the kinds of gender biases found in the English texts are repeated in social science texts as well.

Students are constantly exposed to textbooks, and regardless of their poor quality, messages predicated on notions of male superiority and female inferiority are being beamed at students. For the most part, women are either absent or barely visible. Where we do come across them, they are either silent or limited strictly to prescribed roles: they cook, clean, look after children, or are generally supportive. In the few instances that we find women in sports or initiating a conversation, they are either depicted as being irrational or used to mouth platitudes about sports or working women.

This is dangerous at many levels. By failing to take into account the diversity of our society, the textbook boards ensure lack of student interest in their work. Exposed constantly to a one-dimensional, mono-visual world in texts that allow no room for discussion or debate, and subjected to a teaching methodology that encourages rote learning to pass exams, students will absorb these gender-biased and culturally skewed messages from class 1 onward, simply because they echo the biases and prejudices of society.

In a traditional patriarchal society, riven by differences of class, caste, and economic standing, this can be, and in fact has been proved to

be, dangerous. We only have to read in newspapers about domestic violence, sexual harassment in the streets, and killings on “suspicion of immoral behavior,” to realize that this is not an empty claim. If young men and women grow up thinking that men alone have the right and the capacity to make decisions not only for themselves but for women as well, then violence, coercion, and arbitrary use of force will become socially accepted behavior. In the world envisioned in these textbooks, where only “Mary” can swim and only “Mrs. Brown” can be an airhostess, working women, sportswomen, women out in the streets to shop, run errands, or do any other work, and women in parks or any other public space for reasons as legitimate as those that take men out of the house, will not only always be guilty of “wrong” behavior, but also be vulnerable to the many forms of violence.

If our aim, as citizens of a mature and progressive society, is to ensure that women are given free access to education, jobs, health, and other fundamental rights, then we need, as a first significant step, to rewrite our textbooks for the simple reason that lessons learned in childhood and early adolescence leave the deepest impression. If our aim is to work toward a humane and tolerant society, then we should rid ourselves of the gender biases that inform our thinking and behavior at the multiple levels of our lives.

Suggestions for Change

Language use

These are some examples of changes that need to be introduced in routine language use:

- Substitute the more specific “he or she” for the universal “he,” depending on the context.
- Substitute “humankind” for the universal “mankind,” which subsumes the feminine category and renders it invisible. Similarly, substitute “chairperson” for “chairman”

and “Ms.” for “Mrs.,” as “Ms.” signifies a woman regardless of whether she is married or not. It is the equivalent of “Mr.,” which signifies a man, married or not.

Representation

How women are represented also need to be changed. Instead of constantly seeing them referentially or as nurturing and caring, they could be seen in other roles—as doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc. This would not only redress gender bias but also present society more realistically.

Women’s economically productive role, as opposed to their reproductive role, should also be emphasized. Beginning with the unpaid and unrecognized labor that sustains household economies—cooking, washing, housekeeping, looking after domestic animals, milking, making *ghee*,⁹ stitching clothes, etc.—and going on to include the different categories of work in the informal sector, the fact that paid work in the public field is enabled by unpaid work in the domestic enclosure should be stressed.

The work of countless women in poorly paid private domestic jobs such as cooking, cleaning, washing, etc. should be acknowledged. Texts should also focus on women’s “double day”: women who are paid for work outside the house are also responsible for household chores; thus, where a man’s day normally ends when he comes home from work, most working women change jobs, and their “working day” often continues late into the night.

Lessons based on popular heroes or personalities should also include women such as Razia Sultana, Mai Bakhtawar, Zebunnissa, etc. Examples could also be used of women who have excelled in sports, or in professions that we conventionally associate only with men, such as law, science, etc.

These steps would do much to redress our books’ gender imbalance, which distorts our society and culture. Boys, too, need to be relieved of “macho” masculinity. Just as it is un-

fair for girls to grow up in world that defines them within the narrow confines of conventional femininity, so too is it difficult for boys to strive toward a narrowly defined and violent masculinity. One way of changing these perceptions would be to show boys in situations that bring out their gentleness. It would also help to include stories of men who have excelled in the arts such as painting or music, or whose acts of bravery involve a more subtle kind of courage based on concern for others and tolerance for those who think differently from them, and not on muscle power alone.

In rectifying gender bias in our school books, we would be taking a step to achieving a society that would enable not just women but men as well, because if the constraint of the stereotype limits and wastes 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.

Notes

1. Rubina Saigol, *Knowledge and Identity* (Lahore: ASR Publications, 1995).
2. Report of the Commission on National Education, 1959.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
4. 1958–69—period of the rule of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan, the first 'long-term' military ruler/President of Pakistan.
5. Wife of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who ruled Pakistan during the 1971–1977 period.
6. A shawl made of cotton, wool or silk. It is an article of dress for both women and men. But in the case of women, it is also associated with female modesty in terms of dressing. It is therefore both a social symbol and an actual article of dress.
7. The putative transnational community of Muslims bound together by a common faith.
8. Nasrene Shah, "School Texts." *Reinventing Women—the Representation of Women in the Media During the Zia Years*, Maha Malik and Neelam Hussain, editors (Lahore: Simorgh Publications, 1985) pp. 80–82.
9. Clarified butter, used for cooking.