

# GENDER EDUCATION: AN EVALUATION OF THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN YEMENI ELT TEXTBOOKS

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## **Abstract**

This study evaluates the image of women in Yemeni ELT textbooks. The aim is to find out how women and men are represented in them, and to what extent these books show equality between the two sexes. The results of the study reveal that there is under representation in the number of female characters in the ELT texts, illustrations, dialogues etc., and overrepresentation of males there and that the reference to the occupation of female characters is mainly stereotypical or non-existent. This, however, does not reflect the recent trend in the Yemeni society towards equality between men and women.

The study suggests some directions for future research in the field as well as for material writing that would promote equal representation for both men and women.

## **Introduction**

For many years, the teaching of English language has had an important status in the Yemeni education system as well as other fields of life. The importance of the ability to be competent in English has increased significantly because this language has widespread acceptability as the most dominant language across the world. Learning English has become popular and necessary for business, commerce, science technology and access to the internet. Modern means of global communications such as journals, newspapers and the internet, use English, and this is true about important studies and research in humanities, social sciences etc. as well. As a result, people who know English have global accessibility to information and knowledge.

Being competent in English enables people from different backgrounds to communicate with one another, and with the world at large that is increasingly becoming more connected. As the Yemeni people are getting integrated with the international community through English, English has come to play an important role in the life of the Yemenis, a role which is increasing every day.

The predominant view seems to be that unless the graduates of schools and universities in Yemen learn English and acquire a fair degree of competence in it, they may not obtain good jobs.

English is taught in schools, universities, institutes across the country. There are now more teachers and learners of English in Yemen than in other foreign languages. This is not to say that other languages such as French and German are not taught in Yemen, but simply to suggest that the language in great demand in Yemen is English. Moreover, this language has increasingly become an important prerequisite requirement for entrance to higher educational institutes such as universities as well as for employment.

The Yemeni people, therefore, place an extremely high value on the knowledge of English and the school education in Yemen aims at providing this to as many students as possible. The school curriculum clearly defines that the goal of foreign language teaching is to ensure that students acquire an acceptable level of proficiency in English before they graduate from high school. This objective comes within the frame-work of public education and within the ideal goals of school education. For the most part, however, this does not occur in practice at school for want of necessary conditions such as level of intensity, exposure to the foreign language, classrooms condition, technical aids, etc.

As a result, students depend on both the teacher and ELT textbooks in learning English. The textbook is used as a guide inside and outside the classroom. Most of the language that students acquire during their learning at school is from the textbook with the help of the teacher.

However, it has been claimed that ELT textbooks taught at schools "discriminate against women and that they possess male-as-norm elements" (Nilsen et al.1974:182; Sakita 1995:2; and Porecca 1984:709). Gender representation in course books will have an unconscious influence on the students as language learners and users if they include sexist features. Using these textbooks in teaching reinforces sexism in the society as "sexism is an unconscious cultural bias, expressed in and reinforced by the language people learn from childhood on (Trudgill, 1974).

This paper attempts to investigate the representation of female in EFL textbooks taught for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade of the secondary school level.

#### **Objectives of the study**

The study aims to evaluate the image of women in Yemeni ELT textbooks used for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade of secondary school level in all governmental schools in Yemen. The focus will be on the following:

- Number of male and female characters both in texts and illustrations in the course book and work book,
- First-place occurrences by male and female characters in texts, dialogues in both the course book and work book, and ,
- How males and females are depicted in different occupational roles in both texts and illustrations.

#### **Delimitation of the study**

This study aims to evaluate the image of women in ELT textbooks (English Course for Yemen & Pupils Book No.4) used for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade of secondary school level.

#### **The Hypothesis of the study**

It is hypothesized that the image of women in the ELT textbooks of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade of the secondary school level is misrepresented and that the representations of gender and gender roles in these books do not reflect the development of the Yemeni society towards equality of men and women.

#### **Research Background**

Since the mid-1990s, several scholars in the field of language education, second language acquisition and bilingualism have addressed themselves to the influence of gender on access to linguistic and interactional resources, on the dynamics of classroom interaction, and on language learning outcomes ( Ehrlich

1997, Norton 2000, Pavlenko Blackledge, Piller, & Teusch \_ Dwyer 2001 , Sunderland, 2000). The field of TESOL has exhibited a growing interest in the impact of gender on ESL and EFL learning, seen in the increasing number of studies and papers written on the topic (In Norton & Pavlenko 2000).

In fact, the study of language and gender began with the year 1970 by the publication of three books which have continued to significantly influence such socio-linguistic works as: *Male/ Female Language* (M.R.Key), *Language and women's place* (R.Lakoff) and *Difference and Dominance* (Thorne& Henley) (in Ansarey& Babaii 2003).

Other relevant studies on gender and its manifestations on EFL textbooks are by Hartman and Judd (1978): "*Sexism and TESOL Materials*, Hellinger (1980) "*For men must work, women must weep: Sexism in English Language textbooks used in German Schools*" and Porreca (1984) "*Sexism in the current ESL Textbooks*"(Ibid.)

In their review of several TESOL textbooks examining the firstness image between women and men (the order of mention of females and males) and their stereotyped roles of females and males, Hartman and Judd (1978) found evidence that ELT materials reflect sexist attitudes and values. Hellinger (1980) conducted a thorough study of 131 passages from three ELT textbooks used in German schools and found that men participated in over 93% of the passages, while not even 30% of the texts included any reference to women. In addition, it was mentioned that 80% of the speakers were male and that women were rarely engaged in any "demanding, interesting, or successful" activities, while male roles represented a broad range of occupational options. Porreca (1984:718) investigated how sexism is manifested in ESL textbooks by analyzing the content of 15 ESL textbooks which are widely used. She focused on the following categories:

- Omission (male/female ratio) in text and illustrations.
- Firstness
- Occupations
- Frequency of male nouns to female nouns.
- Female-exclusive masculine generic constructions;
- Types and frequency of adjectives for men and women.

In every category of her study, she found that there is evidence that sexism continues to flourish in ESL textbooks. She reported that "although females comprise slightly over half of the population of the United States, they are represented only half as often as males in both texts and illustrations (Porreca 1984:718).

Moreover, studies of the portrayal of women in ESL/EFL textbooks (Hartman and Judd 1978 and Ansary&Babaii 2003) have shown that there is a great bias in textbooks against representation of women vis-à-vis men. Furthermore, the roles assigned to women in some textbooks are stereotypical roles of mother and home maker. This depiction of women in stereotypical roles only helps to reinforce the out dated notion that "women stay at home and men go out to work".

In Japan, Osugi, Sadakane, Shimagouchi, and Takahashi (1990:236) were among the first to pay attention to gender issues in Japanese EFL materials. They made an extensive quantitative examination of four major monolingual English dictionaries, published in Japan for sexual bias in definitions with respect to imagery, number of

appearances, personal characters, abilities, occupation, money and appearances. They concluded that sex-biased content and sexual stereotypes rampant in literature might originally be the product of a dictionary which unnecessarily perpetuates these images and suggest that conscious effort must be made to avoid them.

In addition, content analysis of EFL textbooks in the 1970s and 1980s found evidence of gender bias in the following senses: exclusion, subordination & distortion and degradation: for example,

- Exclusion: males were over-represented (e.g. Marlis Hellinger, 1980)
- Subordination and distortion i.e. men tend to occupy both more powerful and greater range of occupational roles than did women (e.g. Karen Porecca, 1988) both males and females performed gender stereotypical activities (e.g. Madeleine Strong Cincotta 1978)
- Degradation i.e. women tended to be stereotypically emotional and were more likely than male characters to be the butt of jokes (e.g. Pat Hartman and Elliot Judd, 1978 and of implied slurs (Sandra Talansky, 1986).

### **The importance of textbooks in language learning and teaching.**

Textbooks are considered very important for teaching and learning the target language because teachers use them as important and immediate linguistic link between the students and the foreign language from one side, and between students and foreign culture on the other. Regarding the importance of ELT textbooks, Sheldon (1988:237) suggests that textbooks not only "represent the visible heart of any ELT program but also offer considerable advantages for both the student and the teacher in the ESL/EFL classroom". Haycroft (1998) for example, suggests that one of the primary advantages of using textbooks is that they are psychologically essential for students since their progress and achievement can be measured concretely when we use them. Sheldon (1988) also points out that students often harbor expectations about using a textbook in their particular language classroom and program and believe that published materials have more credibility than teacher-generated or 'in-house' material. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) have pointed out that textbooks may play a pivotal role in innovation. They suggest that textbooks can support teachers through potentially disturbing and threatening change process, demonstrate new and/or untried methodologies, introduce change gradually, and create scaffolding upon which teachers can build a more creative methodology of their own. More over, "textbooks have two major advantages: first, textbooks are one of the most tangible, the most accessible and the most concrete elements to single out, compared with all the other variables such as teachers, students, physical settings, and administration, which influence on actual learning environments in a complicated way, second, textbooks tend to be far more authoritative and more influential over the textbook users than other elements of classroom language learning/teaching... Both learners and teachers tend to depend on textbooks as a reliable information source as well as teaching tools' (Motohiro 2000:83).

In addition to the aforesaid advantages of ELT textbooks O' Neil (1982) has indicated that textbooks are generally sensitive to students' needs, even if they are

not designed specifically for them, they are efficient in terms of time and money, and they can and should allow for adaptation and improvisation. Cunningsworth (1995) argues that textbooks are an effective resource for self-directed learning, an effective resource for presenting material, a source of ideas and activities, and a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence.

Recently, researchers have started to criticize EFL/ESL textbooks for their social and cultural biases. For example, Clarke and Clarke (1990), Carrel and Korwitz (1994), and Renner (1997) point out that many EFL/ESL textbooks contain rampant examples of gender bias, sexism and stereotyping. They describe such gender-related inequities as: the relative invisibility of female characters, the unrealistic and sexist portrayals of

both men and women, stereotypes involving social roles, occupations, relationships and actions as well as linguistic bias such as 'gendered' English and sexist language. Findings such as these have led researchers to believe that the continuing prevalence of sexism and gender stereotype in many EFL/ESL textbooks may reflect the existing unequal power relationships between the sexes in many cultures, the prolonged marginalization of females, and the misrepresentation of writers with social attitudes that are incongruent with the present day realities of the target language culture (Quoted in Litz 2003:6). Allwright (1982), for example, suggests that textbooks are too inflexible and generally reflect the pedagogic, psychological, and linguistic preferences and biases of their authors. Subsequently, the educational methodology that a textbook promotes will influence the classroom setting by indirectly imposing external language objectives and learning constituents on students as well as potentially incongruent instructional paradigms on the teachers who use them. Moreover, the pedagogic principles that are often displayed in many textbooks may also be conflicting, contradictory or even out-dated depending on the capitalizing interests and exploitations of the sponsoring agent (Ibid).

If the important and influential role of textbooks is accepted, then the way these textbooks portray the various persons in the text and the way people are shown will directly affect the students. This has to do with the important implication for the selection of ELT textbook for teaching and learning English at different levels of schools in Yemen. What are the textbooks taught? Are they appropriate for all students? Do they represent male and female equally? Do they reflect the real development of women in the society? With these questions in view, this paper will evaluate the image of women as projected in the current English textbook namely, English Course for Yemen: Book 4+Pupils'Book 4 which are taught at the 10<sup>th</sup> grade of the secondary school in Yemen.

In analyzing these textbooks from the above point of view, a number of different aspects will be taken into considerations, such the gender distribution of characters, the description of gender / gender roles and representation of gender in illustrations.

### **Methodology**

**Material used:** The textbooks evaluated in the present study are English Course for Yemen i.e. the Pupils' Book (the main course book) and the Work Book (Exercises

Book). The pupils' book contains 58 pages while the Work Book contains 112 pages. These books are prepared by the authors, Terry O' Neill and Peter Snow, and are authorized by the Ministry of Education for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade of secondary school level and currently used in all governmental schools throughout Yemen.

#### Data analysis

- To find out the number of female and male characters in texts and illustration of English Course No.4, (Pupils 'Book + Workbook), all female and male characters are counted in a straight forward way across the lessons in each unit of both books (See. Table 1)
- To find out the first place occurrence (who appear first) of female and male characters in dialogues, texts and illustrations, all characters are counted across the lessons of each unit of both books (See Table 2).
- The number, kinds and range of social occupations of male and female characters in all the units of the two books are examined and grouped into two categories, male and female. (Tables 3&4).

#### Findings

The results of the study support the hypothesis that the image of women in Yemeni ELT textbooks is misrepresented. The data analyses of the two selected books show that there is no balance between male and female characters numerical weighting. **Table 1** presents the number of male/female occurrence in texts and illustration in the pupils' book, male characters (76%) found to occur more than female characters (24%). In the work book, male characters (71%) were found to occur more than female characters (29%).

**(Table 1) The number of male and female characters in texts and illustrations.**

Textbook	Male	Female	Total
Pupils' Book	116 76%	37 24%	153
Work Book	134 71%	55 29%	189

With regard to first-place occurrence between male / female characters, the data reveal that they are not represented equally in dialogues and illustrations examined, in both books the rate of occurrence of females was less than that of males. Males were (61%) and females were (39%) in the pupils' book. In the work book, males were (87%) and females were only (13%) (See Table 2).

**(Table 2) First place occurrence of male and female characters in texts and illustrations**

Textbook	Male	Female	Total
Pupils' Book	16 61%	10 39%	26
Work Book	7 87%	1 13%	8

With regard to occupations and social roles mentioned in both books, the investigation reveals that there are a considerably larger number of occupations held by men as compared to women. Men hold a variety of positions at all levels. But the occupations mentioned for females are just stereotypical. **Tables 3 and 4** show the different jobs assigned for males and females. Males were found to have 33 different jobs out of 40 and females only 7 jobs of 40 in the pupils book with a total ratio of male: female = 82.50% : 17.50%. In the work book males were found to have 27 different jobs and 5 jobs for females with a total ratio of male: female = 84.37%: 15.63%.

**(Table 3). How females and males are depicted in occupational roles in texts and illustrations in Pupils' Book. ( Course Book)**

<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
Painter/ farmer*	nurse*
Pilot*/engineer	secretary
Chef/architect	air-hostess*
Journalist/ TV reporter	check-in clerk*
Baker /booking clerk	student*
Diver*/fisherman	teacher*
Minister/teacher	doctor*
Reporter/captain	
Coastguard/writer	
Doctor/explorer	
Captain*/trader*	
Businessman	
Navigator/sailor	
Surgeon/scientist	
Radiographer/chemist	
Physician/ anatomist*	
Radio reporter/ merchants*	

**(Table 4). How females and males are depicted in occupational roles in texts and illustrations in the Work Book ( Exercises' Book)**

<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
Fisherman*/farmer*	nurse*
Carpenter/pilot*	teacher*
Zoo-keeper/builder	doctor*
Potter/engineer/chef	air-hostess*
Booking clerk/architect	house-wife
Journalist*/doctor*/scientist	
TV reporter /check-in clerk	
Diver/chemist	
Driver/Minister/captain	
Radiographer*businessmen	
Explorer/ clerk/captain/sailor	

### Discussion and conclusion

The objective of this study was to evaluate the image of women in the Yemeni ELT textbooks taught at the 10<sup>th</sup> grade of secondary school education in all governmental schools through out the country.

The findings of our investigation reveal that these two books do not reflect the current status of Yemeni women i.e. equality between men and women in different fields of the society, instead, the texts made females appear less important than males in illustrations and dialogues.

In addition, the data show that male firstness was common; females were more visible in stereotypical roles in texts and illustrations as well. It appears that males are having a variety of jobs, including important positions such as those of minister, scientist, anatomist, businessman, merchants, explorers, etc. However, females are shown to have limited occupations, or stereotypical jobs, such as those of a nurse, secretary, air hostess, doctor, teacher, student and housewife. As Renner (1997) states, that in most English textbooks "female characters are fewer and have more limited roles than male."

In conclusion, we may say that sexism and bias were found almost in all areas investigated in this study, particularly in terms relevant to the numerical weighting of male/female characters, in the ordering of the first place occurrences of males and females and female occupations.

It is suggested, therefore, that ELT textbooks selected for Yemeni learners should reconsider gender roles and representations. Textbook authors should deal with the problem of unequal relationships between male and female characters in texts and as suggested by Jones, Kiteu and Sunderland (2000) the "authors either attempt to make the occupational roles of men and women in textbooks mirror those of the society, or create positive role models in the textbooks by describing women who are employed in a wider range at a higher level of profession than they really are, and perhaps even assuring that there are the same number of men and women in the profession described (for instance, the same number of .....). They believe that it is possible to achieve gender balance in the language practice opportunities but that the risk is that textbooks may lack credibility when they do not describe the society as it really is"(Quoted in Holmqvist & Gjorup2006).

Recent writings on textbook content (Ansary and Babii 2003; Beebe1998; Kanemaru1998; Pierce1990; Wolfson 1989) suggest that textbooks should manifest a balanced view of the role of women in society, and not perpetuate inaccurate generalizations about women and their roles (Quoted in Otlowski 2003).

Wolfson (1989:185) adds, "Teachers and curriculum writers need to be aware of sexist language usage and also of sexist bias in the materials they select for use in the classroom. The monitoring of classroom materials for bias toward sexism as well as racism and other linguistic manifestations of prejudice is very much the responsibility of teachers and administrators. "As Halliday (1978) states, the society defines the language that is appropriate for certain situations: the context of the situation and the context of culture determine correct language for the situation. If textbooks present language



that is not suited for certain situations or do not accurately represent society, the language learned may well be unsuitable and a cause of cross-cultural pragmatic failure.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that since the detailed investigation of the study was limited only to the course book and work book of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade class, its results, therefore, cannot be generalized to other textbooks of other levels taught in governmental schools. It is hoped that this piece of work encourages other researchers in ELT as well as educators to continue further research in the area of gender bias, gender roles and, in particular, of gender education.

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