

## **Gender Bias in Government-endorsed Arabic Language Textbooks for Indonesian Elementary Schools**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study reveals gender bias contained in textbook “Bahasa Arab Madrasah Ibtidaiyyah” published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia. According to the Minister of National Education Regulation Number 84 of 2008 concerning Guidelines for Implementing Gender Mainstreaming in the Education Sector, textbook, as part of significant element in learning process, should promote gender equality. However, the study shows several words, phrases, sentences and even images in the textbooks lead to gender bias. Therefore, the study is aimed at elaborating the forms of gender bias contained in the textbook. By implementing Saussure's semiotics, the study examines the content of the textbook by focusing on verbal and visual elements that highlight gender issues. The findings are expected to increase the critical understanding of gender roles in the textbooks among teachers and students, as well as to provide recommendations for improving the curriculum, especially teaching materials, to be more inclusive and gender equitable.

**Keywords:** semiotic, Arabic textbook, gender bias

## **A. Introduction**

In the last decades, the government of Indonesia at all sectors is working to create a culture and environment that strongly values gender equality, including in education sector. The Ministry of Education and Culture has emphasized the significance of gender mainstreaming in educational development. It is proven by the enactment of the National Education Ministerial Decree No. 84 Year 2000 that “each work unit in the education sector carries out planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all policies and development programs in the education sector in order to integrate gender into them”. The awareness on gender equality might be traced back to Indonesian women's long-standing efforts to attain equal rights through education, such as those made by Kartini, Dewi Sartika, and Maria Walanda Maramis (Widodo, 2018). Therefore, all educational activities and infrastructures must incorporate gender equality.

One of the influential instruments in the teaching and learning process is textbook. It plays significant role in both the teaching and learning of school subjects since it serves as the primary curriculum bearer (Hadar, 2017). Regardless its limitations, textbook is a teaching instrument that supports both efficient instruction and self-directed learning. Textbook can be included into the entire teaching process by the instructor. Textbook also works as a tool for students' autonomous learning at the same time (Mithans & Grmek, 2020). Provided with the road map of the course in the textbook, students feel more secure because they know what to anticipate and what is required of it. In addition, as it requires little investment and teacher pre-course preparation to accomplish modest academic goals and state criteria, textbook recognized by state oversight agencies is regarded as the safe, cost-effective instruction method (Scott & Husain, 2021).

Due to its vital role in teaching and learning process, textbooks should not disregard the standards established by the government, particularly taking into account equal gender representation. The government should also provide reading materials for students that foster an understanding of gender equality because the books they produce in large quantities serve as the primary teaching resource for the majority of Indonesian schools. However, a number of recent studies indicate that certain Indonesian school textbooks, specifically the textbooks which are

published and distributed by either the Ministry of Education and Culture or Ministry of Religious Affairs, display gender inequality (Ariyanto, 2018; Kuraedah dkk., 2023; Susanti dkk., 2021; Suwardi dkk., 2017; Suwarno dkk., 2021). The number clearly demonstrates the government's lax oversight of the preparation of the textbooks.

Given the fact that gender representation in the textbooks remains biased, the study is interested in examining gender bias found in the Arabic language textbooks for elementary schools published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Discussing on the role of textbook in primary education, Stara, et.al (2017) argued that despite the fact that most teachers think they should create their own worksheets to support students' individual needs and that textbooks shouldn't guarantee that curricula are complete, textbooks still dominate classroom instruction and other teaching resources are used surprisingly infrequently.

Furthermore, according to Piaget's cognitive development, children in 7 – 11 years old are in concrete operational stage (Babakr dkk., 2019). In this stage, according to Piaget, children can categorize objects based on their shape, value, and size as well as take into account their associations (King, 2011 cited in Babakr dkk., 2019). This study raises the concern that even though elementary school-aged children are already proficient in categorization and association, when they are repeatedly exposed to text or images claiming that a particular gender is associated with a particular occupation in the textbooks, it will alter their perception of how gender-based social practices are used in everyday life. Lee (2014 cited in Ariyanto, 2018) further explained that education-related products frequently display gender stereotypes in some way. In the case of linguistic sexism, children may be exposed to gender prejudices through textbooks if a language has words and phrases that imply prejudice towards a specific gender group.

Therefore, gender bias in Arabic language textbooks for elementary schools published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia deserves further examination. The study implements Saussure's semiotics. Besides unmasking gender bias issues in educational textbooks, the result of present study is expected to increase the critical understanding of gender roles in the textbooks among teachers and students. Furthermore, the results can be taken into account by the

authors of textbooks as they reevaluate how to fairly depict gender in the textbooks.

There have been several studies on gender representations in Arabic textbooks. In Suwardi, et.al. (2017) examined gender bias in Islamic textbooks for Muslim children in Indonesia. The object of the study is not only Arabic textbooks, but also Akidah Akhlak and Fikih textbooks for Islamic Elementary school level, which are published by the Ministry of Education. In their study, they discovered that while man gender bias against women is viewed as low in Arabic textbooks, it is regarded as strong in the illustrations from the Fikih and Akidah Akhlak textbook. In all three Islamic textbooks, there is widely thought to be a high category of man gender prejudice towards woman gender.

Muassomah, et.al (2023) examined gender inequality in Arabic textbook, specifically *Al-'Arabiyyah baina Yadaika*. The results point to a persisting gender disparity in the preparation of the Arabic textbook *Al-'Arabiyyah baina Yadaika*. Inadequate physical and psychological depiction of women is seen in the textbook. This supports the profoundly ingrained patriarchal notions of Arab society, which portray women as emotional, docile, and relegated to household responsibilities. This demonstrates the important role that these textbooks have in influencing students' perspectives, ideologies, and cultural practices in addition to transferring academic information.

Besides finding the gender injustice faced by women in many contexts, such as the treatment of women as second-class citizens and gender prejudices, the study conducted by Uyuni, et.al. (2023), who examined *Al-Asas* volume 1, 2, and 3, explicated that the books have favorable depictions of women. The books also include representations of women, such as putting them on an equal footing with males in a variety of public social and professional activities.

The other recent study was conducted by Kuraedah, et.al. (2023) who investigated gender representation in the government-endorsed Arabic textbooks for Islamic-based schools in Indonesia. They examined the verbal and visual text in the textbooks for grade X, XI, and XII. The findings demonstrate how women were still typically characterized as domestic workers despite being present in verbal and visual materials in the three textbooks that were endorsed

(Grades X, XI, and XII). Additionally, travelers, home workers, and pediatricians are other stereotypes associated with women.

The earlier research mostly looked at the portrayal of woman in arabic textbooks for non-native speakers. However, the study conducted by Muassomah, et.al (2023) and Uyuni et.al. (2023) investigated the textbooks published by the Arabic speaking countries. On the other hand, the other two focused on the textbooks published and endorsed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia. Suwardi et.al. (2017) observed three textbooks, i.e., Fikih, Akidah Akhlak, and Arabic Language, for Islamic elementary schools. Meanwhile, Kuraedah, et.al (2023) focused on Arabic language textbooks for high school students. To sum up, the previous studies found woman representation in the Arabic textbooks remains biased. They are mostly situated in domestic area. However, Suwardi, et.al.(2017) revealed that the percentage of gender biased in Arabic textbook is lower compared to Fikih and Akidah Akhlak. In addition, Uyuni et.al. (2023) stated that in Al-Asas, women in some circumstances have equal position as men.

The the focal point of this study is it examines the Arabic textbooks for Elementary students published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2020. It will evaluate whether the government has made modifications to the textbooks' content or they continue to perpetuate gender prejudice, as documented by earlier academics.

The present study is language-based research. Therefore, the data in the study were collected using observation method (*Metode Simak*), which means observing the significant linguistic units in Arabic language textbooks for Elementary Schools published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This analysis is ordered according to class level (from class 1 to 6). Since the study implemented Saussure's Semiotics, to find the Signs, the first step to be taken is finding out the signifiers in the form of verbal and non-verbal data. After collecting the signifiers, the following steps is finding the signified, which is generated from the interpretation or conception of the signifiers (Yakin & Totu, 2014). In this case, the researchers did interpretations to the signifiers to find out the signified, for the signification would not occur if the signified is not found. Both signified and signifier have mutual need and complement each other.

## B. Findings and Discussion

The identity of the Arabic language textbooks which are examined in the present study can be seen in the following table.

Table 1. Book Identity

Publisher	Class	Author	Chapter
Directorate of KSKK Madrasah, Director General of Islamic Education, Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, in collaboration with the Center for Research and Knowledge Networking, Saudi Arabia.	1	Makhi Ulil Kirom (author) Danial Hilmi (editor)	Chapter I: التعارف Chapter II: أسرتي Chapter III: هوايتي Chapter IV: بيتي Chapter V: الفواكه أسماء Chapter VI: الألوان
	2	Amrini Shofiyani (writer) Danial Hilmi (editor)	Chapter I: المدرسة أفراد Chapter II: المدرسية الأدوات Chapter III: المدرسي الزي Chapter IV: المواصلات وسائل Chapter V: المنزلي الأثاث Chapter VI: الطبيعية المناظر
	3	Umi Kholila (author) Danial Hilmi (editor)	Chapter I: الدراسية المواد Chapter II: الحيوانات أسماء Chapter III: الأمراض Chapter IV: الرياضة Chapter V: أصدقائي Chapter VI: الحديقة
	4	Jauhar Ali (author) Siti Salih (editor)	Chapter I: العنوان Chapter II: المهنة Chapter III: أُملي Chapter IV: الأسرة أفراد Chapter V: البيت في

			Chapter VI: إندونيسيا أحب
5	Ahmad Zamroni (author) Siti Salih (editor)		Chapter I: الجسم أعضاء Chapter II: المهنة Chapter III: الحيوانات حديقة Chapter IV: وغرفة المذاكرة الاستقبال غرفة في Chapter V: والمكتبة المعمل في Chapter VI: في المقصف
6	Uswatul Hasanah (author) Siti Salih (editor)		Chapter I: الساعة Chapter II: العربية اللغة أحب Chapter III: الأنشطة أحب Chapter IV: العطلة Chapter V: النزهة Chapter VI: الحديقة

The investigation began with the textbook of class 1. Because visuals predominate in class 1 content, there is few verbal texts offered. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, a child utilizes pictures and words to understand the world around them between the ages of 2 and 7 years. In certain circumstances, visuals are used more than words.

In Chapter IV page 8, it is found a picture of a boy and two adults wearing safety vests and hard hats.



وَلَدٌ

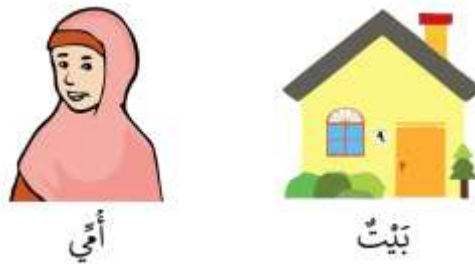


مُهَنْدِسٌ

This signifier draws a conclusion that the civil engineering and work related to building construction has been dominated by men (Manesh, 2020). Pairing the image of a boy with two engineers raised an associative thinking that the ideal future career for a boy when he grows up is to become an engineer. The amount of

structures that depict the phallus or male genitalia is one of the reinforcers of masculine stereotypes as an engineer/ architect (Santos Rodríguez & Ortiz Goulart, 2021). An example of phallic architecture is The Gherkin, or the Erotic Gherkin, a spherical landmark of the City of London extending upwards with a pointed tip. One of the evidences of the construction of The Gherkin as a show of male dominance over women is its location on Mary Axe street where there is a church dedicated to Mary the Holy Virgin.

In chapter VI page 124, it is found an image of a mother (أمي) paired with an image of a house.



According to the image above, preconceptions about women exist: Women have two life events: first, they become mothers; second, women who become mothers must stay at home and, therefore, become housewives, which in Arabic is called ربة البيت. The opposite of this term is رب البيت which means housefather. Unfortunately, this term is less familiar both in Indonesia and in Arabic (Al-Ali & Shatat, 2022). The use of the terms رب البيت or رب المنزل is so rare that there is a special discussion regarding the use of these terms; whether it is allowed or not and how to use it properly (al-Uthaymin, 2007). Despite the perception that the term رب البيت only deserves to be attributed to Allah, as a consequence of the meaning of the third verse of Surah Al-Quraish, the (almost) absence of the term رب البيت which means "household father" shows the minimal role of fathers in the Arab world in taking care of their household, including caring for children and doing unpaid domestic work, such as mopping, washing dishes and sweeping (Ridge dkk., 2017).

In the textbook for class 2, it is found the signifier in the form of verbal text which can be seen as follows:

مَنْ أَنْتِ؟ أَنَا بَائِعَةٌ، الْبَائِعَةُ فِي الْمَقْصِفِ.

(Who are you? I am a woman seller. A seller in the canteen.)



One step closer to gender equality is the inclusion of women as seller or, in a larger sense, as participants in the economy. This is due to the fact that males formerly controlled the economic sector (Lane & Crane, 2002). However, it doesn't seem as though this advancement can always be viewed as being beneficial for women, as negative stereotyping of women persists, such as the idea that a seller's high sales are due to her beauty and attractiveness or the idea that female sellers want to serve as sexual objects for their customers based on the accessories and attire they choose to wear. Women in the workforce are stereotyped as being "soft" and "feeling" people, which makes them not just sexual objects but also hinders their ability to advance professionally. Meanwhile, to become a manager or leader, a person must have "testosterone decision-making", namely traits that have a violent nuance, which are (considered) attached to the testosterone hormone, namely assertiveness, dominance and complete control. Due to these restrictions, woman is only able to work as a meager salesperson in the public economic sector (Lane & Crane, 2002).

Another verbal text is also found in Chapter IV, page 63. The text is a conversation between two boys about means of transportation.



The signifier implied that males are always fixated on automobiles or other modes of transportation, including motorcycles, buses, trains, ships, and airplanes. This is due to the fact that they have grown accustomed to playing with automobiles and other toy vehicles since they were little. Therefore, it is not

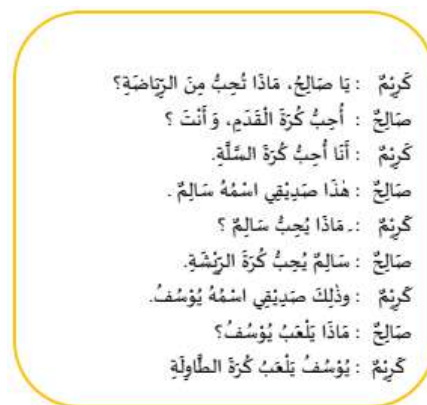
surprising that males predominate in conversations regarding transportation methods; in this instance, women are even absent from the discussion about automobiles. This stereotype is nothing more than a social construct that defines males as people who use their automobiles for business and other activities in public places, whereas women do not. They are used to acting out housewife roles and playing with dolls (Arnania-Kepuladze, 2010; Marinova, 2003).

The non-verbal signifier is also found in chapter III, page 41. The image of male and female student with description can be seen below.



The description that appears underneath the image is not the subject of this debate because it may be said that both of these explanations are comparable. Firstness or the order in which the subjects are mentioned—men first, then women—is the issue here (Hamdan, 2008, hlm. 81). The identical proof was discovered in this textbook, among of which are on pages 10–11 and 27–28.

In the textbook for class 3, the signifier is found in the form of conversation between two male students about sport.



There are no discussions about sports in this exchange that involve any women. Even while mentioning the interests of their friends, these two students identified their friends as male. Even if, in fact, the number of women participating in sports is rising, stereotypes still persist. There are sports represented by men, such as football, and some are represented by woman, i.e., skating (Cárcamo dkk., 2021). This is inextricably linked to the outdated notion that sports that feature competitions to test one's physical prowess are intended for strong masculine men. Women who are dedicated to feminine qualities, on the other hand, can only participate in non-athletic sports (Romney & Johnson, 2020).

One of the unfortunate things about this textbook is that there are very few images of women shown, especially chapters 1-2 which only show less than 10 pictures, one of which shows the presence of woman in the book cover inside the textbook. Another example of a visual that involves women appear in chapter VI, page 105.



The picture shows two women standing in the garden full of flowers. Since the Middle Ages, at least through the medium of painting, the word "flower" has been used to refer to the (perceived) feminine traits that are inherent in women. For instance, Mary, the Holy Virgin, is symbolized by the white flower, which denotes the purity of sexuality as well as spiritual purity (Stott, 1992). This portrayal cannot be separated from the historical tradition that views women as both weak, delicate, and attractive beings that want protection. The placement of women in the garden serves as the protective method in issue. Pro-patriarchy groups exploit this antiquated perspective to continue domesticating women (Frownfelter, 2010).

This Arabic textbook has a complete composition for students to master five language competencies: listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. In class 4, speaking competency in each chapter displays a conversation (*hiwar*) that occurs between two or more people (dialogue) or more (polylogue). The following are details of the characters in *hiwar*:

- 1) Chapter I: Ali and Sulaiman;
- 2) Chapter II: Ibrahim and Hasan;
- 3) Chapter III: Yusuf and Umar; Ahmad and Hilman;
- 4) Chapter IV: Umar and Usman;
- 5) Chapter V: Mother, father, Ali, Fatimah, Ahmad, Lathifah, grandmother, grandfather;
- 6) Chapter VI: Rosyid and Hakim.

Of the six chapters, one chapter contains *hiwar* involving women i.e., of Fatimah, Lathifah and grandmother, as characters in it due to their status as family members. If chapter V did not contain the theme "home", no women would be given the right to speak. This thesis is proven by the absence of female characters in the discussion about "family members" in Chapter IV. Equal rights to speak or, more precisely, freedom of speech for women becomes even more important when they become victims. Because when they become victims, especially victims of sexual harassment, many women tend to choose to remain silent; either because of shame, trauma or being pressured and restricted in their movements by the perpetrator, or even the victim then becomes the guilty party because of society's patriarchal views (Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020).

Chapter II, page 18 shows the image of men with different professions.

المِهْنَةُ



The image that explains the main title of chapter II above shows that women are excluded from those who have the right to work or carry out activities in the public sector. Even while women may be seen working as firefighters, prosecutors, cooks, and mechanics in the real world, the image above tends to emphasize two things: it denies the reality that women are faced with as workers in the public sector, and that women should be at home and doing domestic work.

In the textbook for class 5, it is found several signifiers in the form of verbal data. For instance, in chapter II, page 15:

مَاذَا تَرَى فِي هَذِهِ الصُّورَةِ؟ مَاذَا تُرِيدُ أَنْ تَسْأَلَ عَنْهُ فِيهَا؟

(What do you see in the picture? What do you want to ask about the picture?)

Questions aimed at students to comment on pictures. The two questions above use the second person singular male pronoun (أَنْتَ). The author of the book chooses to deny the fact that the readers of the book are men and women. In textbooks, and perhaps all Arabic textbooks, the editorial commands contained in the material or practice questions are always directed at men. For example in chapter II, page. 17:

اقْرَأْ وَاحْظِ التَّرَكِيبَ الْقَالِيَةَ!

(Read and notice the following sentence structure!)

Chapter V, p. 53:

انظُرْ واسْتَمِعْ وأَعِدْ!

(Look, listen and repeat!)

Imam Sibawayh, a Persian grammar expert, said: "Know that men are lighter than women, because they are the first and also have the strongest use of language. And hence (male as the beginning), female grammar branches off from male grammar." (Afifi, 1996, hlm. 59). Imam Sibawayh's opinion is based on the words of Allah in Q.S. al-Nisa': 176:

فَلِلذَكَرِ مِثْلَ حَظِّ الْأُنثَيَيْنِ

"The male will have the share of two females".

This is what is meant by being lighter, that is, 1 man is lighter than 2 women.

Imam Sibawayh's opinion gives rise to consequences in the form of superiority of male pronouns over female pronouns. For example, the pronoun for

Ali, Hasan, Husna and Laila are the third plural male pronoun (هم), not the third plural female pronoun (هن). Because Arabic grammar has the potential to be gender biased, language speakers must be careful not to fall into bias. One way is to include pronouns that are appropriate to gender (Huda, 2021).

Non-verbal data that shows gender bias is presented in chapter II, page 15. The picture shows people in uniforms based on their profession.



When we hear the word doctor, we picture a white-suited man with a stethoscope hanging over his chest. On the other hand, when we hear the word nurse, we picture a lady clothed similarly to how we see a doctor. We have been growing up accustomed to people indoctrinating us into believing that nurses are female and doctors are male. When we are questioned about our dream by teachers, they may ask us questions that illustrate this theory. Men are leaders, thus they naturally become physicians. Women, who are the second-ranking residents, transition into careers as nurses or medical assistants.

In the textbook for class 6, it is presented a descriptive text about activities at school followed by some questions. In the text, there are two characters, Saleh and Karimah. The complete text can be seen as follows:

اسمي صالح ..... أنا ألعب كرة القدم في وقت الاستراحة .....

اسمي كريمة ..... أتعلم اللغة العربية .... وأتعلم علم الحساب مع زملائي .... ثم أتعلم الفقه .....

الأسئلة:

في أي ساعة يذهب صالح ....

في أي ساعة يتعلم صالح ....

في أي ساعة يقرأ صالح .....

As explained previously, men tend to be associated with firm, tough and rebellious traits. Therefore, the activities they perform should represent those

characteristics. "Saleh, when the break comes, plays football with his friends." There was no problem with this sentence, until there was a comparative text on Saleh's activities at school. The comparative text in question is about Karimah's activities at the school, with the aim of enriching students' vocabulary.

Problems arise when the text does not tell about Karimah's activities during her break. Karimah is said to be a very diligent student, who continuously studies all the time, from first hour to the end, with various subjects. This condition is in contrast to Saleh, who enjoyed his free time playing football. This text depicts men as someone who is active outdoors with masculine activities, while women are portrayed as someone who is involved in the domestic sector (classroom).

The second problem is that Saleh's story is told before Karimah's. Prioritizing men over women in telling stories might be fine. However, this becomes problematic when it occurs in many living spaces.

The final problem is Karimah's absence from the discussion room. Karimah, who introduced herself via text, is not mentioned at all in the list of questions. The questioner was only interested in Saleh's story. This absence seemed to consider Karimah's story unimportant and not worth discussing.

Non-verbal data in the textbook for class 6 is a picture of female student sweeping the floor, found in chapter II, page 28.



This last image seems to be a monument to confirming the labeling of women as domestic workers. Apart from domestication, sweeping is also quite closely associated with trivial work. Even though sweeping can occur in public spaces: offices, stadiums or streets, for example, because the image of sweeping is closely associated with domestic work which does not really require a strategy and a thorough activity plan, the image of a schoolgirl sweeping the floor perpetuates the domestication of women.

### C. Conclusion

To sum up the discussion, the textbook in every class has still demonstrated gender bias, which means women are still positioned as the second subject, compared to men. The forms of gender inequality vary. The one that frequently appear is positioning women as the domestic workers. Since they are stereotyped as a "soft" and "feeling" creature, even when they become a worker, the professions they undertake seem powerless, unlike those given to men, such as seller in the canteen and nurse.

In addition, firstness also becomes the issue in this study, since men are always mentioned earlier than women. The characters in conversation are also dominated by men, while women solely get small portion. Besides, the use of second person singular male pronoun is still found in all editorial commands contained in the material or practice questions, in fact students are not only male but also female.

From the signifiers that have been obtained, it can be indicated that textbooks unconsciously still perpetuated gender bias, proven by the fact that in Suwardi, et.al(2017) found gender bias in Arabic language textbook for Elementary school, meanwhile the current books still perform some gender bias too. The government should significantly reevaluate how to fairly depict gender in the textbooks, not only Arabic textbooks but also other textbooks. It is crucial since textbook becomes the significant teaching instrument for both students and teachers in the teaching and learning process and are still widely used in most of the schools in Indonesia.

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