

Siddhajyoti Interdisciplinary Journal (SIJ)

Vol. IV, January, 2023

(A Peer Reviewed Open Access Research Journal)

ISSN: 2645-8381

Published by Research Management Cell, Siddhajyoti Education Campus, Sindhuli

<https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/sij>

Gender Representations in Social Studies Textbooks at Grade Three and Four

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Article History: *Received:* 30 June 2022; *Reviewed:* 30 November 2022; *Accepted:* 10 December 2022

Abstract

This study explored the gender roles of text characters and the messages given at grade three and four social studies textbooks of the community school of Nepal. The study further explored the gender representations of text characters in the textbooks through exploratory qualitative method; the verbal data noted from the textbooks were analysed through content analysis. The textbooks of grade three and four social studies were purposively selected because they have recently been reconstructed. The major findings are that the textbooks are the depiction of patriarchal traditional gender bias mind-sets and the dominance of men over women. Men and women are portrayed in traditional gender bias occupations: strong, prestigious, intelligent and leading works are provided to male characters, and weak, subsidiary, subordinate, less prestigious and household chores are determined to women in the textbooks. The male-dominated family structures portrayed in the textbooks may not eliminate gender inequality, and reinforce male-dominated society in Nepal. Curriculum designers and textbook writers must reconsider the equal gender representations in the children's textbooks to construct a positive effect on children's gender perceptions while revising and/or producing new textbooks in future.

Keywords: Content analysis, gender equality, gender representation, male-dominated society

Introduction

Gender issue has been a great problem for maintaining a good society in Nepal. For gender equality, gender education enhances children's thought and behaviours, and the children become the responsible citizens in future. Curriculum Development Centre(CDC) of Government of Nepal has recently restructured the course of grade three and four Social Studies. Children see the roles and behaviours of their mothers and other females and fathers and other males in their families and societies. They also study social studies textbooks in formal education; textbooks carry the gender representations and roles. Genders' models depicted in the textbooks affect the gender perception of children. The socio-familial environments and the textbooks engrave the understanding of gender roles in children's memory or mind. Gender social roles that promote gender equality should be portrayed in the textbook. This study aims to

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Siddhajyoti Interdisciplinary Journal (Peer reviewed), Volume 4, January, 2023

discuss the gender representations engraved in the social studies textbooks that moulds the children's young mind and behaviours. Presentation of gender representations in the textbooks is necessary to be studied.

Research on gender issues can be not only in a particular community and literary texts but also in textbooks designed with specific purpose, gender education and social justice. Many scholars and feminists have already voiced about gender discriminations and women's rights in the society. Mary Wollstonecraft authored *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) advocated for women's equal rights as men in the society and opined that women must fight against the patriarchal assumption of women as inferior to men. Virginia Woolf in her work *A Room of One's Own* (1929) exposed men have treated women as inferiors and men have not allowed women to occupy their space in the family and public areas. Woolf opined that women must challenge the patriarchal construct of femaleness and redefine their own identity as human beings. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) argued that societies are male-constructed, patriarchal; males have defined women as inferiors, the other to social institutions like government and educational systems. Beauvoir affirms, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." She encouraged women to break the barrier of the patriarchal society for establishing equal identity to men. Gender roles are not fixed but gender identity are constructed socially. Cook (2012) states that the patriarchy has attributed certain characteristics, capacities and roles to women and men. As other many countries, certain unequal gender representation and roles are specified in Nepali society that needs to be reformed.

Government has prioritized to eliminate gender inequality from the society, and provides gender education through school education. Gender education effectively impresses more in children's mind than adults. Gender roles depicted in the textbooks construct the fragile mind of the children that might indicate future culturally pattern gender roles. Sever (2003) stated the messages and information composed as reading materials in the textbooks may influence children's gender perception through pictures and writings (cited in Ozer et al., 2019, p. 2). Educating children is not only to imparting information, knowledge and skills but also reconstructing the thoughts on particular issues like gender. The text characterizations and familial-social environments represented in the textbooks provide young children an opportunity to shape their gender perception (Mendoza & Reese, 2001, p. 1). Young children acquire gender perception through the characters and situations depicted in the textbooks. Ullah and Skelton (2013) mentioned

Gender portrayal in children's books is important from a number of philosophical perspectives. It may be seen, for example, as reflecting current social values and behaviour (Petersen & Lach 1990), as constructing identities which are offered to children for them to aspire to (Baker & Peter 1989; Davies 1993) and as impacting on relationships in society as a whole. (Adler et al., 1993, p.185)

CatalcaliSoyer (2009) stated that young children adopt gender stereotypes of adult world through gender roles displayed in the textbooks and grow up with the same gender perception for the adult world (cited in Ozer et al., 2019, p. 3). Gender representations in the textbooks may effect on children's choices of professions in future (Treichler & Frank, 1989). Gender roles are represented through picture/image

characters and text characters. Textbooks are designed for young children to eliminate the gender inequality in the society. Bruegilles and Cromer (2009) stated that textbooks are powerful means of social change in disseminating values, and influence far beyond the immediate confines of school and learning. The textbooks will effect on children's upbringing through the balanced gender behaviour and values in the society.

Therefore, this study purposes to expose the gender roles through text characterizations in the social studies textbooks of grade three and four. Grade three and four social studies textbooks are purposively selected for the study because they have recently restructured.

Government aims to mould the unequal gender understanding in the society through education from basic school children. To achieve this national goal, CDC includes educational aspect of gender in basic level curriculum and textbooks. Textbooks are major means for formal education in challenging gender inequalities. Gender representations in the textbooks ensure awareness value on gender equality. Gender education imprints effectively in children's mind. Social studies textbooks formally present social gender understanding to children; it might demonstrate the future gender relations and status. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how women and men are portrayed in social studies textbooks in school education in Nepal.

This study aims to explore the gender representations in the social studies textbooks of grade three and four of community schools of Nepal. To achieve this purpose, the following research questions were used:

- How are gender roles and professions represented to males and females in social studies textbooks of grade three and four?
- How is household workload between men and women presented in the social studies textbooks?

Methods and Procedures

This study exploited an exploratory qualitative research method because this study explored the contents presented in the social studies textbook through feminist and/or gender viewpoint. This study used a content analysis method in order to analyse gender representations in the social studies textbooks: this research discussed both verbal contents like narratives, arguments, ideas depicted in the textbooks. Grade three and four social studies textbooks were selected with purposive sampling because in the courses of restructuring social studies textbooks of basic school level, they have been recently restructured and introduced in the classroom in the 2078 and 2079 academic years respectively. This study showed how men and women are presented in the latest social studies textbooks.

Results and Discussion

Gender Portrayal of Text Characters at Grade Four Social Studies

Class three and four social studies textbooks were examined for this studies. Gender representations of text characters in grade four social studies textbook are demonstrated with gender characteristics described in patriarchal society. Traditional gender roles are shifting to gender equal roles but still people determine gender roles per male and female in the society. Gender education is still significant to children for social justice, and it affects in children fragile minds. Female and male are represented

as either feminine, masculine or neutral in the social studies textbook. Patriarchal society has prescribed certain gender roles for female and male that gave space for gender exploitations. Therefore, the gender education should be able to eliminate the gender discrimination. It is significant to study gender representations whether the textbook portrays gender roles as per gender equality and equity. Grade three practised since 2078 and grade four social studies textbook used in the 2079 academic year in Nepal were examined to expose the gender representations. The data regarding the gender representations in the social studies textbooks were analysed on the themes of professions of men and women presented in the textbooks and the workload division at home and outside between men and women.

Unit one lesson one entitled “Relative Relations with Neighbours” is narrated by a girl named Rasila who describes her neighbours, their relations and social activities (p. 2). In traditional patriarchal society, girls were not educated and they did not get opportunity for public speech. Here, the text character a girl got a chance to narrate her neighbours to the class. This unknowingly affect the understanding of traditional gender roles and females can speak to public in public issues. Rasila’s father helped her to do homework and involved in the discussion of cleaning trenches for fields in a meeting with neighbours. But Rasila’s mother prepared tea and serviced to the neighbours (p. 2-3). Here, the gender roles are presented traditionally: male (father) teaches children and participate in public social activities but female (mother) works in kitchen and provides meals to family members and guests. Such portrayal of gender roles in the formal education imprints gender representations in children’s minds and the same gender roles may continue in the society after they will have grown up. The positive aspect of the discussion is that other females participated in the discussion; it shows the women’s participations in social activities. In the reformation of a trench, the workloads were divided with gender bias because Bindu aunt rooted out the grass and Chandani carried cement but Binot grandfather mixed cement and sand and Mansur elder father built the wall (p. 3). Structuring wall and mixing cement and sand need skill and idea but avoiding grass and carrying load of cement do not need. These work divisions also represent the traditional gender roles that men perform skilful and valorous works and women drudge as unskilled workers in the kitchen as well as outside home. The patriarchal society treat women as unskilled workers who do not use reasoning and intellectual abilities in the works. “Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (Tyson, 2015, *Critical theory...*, p.81). In the second lesson also, Chandani’s father succoured the sick woman providing herbs in the village (p. 6); a man (her father) was presented as an intelligent or reasoning person. In the texts, men perform rational, strong and decisive but women weak and unskilled jobs. Role play is suggested for instructional activities (p. 3), and it may imprint traditional gender roles on children mind. This may effect on the mind of the children and this gender education to children may not meet the goal of gender equity.

In unit one lesson two “Chhimekma Sarasahayog” (Helping Neighbours), the profession of teaching is provided to a woman Kabita Budha (p. 5). A teacher (Kabita Budha) asked her students to share their experience of helping each other as good neighbours. The students Prasan Tamang, Chandani Sada Ramesh Yadav and

Rohan Thapa introduced families by the masculine name and relation like Ramu uncle Amar brother, Sonam uncle, Durgananda elder uncle's house, next-door uncle, but not by the names of feminine. This is the patriarchal manner to call families by the names of men. There is no identification of females as the heads in the families. In the traditional society, women are presented by the men's relation in the society, and women are almost invisible in in the context of identity.

Lesson three discusses the behaviours with neighbours, and gender understanding can be in social manners of people. Gender equality is presented in the social behaviours (p. 8); it demonstrates that people should show equal respect, love and affection to all people including disabled persons. It influences young people's thought on gender issues.

Women are presented as housewives and subordinate positions of less prestigious professions in the textbooks. Lesson two has presented a woman Kabita Budha as a teacher. Although teaching profession has been a prestigious job in many developed countries, it has been considered as a less prestigious occupation in Nepal. Lesson four "Occupations and Professions of Our Neighbours" has described the occupations adopted by people. Ramnaresh uncle and Manish Yadav were model professional farmers of an animal husbandry and poultry farming; Rama's father made different bamboo products like baskets and earned enough money. Ahamad uncle ran business, Bhagirathi elder uncle had a hotel, Dandaghare uncle worked at the court and Kapil was a teacher. But Patima's mother prepared pickle and earned little money, and Sushila worked in a health post but her post has not mentioned.

Men are presented as they hold variety of prominent professions, but women are presented with subordinate positions in limited professions. Sushila's job as a health personnel and Pratima's mother as pickle maker represent limited job for women; but men's occupations serve as prestigious intelligent professions in the society. Men are provided as holding higher prestigious professions than to women. The lesson four concludes that all professions have equal significance and all occupations should be equally respected (p. 11). In unit 2 lesson one, a man Sundar Nepali was described as a great social servant and an elected chair of Community Forest Consumers' Committee (p. 22). Though it teaches children importance of all jobs, the professions allotted to men and women may prejudice in women. While prescribing the texts to children, it becomes necessary to rethink about the influences of the texts on children. Home assignments, social works, field activities and professions for text characters must be planned to ensure gender equality; equal gender participation in various activities must be paid close attention in the textbook. Stereotypical representations of females in the textbook gives an impression on the gender roles in young minds. Unequal gender representations can be avoided from the textbooks.

In unit four lesson four, men like Raju Ghalan (the Chair of Himalayan Youth Club), Bhakta Bahadur Praja (the Chair of Chepang Society) were delineated as active, strong and intelligent persons who can lead the society. But women like Ramila Gurung (the Chair of Janajagrit Women community) were represented as less strong and less intelligent compared with men to lead the whole community. A woman named Pranita Pasawan was introduced as the chief of the Police post of a village, but the picture of a man was given (pp. 77-78). It shows the psyche of the patriarchal writer.

Such descriptions and presentations may impress adverse in young minds, and it may not meet the goal of gender equality in the society.

In unit two lesson two, the headmaster and Ward Chair were described as neutral gender, but the pictures of the headmaster and Ward Chair were of a man (pp.24-25). This picture impresses on the young minds that the headmaster may become only men. Unit two lesson four has discussed about language and costumes. Patriarchal society provides various dresses to men and women; they do not wear the clothes with their choices and interest: separate clothes have been prescribed for gents and ladies. *Gunyucholo, butil, Kantha, sortuk, kurtha, lungi, mangalsutra, kalli, pauju*, etc. for women, but for men *daurasuruwalbhoti, istkot*, etc. (pp. 29-30). Dresses for men and women are prescribed by the patriarchal norms; patriarchal men and women follow it as culture and traditions.

Gender Depiction at Grade Three *Meroserophero*

Men are depicted as strong and intelligent but women as weak and domestic in lesson one "Our Introduction". Junu's father was a teacher, grandfather was a business man, and great grandfather was an army. Junu's grandfather narrated stories to her, but Junu's mother taught her to do household works and to welcome guests; the mother did not instruct her son to perform household works. It indicates that her mother was a patriarchal woman because she adopted patriarchal values and taught to her daughter Junu. Even a song (p. 6) gave intelligent prestigious jobs for men like driver brother, farmer brother, *lohar* brother, carpenter brother, doctor and Biru brother businessman. But women were described as a dancer and a teacher for children. Likewise, Binod's father had a cow farm, his uncle has run a shop and his grandfather was social servant in the village: but Binod's mother was a nurse and did household things after office time (p. 7). The lesson has provided limited job to women. A home is introduced with the name of men, but women become unknown in patriarchal society. A home was known by the name of Mitranath and his mother's name was not given (Mitranath's mother). Mitranath's mother cleaned the water tap and toilet, and his mother and sister washed clothes (p. 30). Such household works increase more gender discrimination. A daughter was described as an assistant of household things (Hasina helped her aunt to dry grains), but his brother Phurba went to school. His grandmother as a great social servant was awarded by the ward office (p. 55).

Chinaram smoked too much and suffered from lung cancer, and Dhanbir drank too much and had a problem in liver. Sohan's aunt stayed at home and watched television whole day and suffered from diabetes (p. 81). It demonstrates the traditional habits of men and women. Ramila's mother cleaned home but her father took care of garden (p. 135); cleaning home by a female is a traditional discriminatory household work. Why did a man not clean home? Therefore, it indicates that the textbook writer has a patriarchal mind-set.

The analysis of text characterizations in social studies textbooks showed that men/father figures were portrayed with various professions compared to women in the social studies textbooks. Women were mostly presented as housewives, nurses, health workers at health post, teachers for small children and light workers in the society because women, according to traditional patriarchal beliefs, can hold household chores, take care of children and sick people. Men think that women also do housework after school and health service at health posts. As AkaySahin and Acikalin (2021)

stated, “women were underrepresented compared to men as the appearance of male figures in visuals are approximately twice as high as the appearance of female figures in visuals in the textbooks” (p. 1), in these textbooks, women were generally depicted as the helpers for men and subordinate positions in office work, too. On the other hand, men are represented as armies, business men, social workers, political leaders, chairs of ward committee and other organizations, civil servants, and other prestigious jobs; these jobs symbolize power.

The data indicated that in the social studies textbooks women have the primary roles in household works. Mothers of families do more housework; after mother, daughters presented in the textbooks perform the housework like cleaning at home, cooking food, washing clothes, serving tea and food, welcoming guests, etc. Few household chores were done by men and women together, but most of the time women (mother figures) alone were at the kitchen and household chores even after their professions like nurses, teachers. Daughters were always presented as the helpers of their mothers at housework. Although fathers/men were sometimes depicted doing few housework, sons were seldom presented doing housework like cooking food, serving food, cleaning houses.

The social studies textbooks carry on stereotypical gender roles like cooking food, serving food to family members and guests, cleaning, washing clothes of the family, looking after children, taking responsibility of housework; women hold domestic chores even after doing minor and subordinate professions. Women were portrayed in the limited occupations like primary schools’ teachers, mid-wives and nurses, and only chairs of female groups. Women were assigned few limited occupations that provided women enough time to take responsibility of domestic chores. Although a woman was depicted as police chief at a police station of a village, the text carries a pictures of a male police. Men’s names and masculine nouns are more frequently used in the textbooks compared to women’s names and feminine nouns; females are introduced by either with husbands’ names and/or children’s names, and the texts diminish women’s independent identity in the society. Men were represented more as leading, strong and intelligent characters than women. Mother figures or women were underrepresented in the reading texts.

As Dejene (2017) revealed through a research that “there is no fair representation of females and males in some gender related characteristics” (p. 1), in this study the analysis of the data from the textbooks demonstrates that the social studies textbooks have depicted traditional male-dominated family structures. Males manifest strong, decisive, intelligent, risky and leading roles, and women are allowed doing subsidiary, weak, less prestigious and subordinate position jobs between breakfast and lunch time.

Conclusion

In the context of gender issue, the government has a national goal to maintain man-woman equality in the society; Ministry of Education give gender education to children from primary levels. Along with other subjects, social studies textbooks prioritize gender representation in the composition of texts regarding the gender roles. This study manifests that the social studies textbooks continue traditional male-dominated society. The textbooks are designed for giving education and social change. Key findings from the qualitative content analysis of text characterizations of grade

three and four social studies textbooks in Nepal are the depiction of patriarchal mind-sets regarding the gender issues in texts, the dominance of men in the reading texts of social studies textbooks, and men and women are portrayed in traditional gender roles determined by patriarchal values and beliefs. It concludes that the male-dominated family structures and patriarchal society described in the social studies textbooks may not eliminate gender discrimination and inequality but still continue gender biases in families and reinforce male-dominated society. The textbooks have given far fewer challenges to traditional patriarchal gender roles and traditional ideologies. The textbook contents are structured from male mentality and patriarchal beliefs. The study found that females were underrepresented on traditional male-dominated thoughts and stereotypical images in grade three and four social studies textbooks. Men and women depiction in the children's textbooks are still problematic regarding the gender inequality. When young children see the balanced gender depictions in the textbooks, they enhance their self-esteem and a sense of independent identity in the society.

This study suggests to revise the text characterization to eliminate gender biases and to create a sound society regarding the gender equality. Teachers may maintain gender equality in the classrooms. For gender equal representations, the texts of social studies textbooks may be edited or rewritten. In future, Ministry of Education and textbook writers shall consider the balanced representation of gender roles while revising or producing new textbooks. Otherwise, traditional gender biases in school textbooks may adversely affect children.

In this study, text characterizations of grade three and four social studies textbooks were analysed, but pictures manifested in the textbooks were not analysed enough from the viewpoints of the gender theme. This study lacks the study of other aspects of gender identity. Gender roles in pictures depicted in the textbooks can be another research study. Significance and impact of gender roles in school textbooks can be studied in the educational context and national goals.

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