

## English-language Textbooks Reflect Gender Bias *A Case Study in Jordan*

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The present study examines gender bias in English-Language school textbooks used in public schools in Jordan. The aim of the study is to explore the authors' treatment of jobs attributed to male and female characters. A content analysis of the discourse of textbooks used in grades 1 to 9 has been carried out. The results indicate that the textbooks reflect the culturally-prevalent gender bias. While males practice a variety of jobs and are portrayed as effective and dominant characters in the labor market, females practice traditional jobs such as teachers and nurses. The paper also addresses the implications of the gender-biased messages depicted in textbooks for learners' perceptions.

### Introduction

School textbooks play a crucial role in determining pupils' worldview of female and male roles in society (Byrne, 2001; Harrison, Azzarito, & Burden, 2004; Kobia, 2009). In this study, I investigated the prevalence of gender bias in school textbooks used in public schools in Jordan.

The purpose of this study therefore was to examine the prevalence of gender bias in textbooks (the Action Pack Series from grades 1 to 9) used in public schools in Jordan. I selected jobs and occupations for analysis with a view to providing both quantitative and qualitative portrayal of males and females. In particular, I sought answers to the following questions:

1. *Quantitative*: Do male and female characters practice an equal number of jobs as presented in the content of Action Pack Series textbooks?
2. *Qualitative*: What kind of jobs do male and female characters practice as presented in Action Pack Series textbooks?

U'Ren (1971) conducted one of the earliest content analysis studies, "The Image of Women in Textbooks". She analyzed thirteen of the newest textbooks adopted for use in second to sixth grade California schools. Her findings showed that textbook writers portrayed most females in traditional roles of cook, cleaner etc. Moreover, males were depicted doing all sorts of adventurous and interesting activities.

Coles (1977) examined five sets of popular adult basic education materials. The sixty-one females portrayed were engaged in only eleven occupations. By contrast, Coles found among 106 males, seventy-three different occupations were portrayed, ranging from truck driver to physician.

Shteivi (2003) examined the representation of gender roles in 96 primary school textbooks in Jordan. He found 6159 roles, 87% of which were filled by males. Males dominated 93% of the public roles (as opposed to family roles); public roles constituted 65% of the total roles. Regarding female roles, the majority were traditional female roles such as teaching. Almost no women were depicted in politics or in the professional sectors.

### *Studies on Gender in EFL Textbooks*

Porreca (1984) investigated how sexism is manifest in English as a foreign language (EFL) textbooks and with what consequences. In a content analysis of 15 widely-used EFL textbooks, she found that "sexism continues to flourish" in EFL textbooks (p. 718). She reported that "although females comprise slightly over half the population of the United States, they are represented only half as often as males in both texts and illustrations."

Gupta and Lee (1990) analyzed two series of EFL textbooks used in the Singapore Primary schools. In both series, they found that males were portrayed in a strikingly wider range of roles than females. The roles that seemed to be available to women centered around the nurturing professions (teacher, nurse). For example, only one female appeared in the academic domain compared to ten men.

Sakita (1995) surveyed ten EFL textbooks used in Japanese junior and senior high schools. Males filled occupations such as "mountaineer, reporter, engineer, writer, basketball player, and artist, clerk in a big office, lecturer, physician, doctor, sailor, colonel, priest and carpenter". Females filled a more limited number of roles such as "student, maid, actress, and mother and ballet dancer". Women were assigned to subordinate jobs while men were assigned to independent or managerial jobs. For example, the secretary was a woman; the boss was a man.

Ansary and Babaii (2003) examined sexism in two EFL English textbooks used in Iranian secondary schools. The occupational roles assigned to females were the stereotypical of mother and home-keeper. Males were seen doing different occupations such as drivers, professors, engineers, scientists, etc.

In some countries that have a national and institutional commitment to gender equity, gender bias is less prevalent or absent. Dominguez (2003) analyzed the student EFL book "New Interchange Introduction" used in Canadian multicultural schools. According to Dominguez, in this book, the roles of men and women appeared to be interchangeable. The author included non-traditional occupations for both female and male characters: for example, women were doctors, security guards, and judges, while men were receptionists, teachers, and cooks.

Like Canada, Sweden has a national commitment to gender equity; but Swedish EFL textbooks are not free of gender bias. Holmqvist and Gjörup (2006) analyzed six EFL textbooks used in secondary schools in Sweden. Two texts had been in use since the 1970s and the other four texts were published in 2004. They found that the majority of occupations mentioned were held by men. Women were described either without an occupation or with a stereotypical one.

Lee (2006) tried to determine whether there have been changes in the nature of gender representation in Hong Kong secondary English textbooks over the past decade. He selected twenty English language textbooks from the lists recommended for use by the Education and Manpower Bureau and the former Education Department in Hong Kong. Ten of the books had been published in the previous five years and all were in use at the time of the study. The other ten had been published in the 1980s or early 1990s and were no longer in use at the time of the study. He found no change over time: women continue to occupy traditional roles such as secretary, maid and typist.

Sunderland (1998) summarized gender bias in textbooks this way:

1. Males are over-represented. Put differently, women are ignored or excluded (see also Hellinger, 1988)
2. Men tend to occupy more powerful roles, and a greater range of occupational roles, compared with women (see also Porreca, 1984)

### **Method**

Nine EFL course books currently used in Jordanian public basic stage schools were selected (the Action Pack Series books from grades 1 to 9). The books have been in use since 1998. In 1998, Jordanian schools began teaching English as a foreign language from grade 1. The analysis was based only on the textbooks; workbooks were excluded. Each book consists of 12-16 units and is taught in two semesters. The upper stage textbooks (7, 8, and 9) include dialogues and reading passages. The textbooks (1, 2, and 3) have no reading passages. The researcher analyzed all dialogues, reading passages, and activities on the level of word and sentence.

The content analysis was based on a checklist designed to calculate the number and type of jobs assigned to male and female characters.

## Findings

Table 1: Distribution of occupations and jobs linked to male and female characters, grades 1 – 3.

Grade of textbook	Male		Female		Total	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1 <sup>st</sup> grade	0	0	0	0	0	0
2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	0	0	0	0	0	0
3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	1	17%	5	83%	6	100%
<b>Total</b>	1	17%	5	83%	6	100%

As shown in the table, books for grades 1 and 2 are free from jobs overtly linked to either males or females. A careful reader can guess from illustrations, but not from the discourse of the text, that there are three characters in the book, two female teachers and one male seller of juice. The representation is implicit rather than explicit. The grade 3 offers six different occupations. Males occupy only one position while females occupy five jobs.

Table 2: Distribution of occupations and jobs linked to male and female characters, grades 4 – 6.

Grade of text-book	Male		Female		Totals	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
4 <sup>th</sup> grade	8	73%	3	27%	11	100%
5 <sup>th</sup> grade	3	60%	2	40%	5	100%
6 <sup>th</sup> grade	5	100%	0	0	5	100%
<b>Total</b>	16	76%	5	24%	21	100%

Overall, the texts for students in grades 4 through 6 portrayed males in a variety of roles, including postman, baker, butcher, pilot, farmer, inventor, and driver. Females were portrayed in a more limited set of roles: teacher, nurse, professor.

Table 3: Distribution of occupations and jobs linked to male and female characters, grades 7 – 9.

Grade of Textbook	Male		Female		Total	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
7	16	84%	3	16%	19	100%
8	11	92%	1	8%	12	100%
9	18	90%	2	10%	20	100%
<b>Total</b>	45	88%	6	12%	51	100%

In grades 7 – 9, males and females are portrayed as doing more and different jobs compared to textbooks for earlier grades. The grade 7 book includes nineteen different jobs. Males occupy sixteen jobs (84% of the total), such as professor, scientist, ruler, astronomer, etc., while females occupy only three jobs – journalist, editor, and professor (16% of the total). In the grade 8 textbook, males practice eleven occupations such as inventor, king, sailor, detective, etc., but a female is portrayed in only one job (artist). Of the 20 jobs portrayed in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade textbook, males are shown doing eighteen jobs (such as doctor, guard, explorer,

mathematician, builder, etc), while females are portrayed in only two jobs (weaver and princess). Of the 51 jobs portrayed in grades 7 through 9, males are shown doing forty-five jobs (88%) while females are - portrayed in only six jobs (12%).

Table 4: Gender distribution of jobs and occupations in grades 1-9.

Grade of textbook	Male		Female		Total	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1 – 9	62	79%	16	21%	78	100%

As shown in the table, across grades 1 through 9, males were portrayed in sixty-two jobs (79%) and females in sixteen (21%). Male occupations included juice seller, postman, glass seller, bus driver, scientist, astronomer, pilot, baker, butcher, engineer, farmer, inventor, shop assistant, grocer, professor, artist, ruler, astronaut, fashion designer, hunter, businessman, animal-trainer, zoo keeper, park ranger, marine biologist, civil servant, king, messenger, policeman, sailor, detective, curator, doctor, prince, fisherman, philosopher, petroleum geologist, photo geologist, seismologist, mathematician, explorer, and builder. Females were seen practicing eleven jobs: teacher, dentist, weaver, clothes seller, fruit seller, professor, nurse, journalist, editor, artist, princess.

### Discussion

This study analyzed a series of English language textbooks distributed in Jordan. In grades 1 through 3, the number of occupations was too small to warrant analysis. In books for grades 4, 5, and 6, males occupied 16 jobs out of 21 (76%), while females occupied five jobs (24%). In books for grades 7, 8, and 9, males occupied 45 out of 51 (88%). In the series as a whole, authors assigned 78 jobs: males practiced 62 jobs (79%) while females practiced 16 jobs (21%). Moreover, they portrayed males as the major element of labor force in the society.

In reality, Jordanian women today fill a diverse array of positions including faculty dean, government minister, parliament member, judge, engineer, police officer, lawyer, pilot, doctor, therapist, taxi driver, biologist, etc. Thus, it is quite surprising for the authors of a recent educational series not to recognize the facts of our modern society. One may also criticize the Jordanian adaptation committee which has many professors of English among its members.

The results of the study were similar to findings previously reported by Porreca (1984). She found that the female/male ratio of occupations among 15 textbooks was 1:5.87. Sakita (1995) concluded that women were far more likely to appear without occupations, or that women had limited stereotypical jobs, often assisting males. Similarly, Ansary and Babaii (2003) as well as Holmqvist and Gjörup (2006) found that EFL textbooks gave greater preference to males both in the type and number of occupations.

The results of this study illustrate a tendency toward gender asymmetry in Jordanian EFL texts greater than the gender asymmetry in Jordanian society as a whole. This finding should be taken into consideration when preparing new editions of textbooks.

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## Boys Don't Cry

A mother left her child on the doorstep of school's first day.

His weeping was more bitter because he was alone for eternity, that time that never moves for one so small trapped in a classroom. Boys don't cry! He was soon himself again, or so it seemed, but he had changed.

Children always do.

One poet says that they are like eggs stewing in their lives, and we have no control over what the cooking will do.

Some get harder and harder. That's the way life works, he says, especially for boys, young men to be precise.

In the afternoon, his mother came back, and he was quiet, no tears.

That happens when we turn on the heat that first day of school, when we distinguish boy tears from girl tears, and tell them boys have to tough it out. Ah, the lessons we teachers teach when we dispense the salts of human kindness according to gender.

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