

Gender Stereotypism in the Pictorial Depictions of Primary School Text Books

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Abstract: Irrespective of the vast fund of information in the e –world, textbooks in schools still have a significant role in educating children as sources of knowledge and information for students and as a term of reference for teachers. At the same time text books promote gender stereotypism through their content, language and pictorial representations. Despite the several interventions taken to remove the sexist bias in educational system, it still exists as a formidable challenge to the development of egalitarian gender relations in the growing minds. A content analysis of the pictures portrayed in the English and Malayalam language text books of primary classes was undertaken to assess the extent of gender bias and stereotypism projected in them. The results of the study show that there is an under-representation of females, denigration of women's roles and role models, male centeredness, gendering of skills and spaces and private public dichotomization in the pictures of these text books. Based on the findings of the study and taking into consideration the far reaching impacts that pictorial representations can have in developing proper gender role perceptions, suggestions are put forth to eliminate the gender bias and promote egalitarian gender relations through the pictures.

Keywords: Content analysis of pictures, Gender/sexist Bias in Text books, Gender stereotypism, gendered spaces, private public dichotomization, gendering of skills, gender role perceptions.

I. Introduction

School is a social institution of learning which is to provide equal space for overall growth and development of girls and boys. But it plays a major role in gender socialization, by reinforcing the traditional values, attitudes and notions of the society through various teaching learning practices. The curriculum is a vital part of schooling which covers teaching and learning materials, classroom practices, evaluation and assessment procedures and language policy, within which the children grow up as female/ male in the society and serves as the strongest tool to transmit and transform the culture, values, attitudes and beliefs of the society to the learner.

Textbooks that constitute the most significant components of the curriculum have a significant role in educating children not only sources of knowledge and information but also as instrumental in developing appropriate values and gender role perceptions. According to Sumalatha [1] textbooks are the most potential instruments, which help in building up the desirable attitudes in children. They serve as important mediums where the social realities are created from a certain aspect, through the knowledge and values that are included and excluded in accordance with the prevailing patriarchal norms. These sets of knowledge and values in the text books are created within complex cultural, economic and political systems that make the social texture existing in that context [2]. Every society has its gendered system and gender stereotypes i.e. the existing images of what men and women are supposed to be like, and these are reflected and picturised through the text books. When children enter the school, their concepts about gender, self image, behaviour, aspirations and expectations about men and women learned from the family are reaffirmed through the images portrayed in text books. Rudman [3] opines that text books reflect societal attitudes, limit choices and maintain discrimination in the mind sets of children. The content, language and images in text books along with the perceptions of teachers and facilitators have the power to strengthen the notions of patriarchy. The World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995 Platform for Action, Chapter IV, Section B, paras. 69-79, in particular paragraph 74:) says that "Curricula and teaching materials remain gender-biased to a large degree, and are rarely sensitive to the specific needs of girls and women. This reinforces traditional female and male roles that deny women opportunities for full and equal partnership in society. Lack of gender awareness by educators at all levels strengthens existing inequities between males and females by reinforcing discriminatory tendencies and undermining girls' self-esteem"[4]. In a tradition bound society like that of India, the text books strengthen the traditional values regarding gender roles, where men are represented as active, outgoing, adventurous and bread winners and women in weak, passive, docile and housewife roles who need to be protected and taken care of by the able men.

Research studies endorse that the text books produce and reproduce the gender stereotypic notions though the images portrayed in them [5]. Most of the studies assert that text books have significant role in producing gender discriminatory attitudes among children. A Norwegian study conducted by UNESCO [6]

exposes the gender stereotyped roles of male and female persisting in fourth to seventh grade text books. There are discriminatory attitudes towards girls and women. It was found that boys frequently appear in the illustrations; choices for males was unlimited and varied; examples and subject matter are in favour of boys and in the science subjects there were far more pictures of males than of females. A study of the World Federation of Teachers Union (1983) [7] found that textbooks reflected the prevailing ideology and illustrated the general atmosphere of sexism at all levels of schooling. Evans and Davies [8] highlight how males are still primarily portrayed as the norm and gendered personality traits are attributed to men and women. Men are overwhelmingly shown to be aggressive, argumentative and competitive whereas women are more likely to be characterized as affectionate, emotionally expressive and passive.

Government has taken many steps in removing gender disparities in educational system through its policies and recommendations. As per the National Policy on Education 1986, the national education system shall play a positive interventionist role in removing gender bias and fostering gender equality by developing new values through redesigned curricula, text books, training and orientation of teachers, decision makers and administrators. Before the implementation of NPE, the school text books were highly sexist in nature, which enrich the traditional stereotypic roles of men and women. Though text books were revised at various levels based on NPE recommendations, studies show that the initiatives to remove sexist/gender bias have not been fully successful as there is sexist/gender bias still reproduced in school text books, negatively affecting the status of women.

According to Sadker and Zittleman [9] students spend as much as 80 to 90 percent of classroom time using text books and teachers take a majority of their instructional decisions based on the text book. In the text books, generally men and women are differentiated on the basis of the gender stereotypes defined in relation with the social practices. Rao and Gayathri[10] found that in the textbooks a large number of occupations are assigned exclusively to the male characters as compared to women, the women are depicted only in the roles of wife and mother. It basically confirms the stereotyped sex roles for males and females. A later study of Hamdan [11] reveals that textbooks reflect the culturally prevalent gender bias wherein males practice a variety of jobs and are portrayed as effective and dominant characters in the labour market, while females are projected as teachers and nurses.

The impressions developed during the formative period of schooling get deep rooted and are not easy to be corrected at later stages and also the corrective steps are not usually taken up by any socialization agencies. Instead they serve as pillars of patriarchy by further reinforcing the gender stereotypism. The education system is the medium where viable interventions are possible but turning a blind eye to the sexist bias existing in the text books or the gender insensitivity of the text book writers is doing much harm to the objectives of education in developing proper gender role perceptions and positive attitudes towards egalitarian men women relations. So it is high time that a relooking into the gender bias in the text books is taken up with the objective of exposing all forms of sexism and brought to the attention of the concerned with creative suggestions to eliminate them. It was in such a context that the present study was undertaken to analyse the various forms of sexism in the text books of primary school classes. Taking into consideration the impact of pictorial representations on young children and the dearth of such studies, the gender bias hidden in the pictures given in the text books, especially that in the language texts which have more number of pictorial depictions when compared with other texts are studied in detail.

II. Methodology

2.1. Sample

The present analysis is conducted on the pictorial representations in English and Malayalam- language text books of 1st to 5th standards of state syllabus for the academic year 2014-15 as they are common subjects for all students at the primary level. Though there are SCERT, ICSE and CBSE syllabi based text books, majority of the students of Kerala are studying in the state schools with SCERT syllabus. Because of this, the present analysis is focused only on the text books followed by SCERT syllabus.

Pictorial representations have stronger influence on the schema formation of young children. Whatever is depicted in pictures are deeply internalized and the impressions are long lasting. Content analysis of the pictorial representations was the methodology adopted for the study. The categories looked for include the images of men and women portrayed through specific jobs/professions, possession of skills, share in household work, dress codes assigned, spaces occupied, roles attributed and plays/games engaged in. The collected data was analyzed qualitatively.

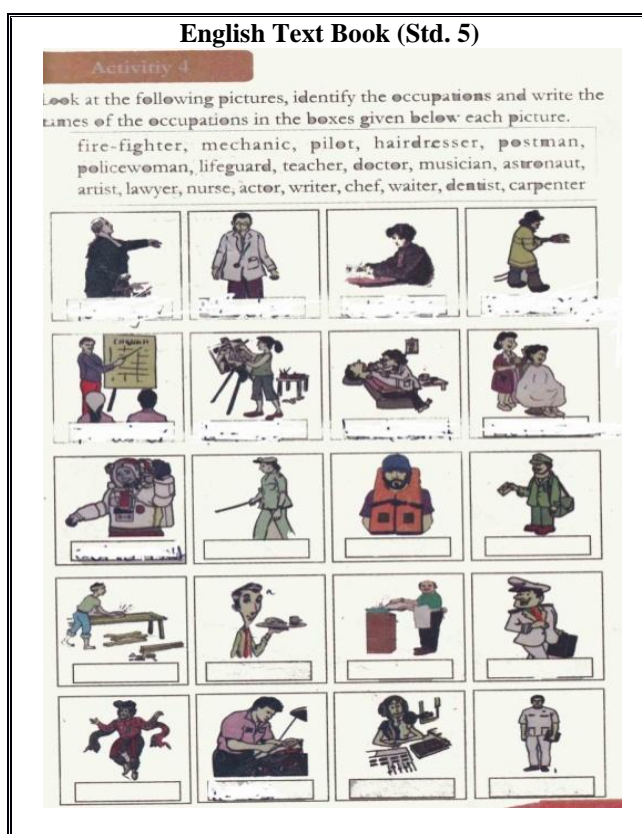
III. Findings

3.1. Extent of Gender Bias in the Pictorial Representations of Language Text Books of Primary School Classes

The content analysis of English and Malayalam language textbooks reveal the extent of gender bias existing in the pictorial representations of men and women characters in primary school classes. There is male centeredness in the depictions of images, because most of the images portrayed in text books are masculine ones. There is gender bias in the depiction of jobs, roles, household responsibilities, dressing pattern, play as well as spaces allotted for men and women characters.

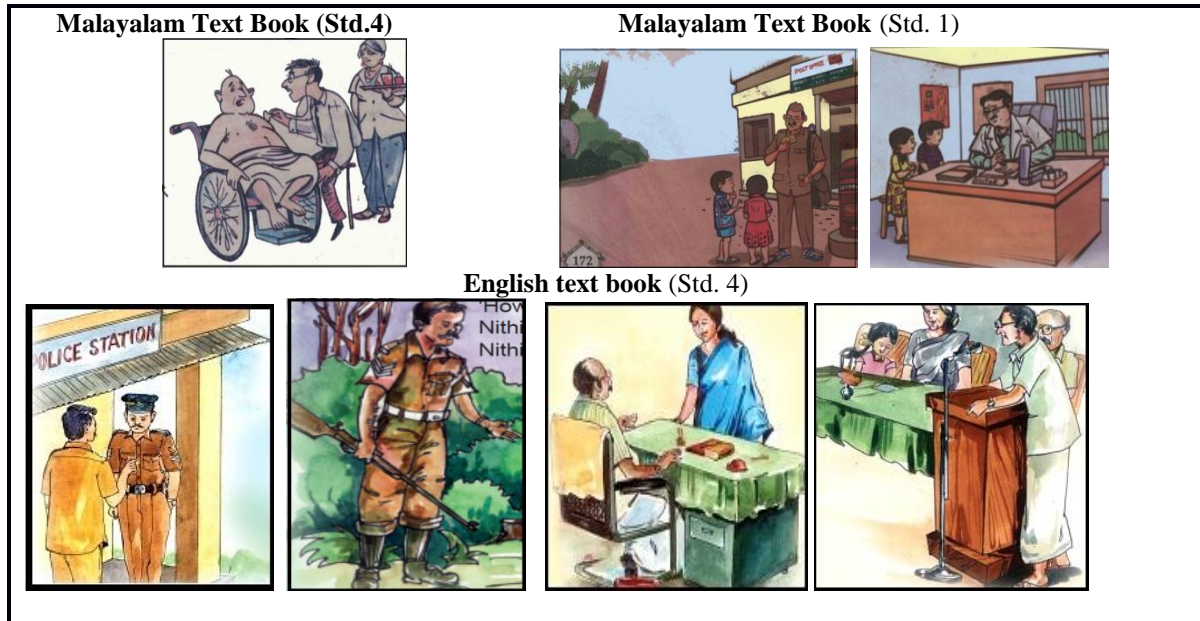
3.1.1 Depiction of Gendered Jobs/Professions

The present analysis reveals that there is gender segregation/gender division in the jobs attributed to men and women. Jobs like doctor, policeman, postman, forest guard, headmaster etc. are presented by masculine characters, whereas that of a nurse or teacher is exclusively represented by feminine characters. On page 55 of English text book of class 5, there is an activity to identify the occupation from the pictures given and write their names in the boxes provided. This activity given in Figure 1 has pictures of men and women depicted based on gender stereotyped occupations. These pictures convey the false message about jobs as appropriate for one sex or the other.



(Fig.1) Depictions of Men and Women in Gender Stereotyped Occupations.

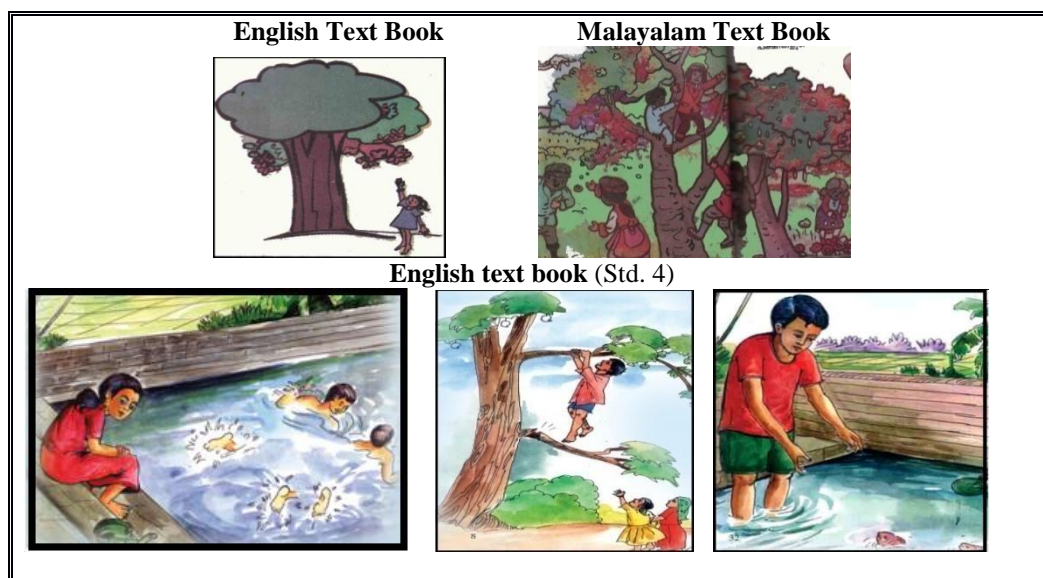
Similar depictions are shown in the first (pp-172, 175,177 & 181), second (pp-47), third (pp-76) and fourth standard (pp- 73) Malayalam text books also. Likewise the fourth (pp- 17, 53-60, 82-83, 86) and fifth standard (pp-41 & 92) English text books also contain depiction of gender division of work among men and women. A few examples are given in Fig 2. Such repeated depictions in one standard after the other serve to the deeper internalizing of gender division of roles and works by students, both boys and girls.



(Fig.2) Depiction of Gender Division of Work among Men and Women.

3.1.2. Depiction of Gendered Skills

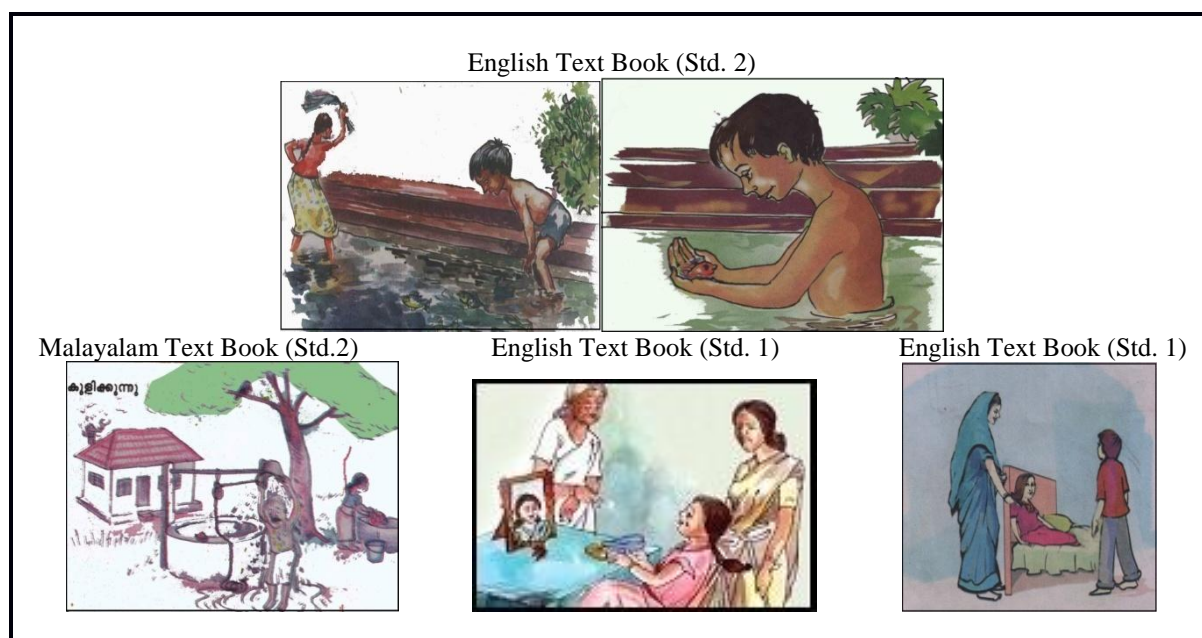
There is sexist/gender bias in the attribution of skills in the text books. Skills like swimming, climbing on the trees, fishing etc are allotted to male characters. Girls are shown as unable to do these activities and appreciating the acts done by boys. The skills attributed to girls include plucking flowers, washing clothes etc. In the English text book of fourth standard (pp-8) a story titled ‘Broken Branch’ in Unit 1 includes pictures of girls and boys. In this, a boy climbs up on the mango tree while the girls watch along. Similarly in the Malayalam text book of third standard (pp- 76, 102-103) the physical activity of climbing on the trees is shown as appropriate for boys and not for girls. In the English Text book of third standard (pp-156) there is a picture in an activity, portraying a girl struggling to pluck flowers from a tree. This picture again reaffirms the concept that a girl is not expected to climb upon trees. In Unit 2 of the English text book of fourth standard (pp-38) there is a chapter titled ‘Tit for Tat’ with a picture showing boys swimming in the pond while a girl watches them from the bank. It shows that boys can swim while girls cannot or shall not. Similarly Unit 3 of English text book of second standard (pp- 32 & 40) portrays the picture of a boy catching fish from the pond and a girl washing clothes. These pictures as given in Fig.3 clearly reveal the gendering of a certain set of skills as appropriate for boys and yet others for girls. Such depictions serve to make the girls withdraw from learning and attempting such skills which are shown as appropriate for the other gender.



(Fig. 3) Gendered Depiction of Skills

3.1.3. Depiction of Men and Women in Gendered Dress Codes

The dressing style of men and women in the pictures are highly stereotypical. Women and girls are portrayed in saree and skirts and tops while men and boys are shown in shirts and dhotis or trousers. In some pictures boys wear the trouser only. The dressing patterns of masculine and feminine characters in text books are shown in traditionally accepted patterns ideal for men and women. From early school days boys and girls develop a perception that a girl's body is something that is to be fully covered and there is nothing wrong for boys to keep the upper part of the body or their legs uncovered. Then and there begins the secrecy with the women's body and the undue chastity associated with women's dress code. A few illustrations are shown in Fig.4.

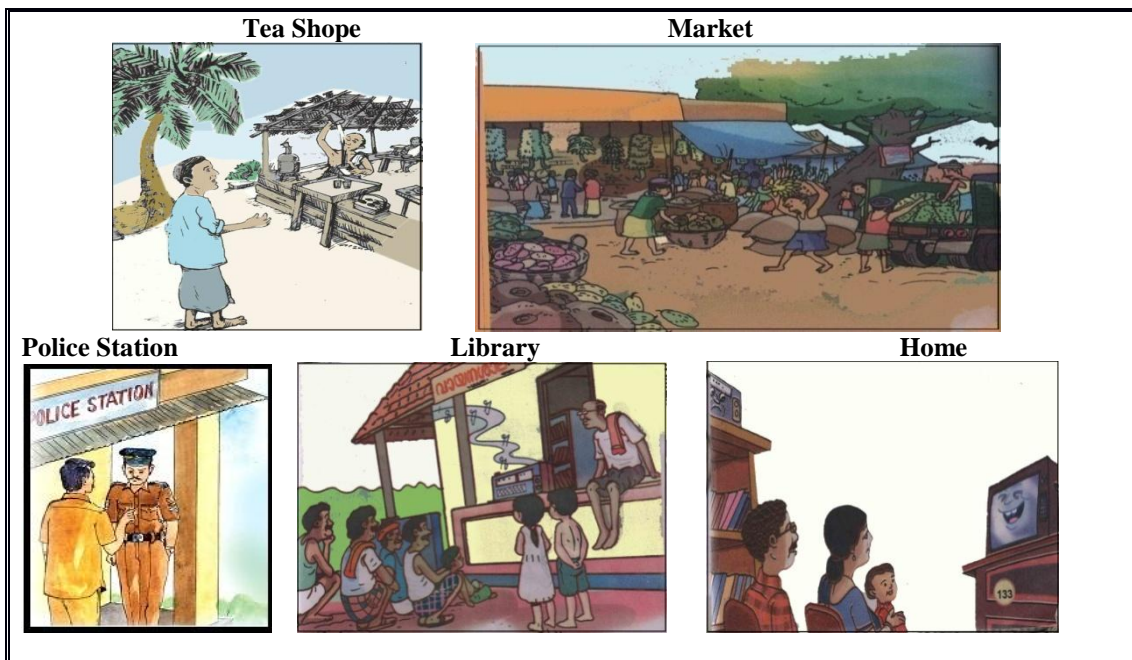


(Fig. 4) Depiction of Men and Women in Gendered Dress Codes.

3.1.4. Men and Women in Gendered Spaces

The analysis also reveals that there are separate spaces or contexts while portraying men and women. The spaces occupied by men include public places like roads, markets, police station, play ground etc. while women and girls are mostly seen in the private domain of the household and rarely in public places like schools and hospitals and that too either as teachers or as nurses. In the Malayalam text book of third standard (pp-131) there is a chapter titled 'Aakashvani' where there is a picture of public library with several men and a girl child listening to the news from the radio while in the same chapter (pp-133) the picture of a family is given with a husband, wife and child watching TV inside the home. This depiction passes on the message that it is appropriate for women to be inside the home and that too with the whole family for watching TV and gaining information while men can gain knowledge and information from anywhere, inside or outside the home.

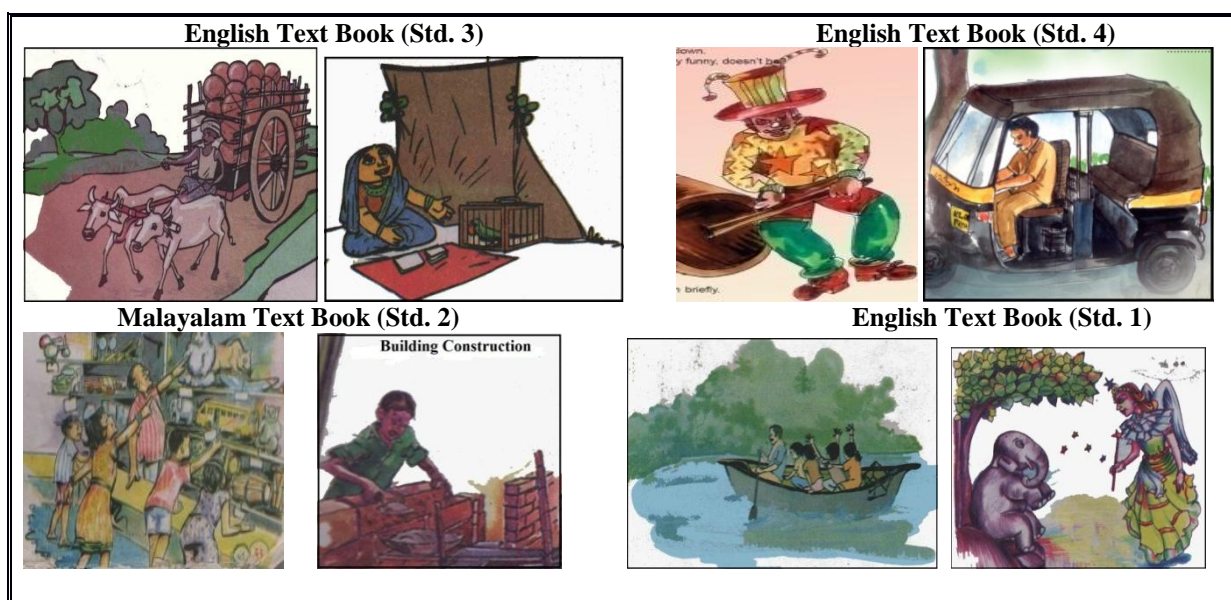
In the Malayalam text book of first standard (pp- 132) there is a chapter titled 'Rangan Chanthayil' which includes the picture of a market ('Chantha' in regional language means market in English), where men are buying, selling, loading and unloading the vegetables and the market area is totally crowded by males. The tea shop in the Malayalam text book of fifth standard (pp-40) is also occupied by men alone. Similarly the picture of police station shown on page 82 of English text of Standard 4 is occupied by two men. All these pictures as given in Fig. 4 convey the notion that public domains such as police station, public library, market, tea shop etc are places meant only for men and not for women. Young girls start to develop a fear and aversion to those spaces that belong to the other gender and learn to confine themselves to their sanctioned spaces. On the contrary young boys learn to perceive the home as a space for girls and women and develop a passion to be outgoing and occupying the culturally allotted public spaces. This feeling gets nurtured at every stage of their growth and finally a stage may develop where boys turn antagonistic to the outgoing girls and tend to restrict the mobility of their own sisters and mothers.



(Fig. 5) Depictions of Men and Women in Gendered Spaces

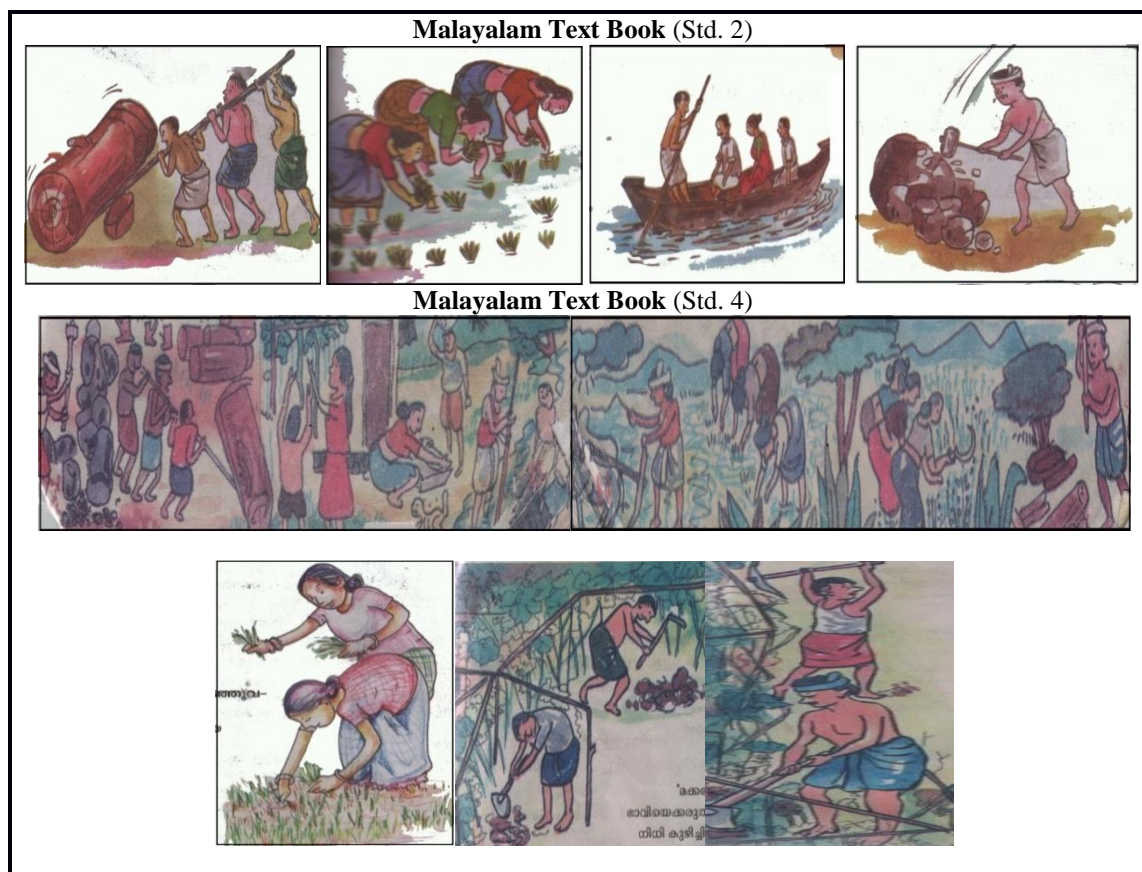
3.1.5. Depiction of Men and Women in Gendered Roles

Different roles are assigned to men and women based on their gender and these are depicted in the pictures of school text books. Males appear in specific roles like shopkeeper, boatman, auto-rickshaw and lorry driver, joker, bullock carter etc. while women are depicted as fortune-teller, fairy etc. These types of pictorial depictions are seen in the English text books of first (pp-95-98,121, & 144-14), third (pp- 104-105 & 154), fourth (pp- 21, 75, 77, 84, & 85) and fifth standards (pp-57) and in the first (pp-80 & 121) and second standard (pp- 53, 75, 96 & 120) Malayalam text books. A few illustrations are given in Fig.6.



(Fig.6) Depiction of men and women in Gendered Roles.

It is generally perceived that men are physically strong and women are weak because of their biological structure. The analysis shows that the pictures of men and women doing outdoor activities in text books are segregated in accordance with their physical strength and social norms. There are some pictures related with agriculture like, planting, seeding etc which are shown to be performed by women and other activities demanding the use of tools and machinery which are shown to be performed by men. Pictures in the Malayalam text book of first (pp-136), second (pp- 75) and fourth standards (pp- 66-67 & 84-85) given in Fig.6 are typical illustrations.

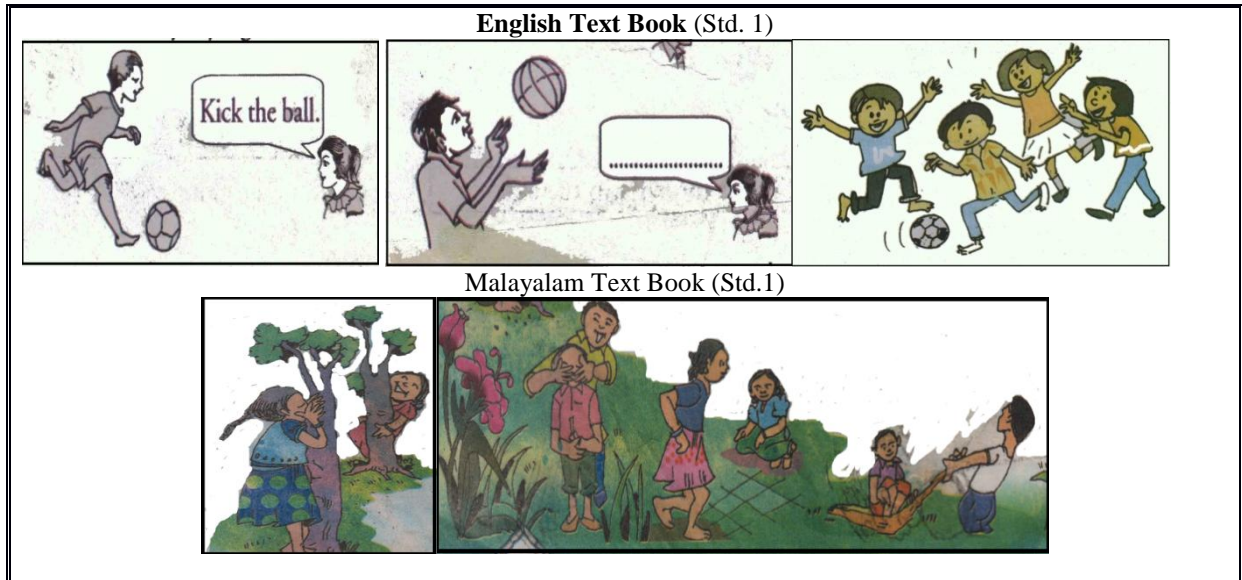


(Fig. 7) Depiction of men and women in Gendered Activities

A girl child going through the text books that depict men as to be associated with tools and machinery and women totally excluded from the scenes where machines are used imbibe a false belief that it is unlady like to get in touch with tools or machines. This feeling is further strengthened over the school days where in the name of co curricular activities like SUPW (Socially Useful Productive Work) boys are taught repairing of fan and mixie and girls are taught cooking, stitching and embroidery.

3.1.6. Depiction of Boys and Girls in Gendered Play

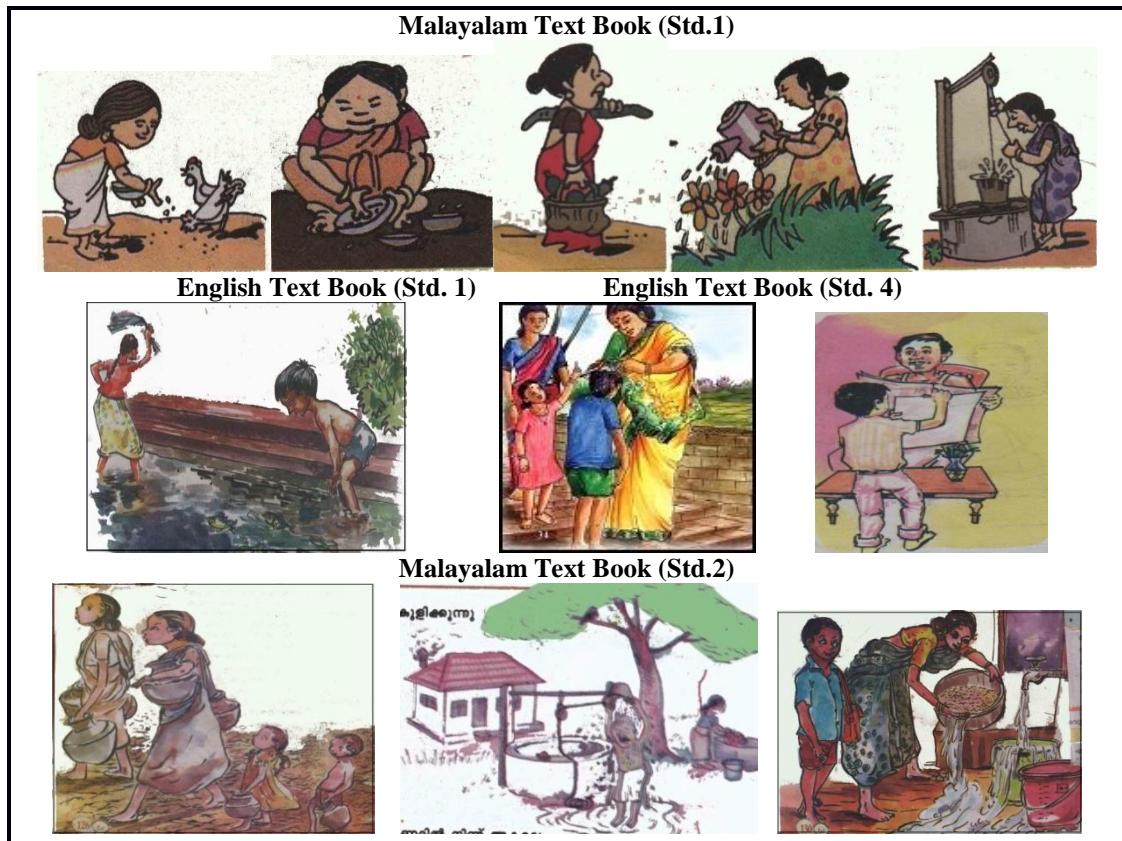
In the matter of play and interactions between girls and boys, some pictures show gender bias. The picture in Malayalam text book of first standard (pp-70) shows boys and girls playing with same sex only. In the same book on page 81 there is a picture of a boy playing football and a girl asking the boy to kick the ball. Similarly in the English text book of first standard, there is a chapter (pp- 153) titled 'Boys and Girls' where also football is played by two boys while the girl watches from outside and enjoys that play. These images convey the notion that playing football is meant only for boys and will lead to gender segregation in play. Young children while going through the texts develop a misconception that boys are expected to play active games and that too occupying the whole space of the school playground while girls are expected to play games that require minimum moving around and that too in limited spaces of the school veranda or corridors. Girls are shown as appreciating the games played by boys and serve the role of cheer girls. Girls may lose their self confidence and develop a false self esteem of lower physical strength and capacity. The gendered play also leads to the development of misconceptions that boys and men are tough and strong while girls and women are weak and fragile.



(Fig.8) Depiction of Men and Women in Gendered Play

3.1.7. Depiction of Gendered Household Responsibilities

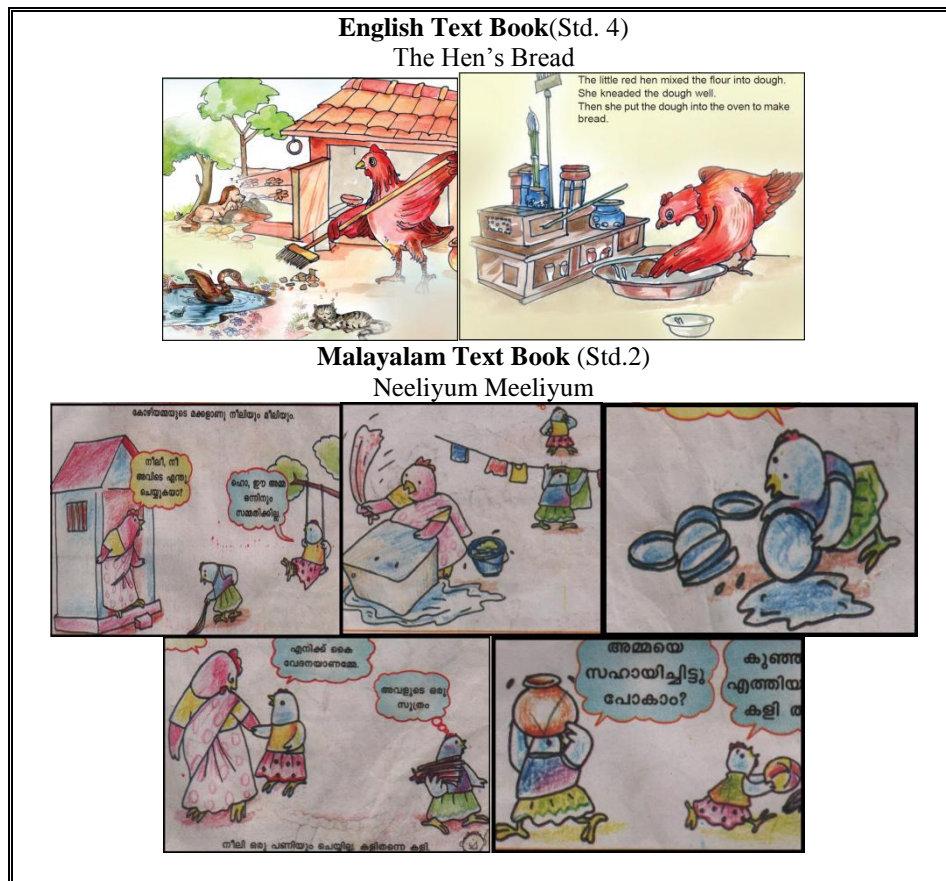
Women are central while portraying family roles/household activities. Women and girls are portrayed as engaged in preparing food, caring and nurturing of children, washing clothes, fetching water etc. There is a picture in English text book of second standard (pp-40-41) where the girl is shown washing the clothes while the boy is engaged in fishing.



(Fig.9) Depiction of Gendered Household Responsibilities

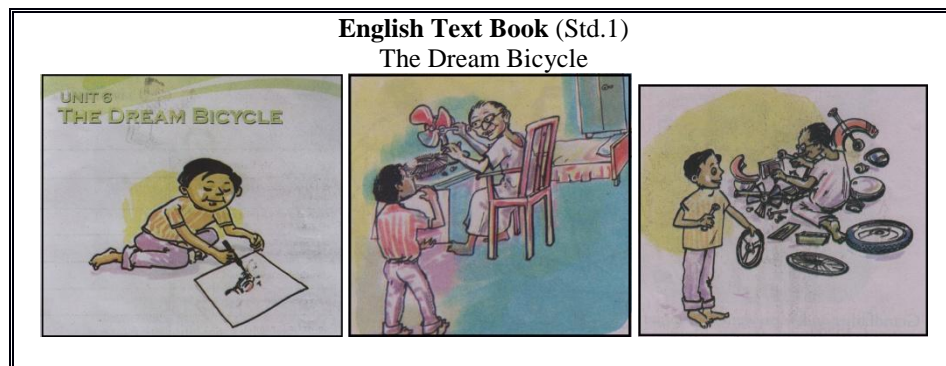
In Unit 5 of the English textbook of fourth standard titled as 'The Hen's Bread', the feminine character (i.e. Hen) is portrayed as doing the household work like cleaning the house and cooking the food. Likewise there is a story in Malayalam text book of second standard (pp-57-59) titled 'Neeliyum Meeliyum' which narrates the

story of a mother hen and two daughter hens. Mother hen and daughter hen are depicted as doing all the household duties like washing clothes, cleaning the house and fetching water and fuel. Here not only humans but also animals and birds are used for reinforcing the gender stereotypic roles of women in the household. A few such depictions are given in Fig. 10.



(Fig.10) Animals and Birds in Gender Stereotypic Roles

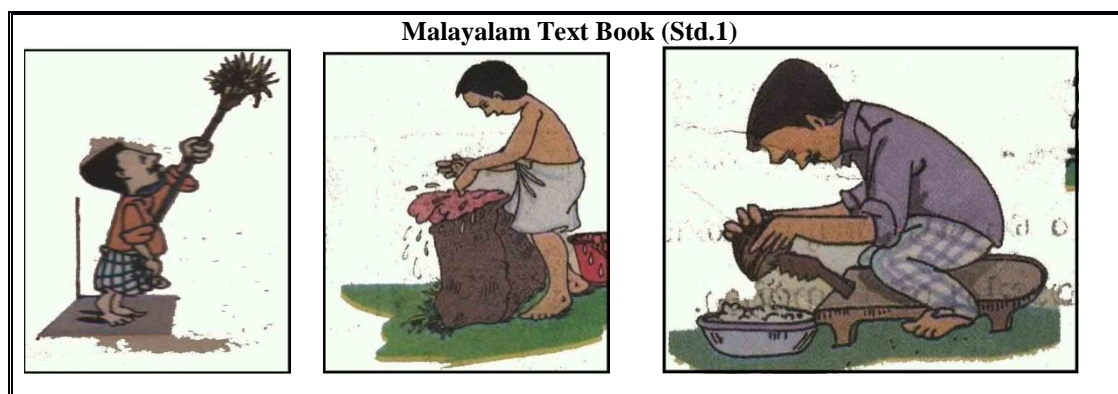
Unit 6 of English text book of first standard (pp-118-120) titled 'The Dream Bicycle' also portrays a household situation (Fig.11) wherein the father is shown as reading newspaper and grandfather as repairing a fan.



(Fig.11) A Gendered Household Situation.

The analysis also reveals yet another fact that the responsibilities of men and women in the family are indicated in the title of a chapter itself and the pictorial representations are done accordingly. The title if associated with the so called masculine or feminine one, then the pictures are accordingly focused on male or female characters. In Hen's Bread, the title is associated with bread making and the characters depicted are mother and daughter hens while in the title Dream Bicycle the characters involved are a boy, his father and grandfather. Girls are indirectly assigned the bread making role while the boys are assigned cycle riding.

Only in the Malayalam text book of first standard (pp-21) three pictures as given in Fig. 12 are shown where men are engaged in washing clothes, cleaning the wall and scraping the coconut.



(Fig.12) Rare Depictions of Men in Non-stereotypical Roles.

IV. Discussion

The present study deals with the content analysis of pictures depicted in English and Malayalam text books of primary school classes. The findings show that the textbooks have a significant role in reinforcing gender bias and discriminations in the society. Text books play a crucial role in developing notions regarding masculinity and femininity among students by reproducing the stereotypic notions of the society. The pictures highlight the typical images of women as weak and dependent in the roles of house wives engaged in caring of children and the sick, preparing food, washing clothes etc or career women, especially as teacher, nurse etc. But men are portrayed as strong and independent engaged in the superior and powerful roles of police man, doctor and so on. The findings of the present analysis are in agreement with the observations of Rao and Gayathri[12] that the textbooks portray large number of occupations assigned exclusively to the male characters and the women are concerned only with the roles of wife and mother. The findings endorse the observations of Hamdan [13] according to whom textbooks reflect the culturally prevalent gender bias where males practice a variety of jobs while females have traditional jobs such as teaching and nursing. Not only the jobs but even the skills like swimming, fishing, climbing etc are also found to be gendered. In the text books analysed, female characters are highly depicted in relation with household chores, while men more often are shown associated with public spaces such as market, police station, public library etc. These depictions make a clear gendering of spaces as appropriate to men and women.

Findings of the present study are similar to those of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s [14] [15] [16] according to which texts, especially language textbooks are biased against femininity and the males are portrayed with importance in occupations, public/social life, and as decision makers in companies, corporations and government bodies. On the other hand, women are rendered invisible, or at lowest representation far less than men.

When children go through these text books their gendered notions get strengthened that males and females are unequal and have separate roles and responsibilities. The depictions of male characters in majority of pictures also convey the false message of men as the norm and women as the other. The gender patterns of males and females in the textbooks are in fact not realistic and pose false images about women and men. But young children are not in a position to understand the hidden meanings and they develop incorrect gender identities and gender role perceptions. Boys tend to become dominating and the girls tend to become submissive. Girls develop a kind of learned helplessness and dependency. Their mental horizons get narrowed, career aspirations become limited and life goals become unrealistic. Their teachers who are products of patriarchy, born and brought up in a patriarchal culture, after having internalized all the patriarchal values and misconceptions cannot be expected to attempt for any correction or positive intervention among the children. Thorne's[17] research about children's behavior in schools, report that boys and girls recognize acceptable behavior for their gender at early ages and this is often reinforced, perhaps unknowingly, by teachers and school staff.

A mother reading the newspaper, a girl playing with football, a father preparing tea in the kitchen, a female in the doctor's and male in the nurse's role, a woman police officer sitting in the police station, women moving around the market place along with men, boys and girls playing together in the school ground, men fetching water, woman auto or taxi driver, babies sitting in the father's lap are representations that could very well be portrayed in text books so as to break gender stereotyping and promote egalitarian relations between boys and girls and men and women. Such depictions would definitely foster gender equality as boys and girls learn to respect each other as equals and equally capable of doing any work. Girls need to shed their learned

dependency and helplessness and boys need to accept the equal rights and capabilities of girls. The values of gender justice are to be learned from the younger days onwards as gender sensitization at later stages has proved to be a failure in several cases. It is difficult to change the mindsets of adult parents who in majority of families transmit the patriarchal values of male domination and female subjugation to their children. A father openly showing respect to the mother is a rare picture in the Indian society while a commanding father and obeying wife is a common scene. Such a gender bias is accepted as natural by the youngsters as all other stimuli in this regard that children receive from the media, religion and other socialization agencies convey the same meaning.

V. Conclusion

Since textbooks serve as a major source of information to students and as a frame of reference for teachers, it is important to take into account the ways males and females are represented in the books used in schools. Since the images used in textbooks have great influence on children's thoughts the gender bias reflected through them is a matter of serious concern.

The reinforcing of gender stereotypes through school curriculum plays a major role in sustaining gender discrimination in the society. In the present sociocultural set up, there are no sufficient role models for school going boys and girls that depict gender equality within the families. So the misconceptions learned from the family need to be corrected when children reach the school and that too at the very beginning of school days. Teachers as agents of social change must be committed to reduce the gender-role typing through their own behaviours, classroom practices and language, especially when communicating with children. Boys and girls naturally tend to form own-sex groups, hence, teachers should encourage activities that involve both sexes and structure the activities so that boys and girls get opportunities to cooperate and mingle with each other.

The gender bias in textbooks especially that is portrayed through the pictures of primary school texts must be eliminated at the earliest. The National Focus Group on Gender Issues in Education[18] has rightly pointed out that gender-sensitive material at the primary and secondary levels require inputs from those who have struggled to bring women's voices, narratives, experiences and world views in to the academic mainstream. Without this knowledge base, those charged with rewriting texts will restrict themselves to superficial tinkering; either by increasing the number of times girls are visually or verbally represented in books or by facial role reversals. Hence the text book writers must be gender sensitized in the true spirit.

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