

## Visual Gender Representation in Indonesian Language Textbooks of the Merdeka Curriculum for Primary Schools

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

gender representation;  
textbook;  
primary education;  
visual analysis;  
Merdeka Curriculum

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#### Article history:

Received 2025-01-14

Revised 2025-12-03

Accepted 2025-12-31

### ABSTRACT

Textbooks play a crucial role in shaping children's perceptions of gender from an early age. As primary sources of learning, visual representations within textbooks can either reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes. This study investigates the portrayal of gender in Indonesian language textbooks used in the Merdeka Curriculum for primary schools. Using a qualitative visual content analysis based on the Brugeilles and Cromer framework, this study examines two government-published Indonesian language textbooks for Grades III and IV. The analysis focuses on three key aspects: the frequency of male and female characters, their occupations, and depicted activities. Visual data were categorized and quantified to assess patterns of gender representation. Findings reveal persistent gender imbalances in both textbooks. Male characters are more frequently depicted, especially in group settings and public spaces. Male characters also hold more diverse and prestigious occupations, while female characters are more often associated with domestic roles and emotional expression. Although the Grade IV textbook shows slightly improved balance in occupational representation, gender stereotypes remain evident in activity types and settings. These patterns suggest that gender bias continues to be embedded in educational materials, despite the progressive aims of the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings call for greater attention to gender-sensitive illustration practices and the development of inclusive learning resources. Teachers are encouraged to critically engage with textbook content and promote discussions on gender equality in the classroom.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender is a concept that identifies the identities of women and men based on their roles, not solely on biological sex differences (Richardson, 2015). Although social life is regulated in various ways, gender is a fundamental component of these regulations (Lindsey, 2020). The roles of women and men,

constructed by social and cultural concepts in society, are often unbalanced. The main source of this disparity is gender bias, which can have a significant negative impact on careers and mental health (Llorens et al., 2021).

Education is an integral part of gender issues and plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality through the materials and textbooks used (Nunun et al., 2020). Gender equality refers to efforts to establish conditions in which a person's rights, opportunities, and responsibilities are not restricted or diminished based on their gender (Breda et al., 2020). It is important to teach this concept from an early age because it relates to children's social development. From an early age, children begin to become aware of their position in relation to age, gender, social status, and power (Khadijah, 2021). Misunderstandings in gender education at this stage can reduce children's sensitivity to aspects of their social development and potentially trigger gender inequality (Yulaelawati, 2016).

The Merdeka Curriculum, which is currently being implemented, has given teachers the freedom to plan and carry out the learning process. Teachers can use various teaching materials, such as textbooks, teaching modules, and learning videos (Hadi et al., 2023). However, the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum still faces various challenges, including at the primary education level. Teachers still have difficulty understanding the nature of the curriculum, mastering the material, carrying out assessments and organizing learning activities (Sutinah et al., 2024). These various challenges make textbooks still one of the main teaching materials for teachers, especially textbooks published by the government.

Textbooks play an important role in the education system by transmitting various types of information, such as history, perspectives, behavior, and social norms (Brugailles et al., 2007). Textbooks are particularly prevalent in elementary schools, where teachers are expected to instruct students in almost all subjects at a given grade level (Bansiong, 2019). Elementary school textbooks often use visual content to convey knowledge. However, gender bias depicted in these images can subtly influence student learning outcomes, career choices, and their perception of science (Wang et al., 2023).

Textbooks that are typically utilized for gender representation research are language textbooks. This is due to the fact that language textbooks contain not only linguistic material, but also knowledge and other values that describe the soul of the language-using community (Susanto, 2021). However, students at the elementary school, as textbook users, have yet to develop the capacity for critical and spontaneous thinking, thus requiring teacher assistance to comprehend text and visual content that exhibits gender bias (Nunun et al., 2020).

Previous studies have concluded that visual content in textbooks emphasizes men's roles more than women's roles (Awaliyah et al., 2022; Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023; Norova, 2020; Nujhati & Nurkamto, 2024; Wahyudi & Lutfauziah, 2023). Awaliyah et al. (2022) found that the visual representation of women in elementary school English textbooks published by the Ministry of Education reproduces traditional gender roles found in patriarchal societies. Specifically, women were depicted as playing a greater role in the domestic sphere, while men were depicted as being more dominant in the public sphere. Similar results were found in Uzbekistan and India. Norova (2020) revealed gender inequality in the visual content of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks for elementary schools in Uzbekistan. The representation of women in textbooks at all grade levels is consistently lower than that of men. Textbooks in India also show a trend of gender discrimination and patriarchal culture (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023). Textbooks are also not gender responsive and tend to perpetuate the stereotype that women are more often engaged in domestic activities. Research in Indonesia found similar results in the 2013 Grade 1 curriculum textbooks, which still contain gender bias. Men are depicted as dominating the public sphere and controlling women's lives (Wahyudi & Lutfauziah, 2023).

Previous studies in Indonesia have discussed gender bias in English and 2013 Curriculum textbooks. However, research on Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum textbooks at the elementary school level is limited. Therefore, more research is needed to improve the comprehensiveness of research on gender representation in elementary school textbooks. This study examines Indonesian language textbooks for the Merdeka Curriculum's Phase B, specifically Grades III and IV. The study aims to analyze the frequency, occupation, and character activities of gender representation in visual content.

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with visual content analysis methods to examine gender representation in textbooks. The analytical framework developed by Brugeilles and Cromer was specifically designed to analyze gender representation in visual content, such as images, illustrations, and photos, in textbooks. By limiting the analysis to visual content, the study can conduct a more in-depth exploration of each image. Text analysis, on the other hand, is more susceptible to subjective interpretations of meaning, character intent, and dialogue nuances. By excluding text, this study minimizes complex interpretive variables and focuses on more observable evidence.

### 2.1. Data Sources

This study's primary data sources were two Indonesian-language elementary school textbooks under the Merdeka Curriculum, published in 2022 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia.

1. Textbook 1: Bahasa Indonesia Kawan Seiring untuk Sekolah Dasar Kelas III (Friends Along the Way for Elementary School Grade III), written by Anna Farida Kurniasari dan Helva Nurhidayah.
2. Textbook 2: Bahasa Indonesia Lihat Sekitar untuk Sekolah Dasar Kelas IV (Indonesian Language: Look Around for Elementary School Grade IV), written by Eva Yulia Nukman dan Cicilia Erni Setyowati.

The sample was selected using purposive sampling because the users of these books are 9- to 10-year-old students in the transition period from early childhood to preadolescence. This phase is critical for developing students' social understanding compared to grades V and VI, whose students have already entered the pre-adolescent stage. This relatively new textbook presents a more diverse range of themes about social life than the books in phase A, which mostly contain stories about family life and animal tales.

### 2.2. Coding

The researchers used a checklist based on Brugeilles & Cromer (2009) analytical framework. The checklist covered three aspects: frequency of occurrence, occupations, and activities.

1. The frequency of male and female characters  
The visual content in both textbooks is presented in two forms: individual pictures and group pictures. Individual pictures are classified into males and females only. Group pictures are classified into three categories: (1) male only, (2) female only, and (3) groups consisting of both male and female. The groups containing both male and female are further divided into three categories: (1) male dominant (more male characters), (2) female dominant (more female characters), and (3) neither dominant (balanced male and female characters).
2. Male and female occupations  
The occupations of males and females depicted in the pictures were identified. The number and percentage of each gender were also counted to determine how social roles were portrayed.
3. Male and female characters activities  
The activities performed by the characters are identified and recorded. These activities are classified as either household activities, such as washing dishes, cooking, and cleaning, or other daily activities, such as shopping, studying, and entertainment. Analyzing the activities performed by the characters is important for describing how male's and female's activities are depicted in the textbook.

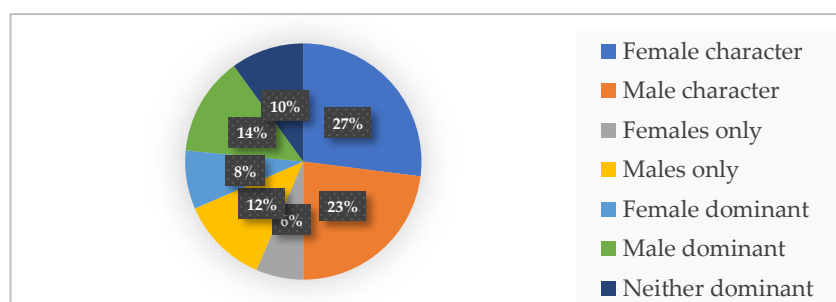
### 2.3. Data Analysis

According to Huberman & Miles (2002), data interpretation was carried out using three stages of qualitative data analysis: (1) data reduction, (2) data display, and (3) conclusion/verification. Data reduction entailed ignoring the frequency with which the same data appeared; for instance, only one character was selected from a series of pictures. Data display involved classifying the data into groups and calculating comparison ratios. Next, interpretation was carried out by calculating the percentage of gender identity representation. This process produced a visual representation of the percentage of gender identity in the pictures contained in the textbook. The final stage of data explanation was carried out by examining it within a theoretical framework using a number of references.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. The frequency of male and female characters

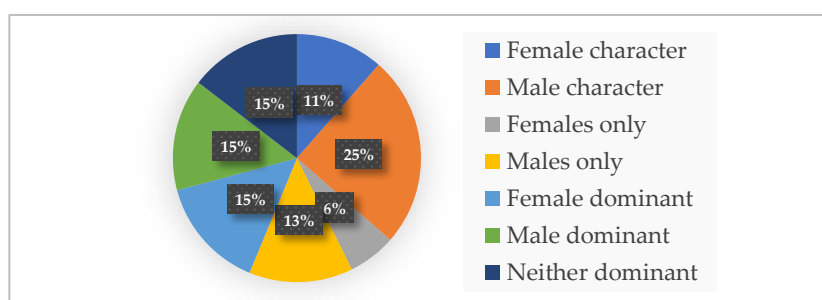
The frequency of male and female characters appearing in textbook 1 is depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The Frequency of Male and Female Characters in Textbook 1

Figure 1 shows that individual pictures of female characters are more dominant than individual pictures of male characters. However, in group pictures, there is a significant difference between pictures of males-only (15.9%) and females-only (8.7%). Group pictures featuring both genders also show a dominance of male characters, with an 8% difference.

The frequency of male and female characters in textbook 2 is depicted in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** The Frequency of Male and Female Characters in Textbook 2

Although the distribution of pictures in textbook 2 is slightly more balanced than in textbook 1, male characters still dominate both books. While textbook 1 contains more individual pictures of female characters, textbook 2 significantly reverses this trend, with individual pictures of male characters appearing more than twice as often as individual pictures of female characters. These findings suggest that female's visibility as independent actors decreases as grade level increases. In the context of

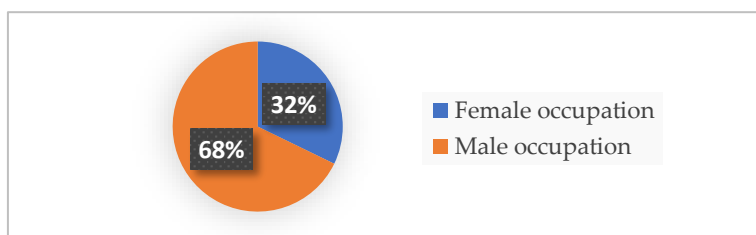
education, this may implicitly convey the message that males are more deserving of being portrayed as the main subjects than females at higher levels.

Both textbooks depict social spaces as male-dominated. In textbook 1, male-only group pictures (24%) outnumber female-only group pictures (13%) by twofold. In textbook 2, the disparity is even greater, with 21% of groups being male-only and 10% being female-only. These data suggest the assumption that males have greater access to and control over public spaces and homogeneous social interactions than females do.

Similar findings were reported in previous studies of textbooks from Uzbekistan, India, and Indonesia, which also showed that male characters were depicted more frequently (Fatmawati et al., 2022; Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023; Norova, 2020). It's important to note that textbooks can be considered silent partners that describe things legitimized by certain communities (Widodo, 2018). Textbook pictures and illustrations are designed for many purposes, including teaching concepts and raising children's awareness (Pourrajab & Rabbani, 2015). At the elementary school level, group pictures are used more often to help children who have just started school build peer-group identity (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009). The visualizations in this textbook can illustrate certain values regarding gender treatment. These values can be followed unconsciously by both teachers and students.

### 3.2. Working Representation

The occupations of males and females featured in textbook 1 are shown in the following graphic.



**Graphic 3.** Male and female occupations in textbook 1

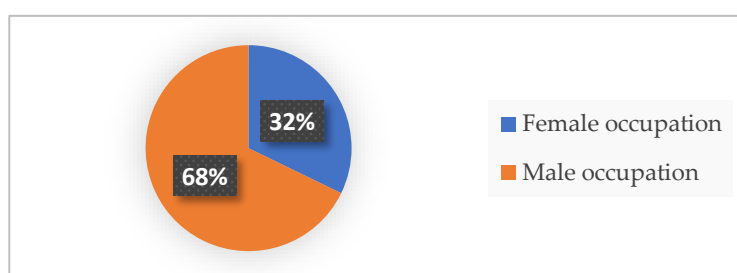
The findings show a quantitative imbalance in visual content depicting the work of males and females, with a ratio of 2:1. This contradicts the frequency with which characters appear, particularly in individual pictures, where female characters appear more often. Table 1 shows the types of work that appear in textbook 1.

**Table 1.** Male and female occupations in textbook 1

Male Occupation	Female Occupation
Seller 10	Seller 7
Janitor 5	Janitor 1
Police 1	Police 1
Farmer 6	Farmer 1
Circus performers 2	Circus performers 1
Salesperson 1	Salesperson 1
Counter guard 1	Teacher 4
Skipper 1	Cashier 1
Fisherman 3	Train attendant 2
Pedicab driver 1	
Shoe polisher 1	
Distributor 1	
Security guard 2	
Porter 3	
Buskers 1	
Veterinarian 1	

These details demonstrate that males' occupations are more diverse than females'. Occupations that require a lot of physical strength, such as pedicab driver, porter, security guard, fisherman, etc., as well as jobs considered prestigious, such as veterinarian and captain, only appear in male characters. This symbolically links masculinity to strength, technical expertise, and leadership. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that male occupations are more often associated with power and authority (Aguilar, 2021; Fatmawati et al., 2022). On the other hand, gender stereotypes about females are exemplified by occupations such as teachers, cashiers, and flight attendants, which are seen as friendly, warm, and service-oriented (Ellemers, 2018). Although teaching is a respected profession, the dominance of females in this field in terms of representation can actually diminish it as a "natural job" for females, rather than an equal professional choice.

Textbook 2 focuses more on activities in the surrounding environment, such as home, school, and playgrounds, so there are fewer occupations represented. The pictures feature male and female occupations portrayed in textbook 2 can be seen in graphic 4 below.



**Graphic 4.** Male and female occupations in textbook 2

Textbook 2 features female's jobs more prominently. Three occupations are equally held by males and females: competition judges, traders, and teachers. However, females still dominate the teaching profession. Service-based occupations, such as bank tellers, are only portrayed as female, while art and creativity-based occupations, such as photographers, are still predominantly male. This suggests that creativity and control over visual representation are more closely linked to masculinity.

The presence of females as paediatricians is a bright spot in this textbook. Although pediatrics is a field traditionally associated with caregiving, the presence of females in this prestigious profession transcends the stereotype of service alone. This demonstrates an effort to create prestigious roles for females, though the field is not yet completely free from gender associations. The following table shows details of the types of occupations in textbook 2.

**Table 2.** Male and female occupations in textbook 2

Male Occupation	Female Occupation
Competition judge 1	Bank teller 2
Photographer 1	Competition judge 1
Seller 2	Pediatrician 1
Teacher 1	Seller 2
	Teacher 3

The findings of both textbooks are consistent with previous research depicting males as having more diverse occupations (Ariyanto, 2018; Selvi & Kocaman, 2021). Other studies have also found that male characters in textbooks are more often depicted as having occupations that are considered more successful, such as scientists, doctors, and managers, which supports the idea that there are gendered expectations for different types of occupations (Bachore & Semela, 2022). Both textbooks depict females in prestigious occupations, such as police officers, pediatricians, bank tellers, and

teachers. However, there is still a significant difference between the female characters and the male characters who are shown working.

Stereotypes about which occupations are appropriate for a particular gender can influence students' future career choices, particularly those of girls (Wang et al., 2023). Gender bias in school textbooks can affect students' motivation and life choices, as well as their self-esteem, societal views, and perceptions of female's competence (Setyono, 2018). Gender stereotypes in certain disciplines and STEM skill gaps have led to gender disparities in key employment sectors (Supianto et al., 2024).

### 3.3. Male and Female Characters Activities

The third factor studied was the types of activities males and females were engaged in within the pictures. These activities were counted based on how many characters were performing them. The activities from textbook 1 are shown in the following table.

**Table 3.** Female and Male Activities in Textbook 1

Type of Activities	Female	Male
Computer work	4	7
Cooking	4	0
Domestic activity	6	0
Engaging in music	4	2
Engaging in sports	4	23
Personal routine activity	3	5
Playing	44	53
School activity	35	48
Shopping	13	11
Stress/shock/sad/scared	7	4
Studying	17	23
Travelling	28	13
Work activity	19	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>229</b>

The table shows that cooking and domestic activities such as washing dishes are still dominated by female characters because they are considered feminine domains (Nunun et al., 2020). This activity does not depict male characters that reinforce this perception. This relates to the traditional belief that housewives are responsible for these activities (Biermann & Farias, 2021). The lack of male representation in cooking activities may be contrary to the fact that many professional chefs are male, which is an interesting statistic.

Males also dominate in outdoor activities such as sports, play, and work. The sports activities carried out by 23 male characters are more diverse, with soccer, badminton, chess, and archery being some of the most popular. Meanwhile, the four female characters only participate in one sport: gymnastics. This shows a significant gender gap, with male characters appearing almost six times more often. Outdoor activities dominated by women include shopping and traveling. Shopping is still synonymous with the feminine domain and the responsibility of females (Selvi & Kocaman, 2021). Meanwhile, travel activities appear in Chapter 6, "Lost," which is set in a train station. Most of the female characters depicted are mothers traveling with their children.

Males also appear more frequently in indoor activities, such as school, computer work, and studying. This suggests that males are perceived as more intellectually oriented than females, who are more often associated with service-oriented tasks, such as shopping or cooking (Selvi & Kocaman, 2021). Females are depicted more often in activities related to music and illustrations of emotions such as anger, sadness, and confusion. These characters include girls who cannot memorize poems, get lost at the station, and fall off their bicycles. Meanwhile, angry and sad male characters only appear in

exercise sheets. These illustrations reinforce the gender stereotype that females rely on emotions more than logic (Löffler & Greitemeyer, 2023).

Although the difference is smaller than in textbook 1, male characters still dominate textbook 2. The activities in textbook 2 are shown in the following table.

**Table 4.** Female and Male Activities in Textbook 2

Type of Activities	Female	Male
Caring activity	15	7
Cooking	1	1
Dancing	14	14
Domestic activity	2	3
Engaging in sports	4	28
Personal routine activity	5	8
Playing	4	11
School activity	37	33
Singing	5	4
Stress/shock/sad/scared	3	9
Studying	8	8
Travelling	2	5
Work activity	9	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>136</b>

Male characters are portrayed as being equally involved in cooking activities as females and more involved in domestic activities. However, unlike the cooking activities in textbook 1, which take place at home, the cooking activities in textbook 2 take place at work and are carried out jointly by male and female chefs. Meanwhile, males still dominate in outdoor activities such as sports, playing, and traveling. Males participate in a wider variety of sports, including martial arts, badminton, horseback riding, swimming, and diving. Females, on the other hand, are only involved in martial arts. This suggests that males are considered stronger and more physically active, allowing them to participate in a wider range of sports (Ellemers, 2018).

Unlike textbook 1, this book portrays male characters in situations of fear or sadness more often. Examples include a fear of spiders or clowns and sadness when scolded for jaywalking. This new representation shows that boys can express feelings of fear and sadness. Gender differences in social behavior stem from culture, which determines appropriate behavior for each gender. For instance, boys are not permitted to appear weak or cry (Veijalainen et al., 2021). In fact, the impact of toxic masculinity on male's mental health is greater than its impact on female's mental health (Rice et al., 2021). Meanwhile, caring activities not depicted in textbook 1 are dominated by female characters in textbook 2. For example, girls are depicted bringing drinks to their older siblings and visiting sick friends. This aligns with the societal assumption that women are more empathetic (Löffler & Greitemeyer, 2023). Meanwhile, males are portrayed as caring when they use their strength to help others, such as carrying a fallen friend off the field or helping a motorcyclist who has been in an accident.

In some activities, both fathers and mothers seem to accompany their children, such as when they study or go on picnics. However, mothers seem to be alone more often, such as when they accompany their children to the doctor's office or cross the street. Here is also an illustration of a school art performance where all the parents present are mothers, some of whom bring their younger children. Meanwhile, the father only appears alone when he accompanies his child to study, and he appears with the mother when they go on a picnic by jeep and roller coaster. These illustrations depict a patriarchal system in which the mother's role in childcare is considered more important (Yunianti et al., 2023). In reality, childcare is a shared responsibility between mothers and fathers. Secure father-child attachment is related to the quantity and quality of time fathers spend with their children (Cabrera, 2020). Therefore, it is important to depict fathers as being equally involved in childcare.

### 3.4. Theoretical Implications

The findings of gender inequality and bias in textbook illustrations have significant implications for various stakeholders in education, emphasizing the need for more inclusive and gender-conscious illustration practices. Authors and illustrators should adopt guidelines that ensure the following: (1) quantitative balance in the appearance of female and male characters in both single and group images, (2) diversification of roles and activities that are free from stereotypes, and (3) the elimination of exclusive associations between certain genders and types of work or attributes, such as physical strength or friendliness.

Another implication of this research is the urgent need to improve critical literacy in teaching materials. Teacher training programs, both pre-service and in-service, must equip educators with the ability to analyze and deconstruct biases in teaching materials. Teachers should be trained to engage students in critical discussions about biased representations, turning them into learning moments about equality. They should also be able to select or create more balanced supplementary materials.

### 3.5. Extending and Challenging Previous Research

This study supports previous research on gender bias in language textbooks, which is an important topic in language education. While previous studies have examined gender bias in language textbooks used in other countries (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023; Norova, 2020; Wang et al., 2023) and in Indonesia, (Awaliyah et al., 2022; Fatmawati et al., 2022; Nujhati & Nurkamto, 2024; Wahyudi & Lutfauziah, 2023), this study is among the first to focus on gender representation in Merdeka Curriculum textbooks specifically. As a new curriculum promoting independent and in-depth learning, this study examines whether inclusivity is reflected in its visual material. Most previous studies analyzed textbooks for one grade level or in general. This study's comparative analysis of two textbooks from consecutive grade levels is unique. This approach reveals the dynamics and shifts in gender representation as the complexity of the learning material increases.

### 3.6. Recommendations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the sample is limited to two elementary school books. Second, the analysis focuses on visual content. Third, the data coding was carried out by two researchers without an inter-coder validation process. Further research could expand the scope of the analysis by integrating visual content and textual discourse to achieve a more comprehensive understanding. The sample could also be expanded to include other levels and subjects for comparative analysis and to observe more comprehensive trends. Additionally, qualitative research could be conducted to explore students' and teachers' perspectives on how these images are interpreted and their perceptual impact.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study found that gender bias continues to appear in the visual representations of the Merdeka Curriculum Phase B Indonesian language textbook. Although the curriculum is designed to be more progressive, the illustrations still demonstrate both quantitative imbalance and qualitative patterns that reinforce traditional stereotypes and gendered divisions of roles. These findings suggest that curriculum reform alone does not automatically lead to changes in symbolic representation within learning materials. However, this research is limited to the analysis of visual representations in a single textbook and does not examine other learning resources or the broader impact of these representations on students' perceptions. Therefore, future research is recommended to analyze a wider range of textbooks and educational materials across different subjects and curriculum phases, as well as to investigate how gender representations in textbooks influence students' attitudes and understanding of gender roles. Additionally, further studies could contribute to the development of systematic and

gender-sensitive guidelines for textbook illustration and evaluation to support more equitable and inclusive educational materials.

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