

Gender Sensitivity in School Textbooks in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study examines the gender sensitivity of school textbooks in Bangladesh as school is a 'legitimate agent' of socialization to educate children. The study finds that there are gender discriminations and stereotypes in the textbooks in using language and portraying men and women. Less participation of women in writing and editing textbooks has made things worse. However the study ends with some recommendations to improve the gender sensitivity situation in the textbooks.

Introduction

Children learn about the world mostly from family and from the school. School is formally charged by law as a legitimate agent of socialization to educate our children (Richardson, 1977 cited in Evans and Davies, 2000). The formal education in this 'legitimate agent' is given through textbooks. Usually these textbooks are prepared by learned and experienced teachers. But studies show, the textbooks are not free from gender bias. In the studies conducted in different countries show that most textbooks are mostly written by men (Gershuny, 1977 cited in Dominguez, 2003) where women suffer from low visibility, male references outnumber the female one and (Hartman and Judd, 1978 cited in Dominguez, 2003) and males are overwhelming shown to be aggressive, argumentative, and competitive (Evans and Davies, 2000). Hartman and Judd also demonstrated that women's stereotypical roles were related to housework and childcare. Women's household chores were exemplified by cooking, changing diapers, doing laundry. Men, on the other hand, were depicted fixing the car, changing electrical bulbs and/or mowing the lawn (Hartman and Judd, 1978 cited in Dominguez, 2003).

This study examines the gender sensitivity of school textbooks in Bangladesh. It is important to investigate that due to the importance of textbooks to build up the worldview of children on any issue. If the textbooks remain discriminative in any form among class, gender or

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ethnicity it will increase the discrimination in the society. In this article, emphasis has been given on gender sensitivity of textbooks. Along with gender responsiveness, the study has also included the reproductive health issue of adolescents as a related matter of investigation. Recently, few texts and chapters on HIV/AIDS have been included in textbooks. This study also has investigated those chapters as the researchers want to see HIV/AIDS as a gender issue.

Reproductive Health

Reproductive health is very much important area with which adolescent students must be oriented. Adolescents have unique reproductive and sexual health needs. Adolescent Reproductive Health (ARH) is a particular area of concern which covers teen sex, sexually transmitted infections, birth control, and teen pregnancy are a few of the clinical and social issues to which they should be oriented through textbooks. Otherwise they will learn these issues from other channels which might be full of confusion, wrong information and abusive ideas to women. This study tends to examine whether there is any information included in the textbooks or not on reproductive health.

World Health Organization (WHO) provides a comprehensive idea of reproductive health:

Within the framework of WHO's definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, reproductive health addresses the reproductive processes, functions and system at all stages of life. Reproductive health, therefore, implies that people are able to have a responsible, satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so.

Implicit in this are the right of men and women to be informed of and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of fertility regulation of their choice, and the right of access to appropriate health care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant (www.who.int).

WHO's idea of reproductive health can be summarized as the peoples ability of responsible, satisfying and safe sex life, freedom to decide in reproduction, right to access health care service of parents for a healthy infant. And students should be oriented with these aspects of reproductive health which would consist sex education, reproduction process and rights related to reproductive health. This study examines the status of reproductive health information in the textbooks.

Gender Aspect of HIV/AIDS

In the existing discourse of HIV/AIDS women are described more vulnerable for the structure of her organ particularly. On the other hand women were never the primary source of HIV. The first HIV positive

person of the world was found in 1982 in America and he was a man. The first HIV positive person found in Bangladesh in 1989 was also a man. We see women are victim of HIV, not responsible for it. So highlighting woman's body vulnerable can be counted as a misleading approach. The proposition overlooks the fact that woman are victim of the situation. Women are relatively poor and stay far from awareness information; they do not have the power to oblige men to use condom; due to poverty, finding no other way they come to the profession of sex work and become infected by men.

There was a round table meeting in 2009 jointly organized by UNFPA and *Prothom Alo* (*Prothom Alo*, 1 December, 2009). In that meeting, the discussants emphasized on men's participation in the campaign on preventing HIV/AIDS. Their prime recommendations were:

- For effective prevention of HIV infection the participation of men in all levels of the society is mostly needed.
- The idea of participation of men should be emphasized in the national policy of this regard.
- In the text books the idea should be included and it should be discussed in the classrooms.

In recent times, chapters have been included on HIV/AIDS issue in the textbooks. This study will examine the gender aspect of those chapters.

Method

The key objective of this research is to analyze the gender sensitivity of textbooks published by National Curriculum and Textbook Board of the Government of Bangladesh. Along with that, the status of some other closely related issues like reproductive health and HIV/AIDS are also examined in this study. For content analysis, all 33 books from class four to class eight published by National Curriculum and Textbook Board of the Government of Bangladesh have been selected.

For analysis, qualitative method has been chosen for content analysis of the selected texts. It will give us some scopes of in-depth analysis and connecting the findings with the greater societal sphere. Qualitative methodology allows the researcher to 'get close to the data' thereby developing the analytical, conceptual, and categorical components of explanation from the data itself – rather than from the preconceived, rigidly structured, and highly quantified techniques that pigeonhole the empirical social world into the operational definitions that the researcher has constructed (Filstead, 1970 cited in Chadwick et al, 1984).

State of Gender Sensitivity in Textbooks

The picture of gender sensitivity in the textbooks is not encouraging. The study finds that there are gender discriminations and stereotypes in using language and portraying men and women. Less participation of women in writing and editing textbooks has made things worse.

A. Less Participation of Women in Writing Textbooks

Women have less participation in writing textbooks. Hence the texts of textbooks appear with gender insensitivity and biased to male chauvinism. The same account happened in editing and drawing cover and layout of the textbooks. The writer lists of the selected 33 books show women are sharing only 23% (25 among 111 writers) of the total number of writers of the text books. In the case of editing those books, the participation of women is very low. Among 54 editors, there were only 3 (6%) women only. Because of less participation of women in writing and editing text books has left those books with a lot of gender insensitivity. Though the participation of women doesn't guarantee gender sensitivity but the increase of participation is needed in three aspects: 1. Women have the right to participate in every kind of academic and creative sphere, 2. A man cannot understand and sense the problems of women and dominance of patriarchy in that level as a woman can do. Her experience is unique in this case in comparison with man and 3. Women have better chance to understand women's issues, interest and needs.

B. Insensitivity in Language

In many cases gender neutral words have not been used in the textbooks. Instead of using 'student' ('Shiksharthi') the gender divided words 'male student' and 'female student' ('Chhatro-Chhatri') have been used. Even the word 'male student' ('Chhatro') has been considered as gender neutral word and been applied for female students as well.¹ But there is other gender neutral word 'Shiksharthi' in Bengali language. The same thing happens with the words 'male farmer' and 'female farmer' ('Krishan-Krishani'). Some words like 'Chairman' and '*Mohila*' have been used frequently which are not politically correct.

C. Men are Powerful, Women are Weaker

In the textbooks men are always found in strong and powerful characters. The position like director, controller, money earner, distributor and lender, hard worker are occupied by males. But females are portrayed as weaker than males, less skilled and subordinate.² It has been seen that working women are less paid than men in mathematics books.³ In all cases man is described as the owner of resources and wealth and he is distributing those among offspring and depriving wife.⁴ Apart from this portrayal of gender discriminative picture, this also orients students to

¹ *My Bengali Book*, class 5, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 12.

² *Lower Secondary Mathematics*, class 7, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka., p. 29 and 36.

³ *Primary Mathematics*, class 4, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 108.

⁴ *Lower Secondary Mathematics*, class 8, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 142.

cheat or deprive other. But this can be taught in a better way, with better examples. It is also seen that men are doing hardworking job like taking care of livestock, and women are engaged in preserving eggs.⁵ Preserving eggs or stuffs like that are no less important. Students should be aware of the fact and importance of women's valuable but unpaid role in agriculture/domestic work. In the process of agricultural jobs, women do a major part of it at home which is not recognized. Nowadays they work in the crop field as well. These changes should be endorsed in the textbooks so that students can be oriented with the diversified works done by women.

In a similar study, Robaet Ferdous and Firoz Jaman Chowdhury (Ferdous and Chowdhury, 2008) critically analyze a poem by Rabindranath Tagore entitled 'Birpurosh' (Heroic Man) included in Bengali Book (*Amar Bangla Boi*) of class four, which describes a story where a boy travels with his mother and saves her from the attack of bandits. It is implied in the poem that the mother being an adult woman has to be saved by her son even though he is a boy. Any other poem by Rabindranath could be selected which does not consist gender bias.

Mathematics Books: A Hub of Gender Stereotypes

The mathematics books published by Textbook Board are especially malicious by gender stereotypes. These stereotypes are not constructed directly but the indirect but consistent portrayal, in turn, reinforces the stereotypes learned from society of the students. Here are some examples of stereotypes which are evident especially in Arithmetic:

- **Women are weak in mathematics:** In the mathematics book of class 5, one problem was stated in this way – “The marks of mathematics achieved by students: Mithu 85, Rina 80, Raju 82, Rani 65, Rita 60...”⁶
- **Women to be deprived in getting money and assets:** A lot of examples can be mentioned in this regard: 1. “Uncle of Seema ... gives tk 15,600 to his son and tk 10,890 to his daughter ...”⁷ (the daughter is getting lesser money from her father in comparison with her brother). 2. “Abdul Latif has two daughters and one son. He gives his son additional tk 9830 than elder daughter”⁸ (Again the daughters are getting lesser money from her father in comparison with her brother). 3. “Moyeen Uddin Saheb distributes 12% of his assets to his wife, 20% to his son and rest 816,000 taka to the daughter. What is the

⁵ *Agricultural Study Book*, class 8, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 90.

⁶ *Primary Mathematics*, class 5, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 117.

⁷ *Primary Mathematics*, class 5, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 9.

⁸ *Primary Mathematics*, class 5, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 6.

amount of his total assets?”⁹ (The wife is getting lesser amount of assets than the son). 4. “Distribute 170 taka among 50 men and women in a way that every man gets 3.50 taka and every woman gets 3.25 taka.”¹⁰ (Every woman is given lesser money than every man).

- **All buyers are men:** In mathematics books the control over money is solely dominated by men which is a stereotype. In the mathematics book of class 8 and in page number 55, in three consecutive problems all buyers were men: 1. “Rashid buys a Parker pen ...”, 2: “Habib buys 50 kg rice in the rate taka 15 per kg ...”, 3. “Taher buys 40 kg rice by 300 taka ...”.¹¹ There was no woman buying something.
- **Women cannot work equally like men:** “Two males equal three females” – thus one problem measures the skills of men and women. In the class 7 book, one problem was stated in this way: “2 males does works equal to 3 females...”¹² In the same book other problem was stated in this way: “1 man, 1 woman and 1 boy can complete a work together in 5 days. But 5 men, 5 women and 5 boys can complete 7/12 portion of the work together in 1 day. How much days are needed for a man to complete the work *alone*?”¹³ (emphasis added) This problem creates an impression that a man can do some works *alone* (but a woman? Never).”
- In one problem a stigmatizing word ‘strilok’ (wo-man) was used.¹⁴

D. Women without Identity

In some cases women are without identity. They are introduced with the name of their husbands. In that way we find Mrs Kamal¹⁵ and Mrs Chowdhury¹⁶. Presenting women by their names and identities is necessary.

E. Women are Employed for Some ‘Feminine’ Roles

In text books women are portrayed as some so called feminine and stereotypical roles like loving mother, nurse and health workers. They are not found in any challenging role though in reality they are doing diversified jobs. In English book of class five it is seen, being a good

⁹ *Lower Secondary Mathematics*, class 8, Textbook The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Lower Secondary Mathematics*, class 8, Textbook Board of Bangladesh, p. 143.

¹¹ See *Lower Secondary Mathematics*, class 8, Textbook Board of Bangladesh, p. 55.

¹² *Lower Secondary Mathematics*, class 7, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 35.

¹³ *Lower Secondary Mathematics*, class 7, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 35.

¹⁴ *Lower Secondary Mathematics*, class 7, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 29.

¹⁵ English Book, Class 6, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 93.

¹⁶ English Book, Class 6, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 79.

student, a girl Mahmuda chooses the profession of nurse.¹⁷ Females are employed in some repetitive works like cooking, washing clothes, sweeping home and child caring. While women are participating in agricultural works, they are given the role of assisting men.¹⁸

On the other hand, men are portrayed in many dignified professions like scientist, artist, intellectual and *shahid* freedom fighter. One exception was Begum Rokeya. Today women are doing job with efficiency in every sector of society. This picture is absent in the text books.

F. Male Dominated Religious Studies

In Islamic Studies Books we see a male dominated world. In the ‘Ideal Life Sketches’ (‘Adorsho Jibon Chorit’) chapters, there were very few ‘ideal’ female characters. Though the names of Hazrat Khadiza, Hazrat Ayesha and Hazrat Fatima are mentioned but with the connection of the Prophet. In describing Hazrat Fatima, she has been portrayed in some stereotypical roles. She was described as an honest character, her title was ‘Zahra’ (very beautiful), she used to do all works including child caring and serving the husband.¹⁹ In the Islamic Studies book of class 6, the businesswoman or entrepreneur Hazrat Khadiza was less highlighted, rather her marriage with prophet, taking Islam as religion were more highlighted. In the last line of the text it was said: “Her honest character, respectfulness to the husband and sacrifice for Islam have made her great among world women”.²⁰

In other books of religious studies, the picture is almost same. In Hindu Studies books, there are some chapters entitled ‘Ideal Life Sketches’ (‘Adorsho Jibon Chorit’) as well, where most of the life sketches presented were of males.²¹

G. Women in Positive Role

In some cases positive image of women has been portrayed. In Bengali Book of class five, a woman tells the story of *Mahasthan Garh* to two men.²² In some pictures in textbooks both male students and female

¹⁷ English for Today, class 7, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 50.

¹⁸ See in the English book of class six where a woman brings food for her working husband (*English Book*, Class 6, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 93).

¹⁹ *Islamic Studies*, class 7, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 66.

²⁰ *Islamic Studies*, class 6, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 61.

²¹ In class six of *Hindu Studies* (class 6, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 52-64) the life sketches included 3 males and 1 female. In class seven of *Hindu Studies* (class 7, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 61-76) the life sketches included 5 males and 1 female.

²² *My Bengali Book*, class 5, The Board of National Curriculum and Textbooks, Dhaka, p. 104.

students were found in laboratories and libraries.²³ They were found in some good positive roles as well.²⁴ In the Hindu Studies book of class 5 there is no chapter of 'Ideal Life Sketches' ('Adorsho Jibon Chorit'), but one chapter was on the Patriot Jona (Deshpremika Jona). Though the Bengali word 'deshpremika' is not politically correct, but the chapter itself positive in terms of portraying great women in the textbooks.

H. Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS Situation

There is no text in the textbooks on reproductive health. But reproductive health is very much important area with which students must be oriented. Adolescent Reproductive Health (ARH) is a particular area of concern which covers teen sex, sexually transmitted infections, birth control, and teen pregnancy are a few of the clinical and social issues to which they should be oriented through textbooks. Otherwise they will learn these issues from other channels which might be full of confusion, wrong information and abusive ideas to women.

Recently, in General Science Books from class VI to XII, a chapter has been included on HIV/AIDS. This is the result of continuous campaign for preventing the HIV/AIDS disease. But this chapter may be found as a sudden addition and over emphasized with the other chapters. It could come as a part of other diseases or public health in a chapter. In General Science book of class Eight there is a chapter entitled 'some general diseases' where AIDS is included with blindness, cancer, jaundice, diabetes, and high blood pressure and drug addiction. Though all of these diseases are not 'general' at all, but the position of AIDS juxtaposes with other diseases which seems normal and acceptable. But in the General Science books of class six and seven it has been appeared as the last and as an extra chapter at the end of the book, hence over emphasized. In all those chapters students are advised to abide by religious and social norms and values to avoid infection of HIV. This suggestion may create ambiguity in terms of gender sensitivity. In true sense both religion and social norms are dominated by patriarchy. In that sense both religion and social norms are conservative towards feminine rights.

Conclusion

The study finds that the picture of gender sensitivity in textbooks is not encouraging. The situation must be improved by taking some measures. The participation of women in writing and editing textbooks should be increased. Moreover orientation and training on gender awareness, equality of women can be arranged for the writers, artists/illustrators and editors.

²³ See page no. 25 of *General Science* book of class 6, where in a picture a female student is found in action in a scientific laboratory.

²⁴ In a picture in the book *Introduction to the Environment: Science* of class 5, both males and females were found engaged in video conferencing (p. 150).

Ambiguous and relative terms/sentences should be avoided. While suggesting 'live moral life', the term morality should be defined in terms of place, time and person. Pictures should be used more carefully to avoid gender insensitivity. In text books, the chapters of HIV/AIDS shouldn't look like extra and sudden. It should be discussed with other diseases. Before HIV/AIDS, reproductive health including sex education should be discussed. Otherwise it would be read as over emphasized by the students. The suggestions here of abiding by social and religious norms are self-contradictory and the statements should be clear. Balanced use of religion would be a better idea. Relatively strict religious and societal norms are already keeping the low prevalence of HIV/AIDS. But religious and societal norm is driven by patriarchy, highlighting it may create newer discrimination to women. Basic information on reproductive health must be included in the textbooks.

In textbooks more women personalities, highlighting their positive, progressive and practical role, should be included in chapters like 'ideal life sketches', 'great personalities' or '*shahid* freedom fighters'. The characters which indicate power (i.e. director, buyer, lender, hardworking) should be portrayed for both of the genders. The characters which indicate power of intelligence (i.e. scientist, philosopher, intellectual, artist, poets) should be portrayed with balance. Women should be portrayed more in positive roles. Women shouldn't be portrayed only in certain professions like nurse, health workers or teachers. Rather they should be portrayed in different challenging professions. In domestic works like cooking, washing clothes, sweeping, child caring both males and females should be employed. In describing woman's identity her marital identity shouldn't be used. Her independent and own identity should be described. In agriculture the labor of women shouldn't be depicted as minor, invisible, partial and auxiliary to men. It should be portrayed as complete work with social and economic value. Besides, the domestic works should be described as productive and payable. The endorsement of its significance of maintaining society running in cycle of productive activities is needed. Special care should be taken for mathematics books. It creates a lot of gender stereotypes in terms of distribution of money, who would be the buyer, strength of women etc. Gender insensitive and stigmatized words and concepts should be avoided in text books. Non-biased words should be used. Instead of using 'male farmer' and 'female farmer', 'male student' and 'female student', the words like farmer and '*shiksharhi*' should be used.

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Appendix: Lists of Books that are Examined

- Textbooks of Class IV: Amar Bangla Boi, Prathomik Gonit, Poribesh Porichiti Somaj, Islam Shiksha, Poribesh Porichiti Biggan and English for Today.
- Textbooks of Class V: Amar Bangla Boi, Prathomik Gonit, Poribesh Porichiti Somaj, Islam Shiksha, Poribesh Porichiti Biggan and English for Today.
- Textbooks of Class VI: Charupath, Nimno Madhyomik Gonit, Sadharon Biggan, Samajik Biggan, Islam Shiksha, Krishi Shiksha and English for Today.
- Textbooks of Class VII: Soptoborna, Nimno Madhyomik Gonit, Sadharon Biggan, Samajik Biggan, Islam Shiksha, Krishi Shiksha and English for Today.
- Textbooks of Class VII: Sahityo Konika, Nimno Madhyomik Gonit, Sadharon Biggan, Samajik Biggan, Islam Shiksha, Krishi Shiksha and English for Today.
- All books are published by National Curriculum and Textbook Board, Bangladesh Government and for 2009 session.