

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gender Equity Teaching in Primary Education: Is the Fifth Grade NCTB *English for Today* Textbook Gender-Inclusive for the Students in Bangladesh?

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the fifth grade NCTB textbook of English for Today to investigate gender equity instances while analyzing through the lenses of Butler's Gender Performativity, Hall's Representation and Kohlberg's Cognitive Development theories, to measure the degree of gender inclusivity of the textbook (if any). The primary data in this research is collected from the textbook, evidenced by activities, professions, and instances, to argue if the socio-cultural representations are 'gendered'. This research is a response to the issues of gender discrimination and unequal treatments toward the women in our society. The purpose of this research is to bridge the gap between the current textbook and one particular mission of the National Curriculum Framework 2021 – "To ensure a sensitive, accountable, integrated, and participatory education system". The qualitative data analysis utilizes the techniques of CDA (critical discourse analysis), thematic analysis and content analysis from the lexical and illustration data. The finding suggests that the textbook in concern is gender-equitable 'to a certain extent' as there is sufficient evidence, with room for improvement in particular areas. This finding helps the NCTB textbook writers to address whether there is any shortcoming and make necessary improvement in the following editions. As limitation, this paper is unable to address critical concerns for third gender, a study as such requires to be standalone. There exists a potential for further research on third gender's inclusiveness to the textbooks, along with the theoretical impact of equitable representations. This study maintains a methodological rigor through its theoretical framework, systemic data collection and analysis to ensure a comprehensive and reliable evaluation gender equity in the textbook.

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1. Introduction

In Bangladesh, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) develops and maintains the primary, secondary, and higher secondary national curriculum with the primary goal of ensuring a standardized education system. As the

National Education Policy 2012 prioritizes the primary education of Bangladesh, NCTB follows the guidelines on the basis of the National Curriculum Framework 2021¹ provided by the Ministry of Education². The subjects include English, Bengali, science, religious studies, social science, mathematics, and so on. This curriculum informs the content as well as teaching methodologies while establishing the learning objectives. It also standardizes assessment strategies for all of the incorporated subjects at the specific education levels. Also, the *Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)*³: *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, Target 4.5: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations*, aspiring gender equity teaching in primary education.

The necessity of a gender equitable teaching in Bangladesh is to be brought into question here. In the present-day context, the government has endorsed changes in policy across their organizations and institutions, yet discriminatory behavior and unequal treatment toward women persist at a large scale. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics survey report from 2015⁴ suggests that approximately 87% of ever-married women in Bangladesh have undergone domestic violence of some form during their lifetime. This report is among many surveys that foregrounds the ineffectiveness of gender equitable regulation – a clear lack of implementation per say.

These surveys and reports lay bare the existing hierarchies, mistreatments, and denial of equal access for women in terms of some of the most basic rights, and

¹https://nctb.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/nctb.portal.gov.bd/page/0d5a8524_e5bc4bfc_9e14_985380773fa9/2023-04-05-05-53-eb730ced57e4704a4e10e83b40a6d305.pdf

²https://nctb.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/nctb.portal.gov.bd/page/0d5a8524_e5bc4bfc_9e14_985380773fa9/2023-04-05-05-53-eb730ced57e4704a4e10e83b40a6d305.pdf

³<https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/4-quality-education/>

⁴<http://203.112.218.65:8008/WebTestApplication/userfiles/Image/SubjectMatterDataIndex/YearBook15.pdf>

all-equal opportunities sound like a far-fetched rhetoric. It is clear as daylight that policy-level interventions are falling short to craft a harmonious co-existence between the male-female binaries as the pre-existing values of patriarchy have already molded the biases and prejudices within this spectrum. It is from these assessments that I, along with numerous other academicians working in this field, succumb to the supposition that only through the teaching of equitable gender norms and values at the earliest possible stage of an individual's life is one of the few viable avenues left to be explored.

NCTB has explored various solutions to increase the effectiveness of the gender equitable lessons for the Bangladeshi students across every division. There have been modifications in previous years, dating back to textbooks written under the curriculum of 2012, the initiation point of the mentioned approach. Critics have welcomed the gender equitable teaching approach, although it has been an underlying factor as the more explicit efforts are made toward providing quality education that prepares the students of Bangladesh to overcome the challenges in the modern world. However, without a thorough analysis of the national textbooks, their effectiveness of deconstructing the pre-existing gender discriminations and binary oppositional hierarchies cannot be understood.

Contents that are gender sensitive and represent equity of the genders, both in terms of access and participation, are essential to challenge the stereotypical values. Judith Butler, Lawrence Kohlberg – theorists such as themselves have highlighted the importance of obtaining value at an early age. Primary education is the earliest social institution after family for children in terms of learning values of equity. A UNESCO report⁵ suggests that each year in Bangladesh, approximately 16,230,000 students are enrolled into primary schools. This underscores the potential impact of teaching gender equitable concepts.

Therefore, this paper identifies gender inequality and discrimination, a malady of a social phenomenon, reaches the root of an individual's psyche in the

⁵<https://uis.unesco.org/country/BD>

development phase and recognizes the potential impact of primary education to help eradicate it from within. Scholars and theorists working on gender-related fields are deemed as the intellectual compass for this paper, along with discourse analysis and interpreting representations as the core methods for assessing the data collected from the latest edition of primary *English for Today* textbook by NCTB.

1.1 Objectives

The objective of this paper is to investigate the latest Fifth Grade NCTB *English for Today* textbook to assess whether this textbook is gender-inclusive (if yes, to what extent), and to analyze the potential impacts and outcomes based on three acclaimed theories.

1.2 Rationale

This paper primarily recognizes discrimination and inequality of male-female gender binaries as a serious concern in the context of Bangladesh that requires immediate intervention. Additionally, the Sustainable Development Goal 4 aspires to ‘Eliminate All Discrimination in Education’ by 2030, aligning itself with the goal of this paper. Many can argue that the intervention can come from alternative areas, the concept of early education, its impact on psychological development and the consequence impact in the society are sufficient reasons to place the NCTB curriculum in the foreground. Concepts like gender or other socio-cultural phenomena can be taught without bias to this particular age-group within an institutional system and learning with the surrounding as well as societal interaction will not only render equitable learning effective, but also make English language learning more efficient. On that note, NCTB at the moment stands out for ‘the latest revision of the curricula brought about a wave of change that signals a step in the positive direction’ (Siddique, 2023). Since *English for Today* is the only NCTB textbook that teaches the English language, it sets the foundation to satisfy the growing need of English language proficiency in the technology-driven world of the 21st century – as stated by the NCTB chairman Professor Dr. A K M Reazul Hassan. Primary curriculum has received relatively less attention than the secondary although the former holds the potential for a greater impact. That is why

this paper launches a critical investigation into the Fifth Grade NCTB *English for Today* textbook by borrowing from prominent theorists and critics to ask the question *if*, and *to what extent* this textbook propels the lessons of gender-inclusivity.

2. Literature Review

The core issue that this paper is challenging is gender inequality which contributes to discrimination in Bangladesh. United Nations General Assembly's Article 1 states⁶ in 1979: "Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."

It is evident in the context of Bangladesh as well, that this phenomenon is at large in different levels of the society and culture. "Although, there has been steady progress in reducing gender inequality in different sectors (education, health, employment etc.) there exists a huge inequality in these sectors of Bangladesh and participation of women is very low compared to their male counterparts. Gender inequality has appeared as the major stumbling barrier in achieving the development targets" (Gender Inequality in Bangladesh, 2011, p. 5).

According to UNICEF⁷, "It (gender equity) refers to differential treatment that is fair and positively addresses a bias or disadvantage that is due to gender roles or norms or differences between the sexes. Equity ensures that women and men and girls and boys have an equal chance, not only at the starting point, but also when reaching the finishing line. It is about the fair and just treatment of both sexes that takes into account the different needs of the men and women, cultural barriers and (past) discrimination of the specific group" (Gender Equality: Glossary of Terms and Concepts, 2017, p. 3).

⁶<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/cedaw.pdf>

⁷<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/1761/file/Genderglossarytermsandconcepts.pdf>

Priess and Hyde's argument in the *Encyclopedia of Adolescence* in 2011 extends that, "The cognitive development approach to gender, pioneered by Lawrence Kohlberg, contends that children's ideas about gender develop in a stage-like manner. That is, as children gain knowledge of the gendered world around them, their thinking about gender changes in qualitative ways" (p. 101). This serves as evidence of placing importance on a child's early stages of development, when the values of society and culture are attained, in this particular regard – the notions of gender-based equity and diversity.

Manzoor Ahmed, Khondoker Shakhawat Ali and Kishwar Kamal Khan's "Bangladesh Education Sector Mapping"⁸ identifies inequality of inclusiveness between male and female students, as the latter showcase a significantly larger number in dropout rates. "Gender Inequality in Bangladesh", a study by Action Aid, highlights that female literacy rate is 39.32% lower than the target of National Education Policy's (NEP, 2010) 100% target, standing at approximately 60.68% (Ferdaush & Rahman, 2010, p. 9).

Other works on gender sensitive language in NCTB textbook draws the data from "class six, class seven, and class eight and analyses to distinguish whether there exists any proof of disparity in terms of the portrayal of gender through any entity (lexical items, images, other tools including graphical data, chart, etc.)" (Sakib, 2020, p. 1)⁹. Similar secondary curriculum study with gender analysis on the backdrop was conducted by Molla Huq in 2008, with the older curriculum which is not relevant today and it has been 15 years since such studies had been published by researchers. Furthermore, Mian Md. Naushaad Kabir's discussion of "incorporating literature into second or foreign language (L2 or FL) teaching has been noticed, especially at the higher secondary (the last stage of K-12) level in Bangladesh" (2021, p. 202) works with NCTB *English for Today* but disregards primary level textbooks. Only Afroza Aziz Suchana extensively worked on the

⁸https://www.academia.edu/29414316/Bangladesh_Education_Sector_Mapping

⁹https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345983471_Gender_Analysis_of_NCTB_textbooks_corresponding_to_the_usage_of_Language

grade 5 textbook to remark that “visibility and participation of women and men are not equally found in images and dictions” (2020b, p. 310). However, Suchana’s discussion quantifies in/equal representations, but is very limited in highlighting the impact on that particular age group of students. An example of teaching in government schools, explored by J M Saiful Islam, suggests that teachers “do not try new examples and they do not think the examples are gender biased” (2021, p. 43).

The significance of investigating into the primary curriculum in terms of gender inclusivity has been identified and justified. It begs to ask a following question concerning the present-day primary curriculum (which began to take shape in 2018) by NCTB whether it the young pupils are taught gender-equitable values. This paper undertakes the responsibility of obtaining data from the most recent *English for Today* textbook. The data intercepts and interprets the discourses from recurrent taxonomy and images, especially those that can be closely associated with the concepts of gender equity, or the lack of it.

3. Theoretical Framework

For the type of data that guides this paper, both the collection and analysis demand a conceptual framework backed up by a set of relevant theoretical lenses. Three theories concerning cognitive development, gender performativity and representation are dotted together to inform the conceptual framework, guiding a justifiable methodology. The framework addresses the parameters/baselines for qualitative analysis and explores if the class 5 *English for Today* textbook is effective enough to arouse gender-sensitivity among the primary students in Bangladesh.

3.1 ‘Cognitive Development Theory’ - Lawrence Kohlberg

Kohlberg’s argument in his ‘Cognitive Development Theory’ circles around moral reasoning and his discussion expands up to the understanding of developing gender sensitivity. He proffers that there is semblance in the series of development stages for children between moral reasoning and understanding of gender differences/similarities.

His theory mentions 'Gender Constancy' - a stage typically occurring between the ages of five and seven, when children understand the biological determinism of gender which is unable to be altered based on behavior or appearance. They endorse the static notion of growth from boy to man, girl to woman, very broadly speaking. Kohlberg's remark on children's gender development parallels their cognitive abilities acquisition, along with a more advanced understanding of their surroundings is valid but is criticized because it lacks the social and cultural influences on developing the concepts of gender.

Kohlberg's theory is essential in the analysis since it signifies the 'aspect of age' for children's gender-based identity and value acquisition. The concepts are borrowed from Kohlberg and Maccoby's book *A cognitive-developmental analysis of children's sex-role concepts and attitudes*, published in 1966. The shortcomings of his work in this particular context are complemented by Judith Butler's work to inform the framework for a broader understanding in this research.

3.2 'Gender Performativity'- Judith Butler

Judith Butler's philosophy of gender contains a significant concentration on 'Gender Performativity', where she challenges the traditional norm of interpreting gender to be static with innate characteristics and arguing that it is rather something performative.

The research draws from her non-essentialist notion of gender, its deviation from biology and seeing it as a social construct that is reinforced by a series of repetitive acts and performances. These continuous repetitions are prescribed culturally through behaviors, gestures, expressions and so on, accrediting each to a particular gender like a script to be followed. Butler's broader argument identifies gender to be a socio- cultural construct, where the performative elements create and reinforce the illusion of a linear gender identity. Performing in the path of a particular gender that is guided by societal norms is what empowers the segregation of male-female binaries.

From this argument, Butler goes on to critiquing the confining nature of gender norms and her way of subversion is through nonconformity and disruption by performing out of the script. Her emphasis on denying the so-called natural category of gender and embracing its fluidity to de/construct is what serves as the overarching guide for the analysis. The performative elements are directly tied to the importance/understanding of representation. Butler's concept is borrowed from her 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

3.3 'Representation' - Stuart Hall

Stuart Hall's pioneering work on media representations encompass textbooks as well and the connection between gender representation and its consequence of shaping/reinforcing cultural norms are pivotal to this research. As Hall suggests in his 1997 book *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* that gender representation in textbooks are neither neutral, nor objective, rather are constructions propelled by different contexts (historical, cultural, social). Existing gender stereotypes and the power dynamics are thus perpetuated by certain elements of representation.

This philosophy guides the data collection phase of this research and highlights the importance of gender-equitable representation in the analysis section. Hall's argument that such representations are contributing factors to identity formation of gendered individuals, solidifying their conception of gender roles and norms. Not only that, but it is also important to understand that representations as such are not naturally determined, rather socially constructed which can and do change over time.

According to Hall, representations of gender in textbooks are not neutral or objective but are constructed through specific cultural, social, and historical contexts. These representations often reinforce and perpetuate existing gender stereotypes, norms, and power dynamics within society.

Hall highlighted the importance of analyzing how gender is represented in textbooks and other media forms, as these representations contribute to the

formation of individuals' gender identities and shape their understanding of gender roles and expectations. He emphasized that these representations are not fixed or natural, but are socially constructed and subjected to change over time. Hall's analogy, although developed around media studies for most parts, indicates that representations reflects pre-existing social values and yet it contains the power to shape or influence them. Therefore, the conclusion can be drawn that it is of utmost importance to analyze and challenge (if necessary) gender representations in the textbooks as they directly contribute to the formation of broader socio-cultural values of perceiving gender roles.

4. Methodology

The methodology section describes the tools, techniques and methods utilized in this paper to collect and analyze the data with justification of each part to ensure the clarity of the progression for this research. This paper conducts qualitative research since the gender inclusive instances are argumentative and the degree or the extent cannot be numerically measured. The research philosophy incorporates interpretivism since the implicit as well as the explicit data need to be interpreted using concepts and theories rather than measured in any given scale. The approach is both deductive and inductive due to the nature of the data and its interaction with the research question that provokes the research.

For this research, the data collection method includes textual and visual analysis from the primary NCTB *English for Today* textbook since the interpretive approach functions based on the representations of both genders. The sampling strategy for this paper is systematic as it thoroughly investigates lexical data and illustrations to identify and highlight the instances of gendered activities. The data is primary since the only source is the NCTB *English for Today* at primary level, thus it is reliable to address the research question that dictates the argument of this paper. The data analysis incorporates three methods of content analysis, thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. Content analysis directly refers to the excerpts from the textbook while thematic analysis interprets them from a gender equity spectrum. Critical discourse analysis then furthers the discussion by

attempting to make assessment based on the theoretical backdrops. The textbook is a mere reflection of the curriculum designed by NCTB, thus dissecting this textbook is one of the most valid methods to evaluate the gender inclusive nature of the curriculum.

5. Data Analysis & Discussion

The data analysis chapter gathers all the instances of the latest primary NCTB *English for Today* textbook. From textual analysis, instances are identified and are further discussed in light of the theoretical framework. The *English for Today* textbook is dissected, words and phrases related to gender identified, illustrations interpreted, and overall inclusion of both genders are highlighted.

The following textbook is the focal point of this paper, from which all the evidence are drawn out for further analyses:

English for Today (Class 5), written by Shaheen M. Kabir, A. M. M. Hamidur Rahman, Md. Zulfeqar Haider, Gautam Roy, printed and supplied by NCTB

5.1 *English for Today* (Class 5)

Despite the attempts at gender inclusive textbook composition, the class 5 edition of *English for Today* stands out as a degree of disappointment in this regard. In page 10, Mrs. Monwara Islam represents the traditional notion of a ‘housewife’ mother who performs all the household chores and enjoys sewing during her idle hours. She also receives sewing orders from her friends and neighbors, allowing her to earn based on performing a passionate activity. This challenges a social norm where women are prevented from accessing the economy – especially if she is a housewife or homemaker.

However, if the difference of leisure time activity between Mr. and Mrs. Islam is contrasted, the male individual seems to be spending more time in creative activity while the female counterpart has to find a means to convert her passion into an economic endeavor. As highlighted by Suchana, “Saikat’s family picture shows the stereotypical representation of women. His mother is only presented in domestic roles. The male character is not shown doing household chores”

(Suchana, 2020a, p. 46). While NCTB's attempt has been to highlight that housewives can also contribute to or take part in the economy, the stark contrast with her male counterpart lays bare how challenging it is for a housewife to earn money realistically.

Page 16 instances out a female model under the category of fashion. It paves into the patriarchal ideology of presenting women as objects to be desired as well as the standardization of beauty – both of which have their own impact on disbalancing the gender equity approach. On the same page, the sports category shows three different instances of kabaddi, cricket, and football – all showcasing male individuals associated with the genres – a representation that undermines women's contribution or existence in these fields. Instead, they are restricted to fashion modeling, another contrastive notion that can direct the ideological development of a young student.

On page 34, the story of Raju becoming a firefighter is an inspiring one for many younglings and a lesson of discipline along with selflessness. It also highlights one social issue in Bangladesh, why are female students not allowed to participate in a volunteer fire department? Until 2023, no woman ever joined the forces, and it began with 15 individuals¹⁰ to set a record. Whereas in the UK, first women to work in the fire department dates back to 1879¹¹. In terms of representation, what NCTB has illustrated is true for the context of the country.

*Figure 1:
Contrastive
gender images of
fashion and
sports supporting
stereotypical
gender role*



¹⁰<https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/15-women-join-fire-service-firefighters-first-time-history-742410>

¹¹<https://sfjwards.com/key-milestones-for-women-in-fire-and-rescue/>

A commendable illustration and description take place in page 63. A mother is seen asking her son Azim to put the dishes in the kitchen. This occurrence is a valuable depiction that distorts the patriarchal, invisible line of household chores that are often segregated for each gender. Page 66 attempts to amend the contrastive gender stereotype of page 16. Here, Anousha, a female individual is expressing her interest in playing football, often remarked as a men-only sport sphere in Bangladesh's social context. The illustration at the top of the page also breaks stereotypes regarding gendered sports.



Figure 2: Representation of athletes from both genders challenging stereotypical roles

Throughout the textbook, a female in profession and a mother never interacts. Meaning, a mother is never portrayed as someone who is a professional in a particular field, or a professional never shown with motherhood. While Mrs. Islam's sewing journey as a housewife functions as a fragile attempt at bridging this gap, however, a professional woman experiencing motherhood is nowhere mentioned. Such fragmentation of women's choices places a hierarchy within the same gender and establish designated pathways of motherhood or professional journey that rarely cross their ways within textually inaccurate representations.

5.2 Impact of Representation in NCTB *English for Today* Textbook

Borrowing from Stuart Hall, the representation of gender equity in textbooks can have a significant impact on young students in numerous ways. Most of the representations in the NCTB *English for Today* textbook have occurred either as

images or concepts in texts. The implications of such representational instances can be manifold and are discussed in this section.

5.2.1 Cognitive Development

Gender equal NCTB textbooks help broaden students' cognitive horizons by exposing them to a diverse range of roles, experiences, and perspectives. This exposure encourages critical thinking, curiosity, and a more comprehensive understanding of the world, fostering cognitive development.

5.2.2 Shaping Perceptions and Attitudes

Primary level textbooks are powerful tools for shaping students' perceptions of gender roles and expectations. When textbooks depict a balanced representation of both genders in various roles, professions, and activities, it can challenge traditional stereotypes and promote the idea that anyone, regardless of their gender, can excel in different fields. Thus, although it is appreciated that NCTB has attempted to involve both the genders in many of the activities that were deemed as 'gendered', some limitations like 'female objectification as fashion models' or 'mothers as housewives' must be addressed. Aside from the professions factor, the shaping of perception on granting equal access to the discussed activities should alter from the traditional path that believes in segregation of boy-girl within the social sphere.

5.2.3 Breaking Down Gender-Based Barriers

Gender representation shown in the textbook can also break down barriers that might have previously discouraged certain genders from pursuing particular fields. For instance, if being an athlete or a firefighter are consistently portrayed as only male-dominated fields, female students might feel discouraged. However, by showing diverse individuals excelling in these subjects, more students across the gender boundaries may feel encouraged to pursue them.

5.2.4 Reduction of Gender Bias

The concept that gender is performative, as discussed by critic Judith Butler, challenges traditional notions of gender being solely biologically determined and

fixed. Instead, it suggests that gender is constructed through a series of repeated actions, behaviors, and expressions. This perspective is subtly incorporated into the NCTB textbooks, as suggested by the evidence, can indeed inspire young students to break free from gender discrimination in several ways.

The *English for Today* NCTB textbook presents a significant amount of fair and equal portrayal of genders that can help reduce gender bias and discrimination. Students are less likely to develop prejudiced attitudes when they are exposed to positive and inclusive representations from a young age, that includes the imageries and access of writers into the textbooks from both genders.

5.2.5 Empowerment and Aspirations

When young students observe people of all genders succeeding in diverse fields in their textbooks, it can help to broaden their aspirations. On such note, the textual evidence suggests that this can lead to greater self-confidence and a belief that they too can pursue any career or interest they're passionate about, irrespective of their gender. For instance, the textbook shows examples of doctors, athletes, teachers – both with almost equal access of male and female individuals who are the epitomes of empowerment.

5.2.6 Equitable Learning Environment

When textbooks depict gender equity, it sends a message that all students are valued and respected. This contributes to creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, which is essential for promoting overall student well-being and academic success. But this manner of composing textbooks isn't enough alone because the teachers as well as the school authority must reinforce such practices within the classroom environment, otherwise the learning would only be limited to concepts and not real-life habituation.

5.2.7 Critical Thinking and Discussion

Inclusion of gender-equitable content in such primary textbooks should encourage students to think critically about societal norms and stereotypes. This can lead to discussions in classrooms, where students can analyze and question prevailing

gender roles, fostering a deeper understanding of social issues. For instance, when they encounter boys participating in household chores or girls playing football, it would open up a gateway for discussion as it challenges the students' preconceived notions on gender roles and the segregations. Step by step, from discomfort, curiosity to discussions and critical thinking, the students will be able to gain insight on gender roles in the society and all the credit goes to the gender representations in the NCTB textbook.

5.2.8 Embracing Authenticity

Understanding that gender is performative encourages students to embrace their authentic selves. They may feel empowered to express themselves in ways that resonate with their true identities, without feeling constrained by societal expectations. This can lead to increased self-confidence and mental well-being. It could start with female students participating in the 'so called' male student activities and vice-versa following the examples presented in the NCTB curriculum.

5.2.9 Challenging Norms and Stereotypes

The *English for Today* textbook from NCTB emphasizes the performative nature of gender that challenges the traditional stereotypes and roles associated with different genders. By highlighting that such roles are not inherent but rather socially constructed, students can become more aware of how societal norms can limit individual expression and potential. The instances of girls playing football or swimming, or the fact that boys are allowed to join girls in such sports activities is a direct challenge to the norms and stereotypes embedded in our society. With such small steps, our society and with it, the country can get rid of this curse of discrimination for good when these young students come of age and assume the helm of social leadership in different positions.

However, it is important to note that the impact of textbook content is influenced by various factors, including the broader cultural context, classroom teaching practices, and the attitudes of educators and parents. While inclusive textbooks

are a crucial step, they should be complemented by supportive teaching strategies that encourage critical thinking and open dialogue about gender equity issues.

5.3 Findings

The findings of this research based on the analysis of the fifth grade NCTB *English for Today* textbook suggest a mixed landscape concerning gender inclusivity. Although there are several instances of gender equitable representations, certain stereotypical and unequal notions still persist throughout the textbook that require attention and improvement. The key findings are as follows:

5.3.1 Presence of Gendered Stereotypes

Despite the attempts made by NCTB to promote gender inclusivity, certain instances reinforce traditional gender roles. As portrayed by Mrs. Monwara Islam, women are often predominantly represented in domestic roles, trying to earn money by sewing (Page 10). Additionally, the side-by-side illustrations of women in fashion and men in sports or in the firefighter position reinforce the segregated professional roles between men and women. Furthermore, association of women in fashion reinforce the beauty-centric, objectifiable representation of women.

5.3.2 Positive Instances of Gender Equity

There exist certain progressive gender equitable contents on the textbook that challenge the gender norms. For instance, boys are seen participating performing household chores, evidenced by Azim in page 63. In addition, girls are represented in engaging male-dominated sports like football and instances of both male and female figures portray them in respectable professional fields like doctors and teachers.

5.3.3 Absence of Intersectional Roles for Women

All of the female characters are shown in a linear path – a mother and an outgoing professional remain two segregated arcs and these two paths don't diverge for any portrayal. While Mrs. Monwara Islam's character is a feeble attempt at bridging a homemaker with access to economy, it does so by keeping her within the

confinements of home. Overall, it limits the aspirational scope for young students, especially girls, by not illustrating multidimensional women figures who are capable of balancing multiple roles.

Both positive and stereotypical gender representations carry significant importance in shaping children's perception of gender roles. Equitable illustrations can greatly help reduce the bias, arouse a sense of inclusivity and encourage young students to pursue diverse roles in their lives, irrespective of the gender roles set by a traditional society.

6. Conclusion

From all the evidence gathered from the fifth-grade *English for Today* textbook and analyses conducted by borrowing a framework from three critical theories, this research concludes that the current version of the textbook is gender inclusive to a significant degree. In terms of percentage of representation, “there is roughly equal representation in all these categories, which illuminates a positive trend toward gender equality” (Rimpu, 2024, p. 24). According to the discussion, gender-inclusive instances like this in the textbook are positive factors to be considered in case of sensitizing students at an earlier stage of their life. The investigated gender representations reinforce equitable teaching to a great extent and the performative elements are subtle yet impactful – credit is due to the textbook writers. It helps craft a gender-inclusive lens for young students and create essential dialogues that hold the potential for a societal reformation toward gender equity.

Drawing from the brief discussion of Kohlberg's theory, this research proposes a future parameter for an impact analysis of students passing through this particular curriculum – a few years ahead in time when they are on the verge of completing their secondary level, mature enough to think critically about gender discrimination as well as equity. This research adds to the great volume of previous NCTB textbook analyses and invites scholars to prioritize inspecting primary textbooks through a gender lens. Although there is still room for improvement on the account of NCTB, for instance, the few areas that come short

in implicating gender equity teachings like segregation of a working mother from motherhood or reinforcing stereotypical gender roles, expectation dictates such instances to be addressed in the coming issues of the textbooks.

Furthermore, teachers are the vital players in this regard as they are the ones to deliver the lectures and their interpretation of gender matter equally to the content. Primary teachers are burdened with this responsibility and therefore need to be specifically trained on the matter beforehand to be able to realize their role in this process. They are also accountable for the efficient deliveries of the implied messages to the pupils to bear fruit out of NCTB's work that the entire society could eventually benefit from. Otherwise, no amount of textbook alteration would be able to address, challenge and improve the pre-existing gender-oriented socio-cultural challenges. Standardized teaching, sensitization about gender-based hierarchies and objectively addressing the matter should help young students develop harmonious perceptions between the genders – values that are deeply embedded within their conscience - and inclusive behavior will follow naturally.

The recommendations based on this research is that it can serve as the basis for impact analysis by interviewing the relevant teachers and the students. Also, similar research can be conducted on other NCTB textbooks, from different classes and subjects. Additionally, the concept of third gender is not included in this research. This can be brought to light at an earlier level of NCTB textbooks to sensitive the students from a young age so that it's perceived as a natural phenomenon, without imposing hierarchies.

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