

## Research article

# Female Representation in Primary School English Textbooks: The Portrait of Gender in Indonesian EFL Education

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Scholars have critically discussed numerous reports on gender representations in language textbooks, but much less attention has been paid to female characters depicted in EFL textbooks used in Islamic primary schools. To fill this gap, the current study dissects the identities of female characters in two English language textbooks proposed by Islamic schools and used nationally in all private primary schools in Indonesia under the global Islamic school association. Quantitative content analysis using Brugeilles and Cromer's framework for character coding scheme and critical discourse analysis were used to critically review the textbook's content. The findings from sixteen chapters revealed that female characters are underrepresented, and they are depicted as having home and family careers, being sensitive introverts, being involved in low-risk activities, and wearing Islamic-based attire.

**Keywords:** content analysis, critical discourse analysis, gender representation, language textbook

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## 1. Introduction

The studies about gender bias in educational textbooks have been widely discussed across the world [1-4] in the last decades. Scholars have debated the unfairness of gendered-related materials represented in the teaching and learning materials, in this case, the textbook. The findings mostly reported the position of women as victims of discrimination in social roles [5]. With the advanced development of human rights, the stereotype of gender has increasingly diminished by social scholars and governmental officers of some big countries. The role of women globally is discussed to be equivalent to a man's one. Therefore, this socio-cultural-laden value needs to be taught overtly or covertly in the educational sphere, especially in learning sources.

From the perspective of social cognitive theory, gender-related behavior results from the interaction of a person and their environment [6]. In the classroom learning context, students interact with teachers, other students, and educational materials including textbooks. Educational materials are seen as the first canonical agent and powerful

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resources for gender socialization [4,7]. By observing a great deal of information in the textbook, students acquire all cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning involving pedagogical materials about gender roles [6-7].

The importance of textbook evaluation regarding gender representation is underlaid by the function of textbooks as a basic vehicle of socialization that conveys knowledge and values. Moreover, the textbook is also defined as sociocultural artifacts that assimilate a myriad of values, including gender-related issues [8]. The considerable impact of inappropriate textbook gender-related content may bother students' ability in understanding the target language and its culture [9]. The high frequency of interaction with textbooks directly or indirectly shapes children's development toward gender identity [10-11]. The authors of textbooks need to present a set of scenarios rather than replicate the realities of the world [12]. Consciously controlling the input of social norms and values in the textbooks, possibly creates a youth-wise perception regarding gender roles in society.

The notion of gender equality in the educational context in Indonesia has been nationally introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) which has had a program to prepare the youth to be the golden generation by disregarding gender disparity in all aspects of life [13]. However, as a mega-diverse country, Indonesia is endowed with a variety of cultures in which each of them sees gender equality differently. Patriarchal belief in some cases still exists among the traditional tribes though some modern societies have supported gender equality and equity [3]. Moreover, the notion of changing the paradigm related to gender roles in Indonesia is a complex issue since religious factor also takes part in structuring social roles. Indonesian which mostly is Muslim shaped by the Islamic teaching that a man or husband is the breadwinner while a woman or wife is the family carer doing household chores at home [3]. This gender role has grown for years and has almost been found in several places in Indonesia. It may raise a question for scholars about why then gendered roles matter. The development of thought and equality-in-right movement now has driven experts and feminists to amplify gender equality issues. The gender roles should not be justified based on sex but the social roles are classified based on capability and competency.

A number of textbook analyses and evaluations have been executed by scholars revealing the absence of gender equality. As the commencement, Barton and Sakwa [2] investigated English language textbooks recommended by the Ministry of Education in Uganda. This suggests an underrepresentation of positive female roles, women's invisibility, and negative depiction of their emotional situations. The findings revealed overt gender bias in EFL textbooks used in Ugandan secondary schools. Moreover, the

study from Lee [10] intended to evaluate the Japanese Government's program named gender-equal society promoted in EFL textbooks. The study demonstrates gender awareness proven by the balance amount of female and male representation in terms of vocabulary, addressing words, and distribution of speakers. However, from social roles perspective, males are cognitively and physically more active than females.

Several studies in the Indonesian context have shown gender inequality presented in language textbooks. [14] has examined critical discourse studies on Junior High School Mandatory English Textbook. The findings revealed gender bias in the form of verbal and visual texts. At the same educational level, [3] have investigated English language textbooks for the Junior School level by implementing the critical study in order to demystify social contexts such as family, occupations, school participation and achievement, and hobbies and interests. The results reveal that the equality of gender has been demonstrated by the writers though gender stereotypes still exist in some parts of the textbook. Currently, the work from Tyarakanita et al [15] exerting language sexism and visual narrative representation in both verbal and visual suggests domination of males in social roles and language sexism of masculine words.

Moreover, [16] has studied Senior High School English Textbook. The findings reveal that some gendered discourses expressed by female characters and social actors show the presentation of gender biases and stereotypes, some emerging discourses represent positive images of women. These indicate authors have had an effort in balancing the portion of females in the materials. In accordance with the senior secondary level, [17] compared gender equality through the lens of the authors' socio-cultural background. This study examined common English textbooks used in public and private schools in Semarang, Indonesia namely mandatory ones written by non-native speakers and imported ones written by native speakers.

Prior studies into gender representation in language textbooks used in Indonesian schooling have been conducted at the primary or elementary level [18] and secondary level namely junior secondary [3, 14] and senior secondary school [16-17] While those numerous research have demystified critically mandatory English language textbooks used in public schools, less focus has been paid to the study of textbooks used by private Islamic schools which have allegedly raised patriarchal ideology [7, 19-20]. This study thereby intends to extend the empirical study on the discussion of female representation in commercial English language textbooks used nationally in private Islamic schools specifically at the primary level – a context very much under-represented in the existing critical studies of gender representation in textbooks.

To begin with, Islamic schools in the Indonesian educational system is needed to be described to make a clear understanding of the context of the study. Indonesia as a country that is mostly Muslim citizens has two kinds of schools, regular and religious schools. The former is under the Ministry of Education and the latter is under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. However, despite those two public schools, there are several private schools with various backgrounds and spirits. As informed by the Indonesian Educational Statistics brief on the 2020/2021 academic year [21] the number of private schools is 11.89%. This number is scaling up from time to time. The popularity of Islamic schools arises among private schools and is seen to offer more religious-based instruction than public ones [22]. Some of the schools are coordinated by the same non-governmental organizations or private institutions and are widely spread around Indonesia. One of the largest consortiums in the Integrated Islamic School Association (Jaringan Sekolah Islam Terpadu – JSIT) has 2.313 schools that actually have incorporated Islamic moral framework in all subjects [23] from kindergarten to senior secondary level of education. At the basic education level, the number of primary schools registered under this association is 905 schools. This number indicates that the study considering this association as the site of research is providing fruitful critique for better development.

In an attempt to guarantee the learning process in the proposed path, the consortium has designed its curriculum for primary schools by adopting a national-mandatory curriculum and integrating it with Islamic values. In Indonesia, the enactment of the 2013 curriculum (current curriculum) has made English an optional subject at the basic education level [24-25]. The autonomy has been given to institutions to posit English as an elective lesson or local content subject [3, 24]. This situation has driven discrepancies between public and private schools. Many public schools disappear English while private ones prioritize it as a must to master ability. Some private schools are those under the Islamic School Association which have nationally numerous private schools around Indonesia. From my observation, for English subjects, the association has determined certain textbooks to be used in assuring their proposed curriculum. Why did the association choose that textbook? This condition triggers the intention to evaluate whether the textbooks have promoted gender equality in representing female characters. In brief, this research aims to elucidate (1) the presence of females and males and (2) female characters portrayed in the English language textbooks. The contributions of the findings are to shed some light on how females are represented in English textbooks and to provide considerations for schools and materials developers to choose or design future textbooks.

## 2. Research Methodology

The study is designed to investigate the number of occurrences of gender issues represented in the textbooks but also explain further about female character contextualized in certain discourses depicted in textbooks. Considering the objectives in mind, the research design best fitted to the study is the mixed method by combining content analysis and critical discourse analysis. Gender representation is not only about linguistic evidence but discussion about meaning beyond them. Further, the study of gender and discourse not only provides a descriptive account of male or female discourse but also reveals how language functions as a symbolic resource to create and manage personal, social, and cultural meanings and identities [26, 27].

### 2.1. Focal Textbooks

The textbook used in this study is written by non-native speakers entitled “Musa Likes Speaking English for Islamic Primary School Grade VI” and “Musa Likes Speaking English for Islamic Primary School Grade V”. These textbooks are published in 2019 by a private company. These JSIT consortium-endorsed textbooks were selected considering their massive use of them in several Islamic schools and the notion of representing the consortium’s curriculum artifacts [3].

### 2.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

Quantitative content analysis is employed in order to collect and identify linguistic evidence regarding gender-related materials. The process of data collection is adapted from the methodological manual for analyzing gender in the textbook proposed by Brugeilles and Cromer [28]. They provide straightforward procedures from collecting the data to analyzing them in a descriptive report. In this manual, the concern of the analysis is the character. The data relating to a character can be identified from demographic characteristics namely sex, age, status; the activities and occupations being addressed; and the posture of the character being drawn in the. Further, the character itself is not merely a picture of a real person but creates a referential illusion of a living individual [28]. A character must be explicitly cited and actualized in both verbal and visual text. The data were collected in visual text or pictures and verbal text represented in several parts of the textbook sections as follows:

1. Opening picture

At the beginning of each chapter, the author presents a large picture as a marker of a new topic. The character in the image is identified as the data.

## 2. Introduction section

In this section, it is described the theoretical definition of the learned topic. The writer explains definitions, material, and examples related to the topic. The data about linguistic features in the form of words/phrases attached to characters were identified.

## 3. Listening section

The author provides exercises in the form of completing gaps in sentences or completing the description of the images that have been provided. In this section, linguistic features in the form of words/phrases attached to the characters were identified as well as images of how the characters were positioned.

## 4. Speaking section

This section contains conversation exercises. In this section, it would be seen who and what topics are being discussed in the conversational text.

## 5. Reading section

The writer provides reading in the form of functional text and short text. Each topic and character contained in the text were identified as well as the linguistic features (verbs and adjectives) that accompany it.

## 6. Writing section

This section contains exercises. In this section, each sentence containing the character was identified along with its gender-related linguistic features.

All the data were identified and tabulated manually. The pieces of data were classified using coding categories adapted from [28]. The gained data then were analyzed in order to classify them into several common themes about female characters.

For textual analysis, bearing the textbook as cultural text [8] in mind, the data were explored by using critical discourse analysis proposed by [29] to demystify the construction of the text tied to contextual conditions and ideological system. He argues for multi-dimensional discourse analysis namely micro, meso, and macro-level analyses to explore ideological reasons beyond the discourse. Micro-level has focus on the analysis of the pattern of the text (verbal and visual text). Meso-level seeks out discursive practice how the text is produced and received or interpreted by human subjects. Macro-level reveals social practice (socio-historical analysis) built by the discourse. Considering the textbook is a product of writing and seen as a social practice [30], qualitative critical analysis is focused on the macro-level grounded by the garnered data from content

analysis as the prior micro-level phase. Macro-level is omitted in the study since readers' perception in this case students and teachers are neglected.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

#### 3.1. Presence of Females and Male

The first finding concerns the ratio of females and males portrayed in images in the initial chapter. A general quantitative study was conducted to count the percentage of gendered characters represented in the opening image. The proportion of female characters (6.25%) was lower than male characters (56.25%). The efforts of gender mainstreaming have been noticed by the representation of figures of male and female characters in one frame (12.5%) and the use of gender-neutral characters (25%). This result indicates a contrast visibility of males and females. The power of opening illustration is actually to engage students with the topic. Considering 'seeing is believing' in mind, more exposure to gendered roles may shape students' perception of gender stereotypes. The limitation of female exposure in illustrations is also reported in the study conducted by [14] and [7]. These findings reveal the passive female appearance.

The second finding discovers the ratio of females and males in conversational texts. From dialogues provided in the textbooks, the presence of female-male interactions is limitedly reported. The speakers in dialogues are dominated by male or boy characters only. The finding contradicts the previous research by [31] who found female and male characters were almost equally represented in primary English textbooks in Hong Kong.

Ultimately, the study reports the ratio of males and females as the main character in the reading text (Table. 1). The sixteen chapters of the textbook only promote a single chapter that reflects a female character named 'Erna Hart'. This text describes Erna has successfully swum across the English Channel. The gendered discourse constructed in the text implies the ability of females over males in terms of breaking the swimming record. However, the low portion of the female-related text indicates less attention on female-oriented topics or subordinate to women's social status. The male dominance is also in line with previous studies in which the textbook authors favored male-related characters over female-related ones in stories and reading passages [1, 17].

#### 3.2. Female Characters

TABLE 1: Percentage of characters.

Category	F	%
Male	9	56.25
Female and Male	2	12.5
Female	1	6.25
Neutral	4	25
Total	16	100

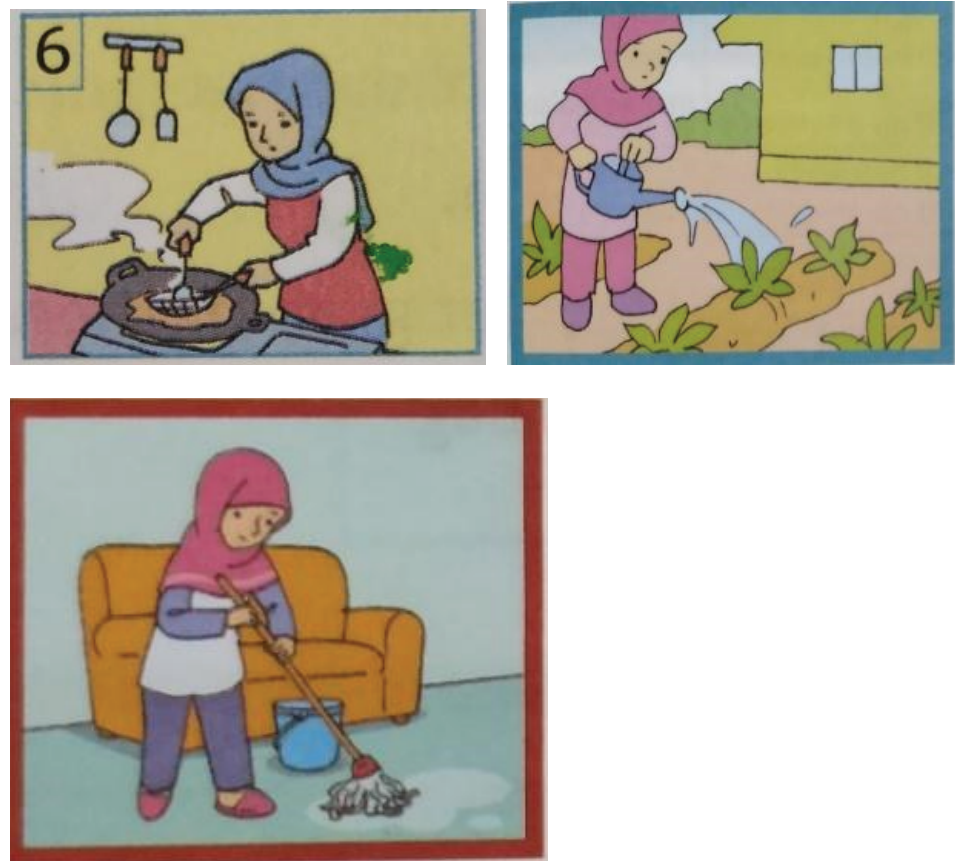
### 3.2.1. Off-School-related activities

This part of the discussion aims at revealing female activities outside the school. From the verbal evidence, female characters were depicted as family carers and domestic roles doer. The sentence 'My mother cooks in the kitchen' (Ch.4) indicates food serving as the mother's responsibility. The choice of words in composing the sentence implies a mother or a wife is socioculturally assigned to deal with domestic chores. This reinforces the narrow range of occupational roles of women to do mother's duty [32]. This condition is ascribed to the traditional feminine roles proliferated in Indonesian society [3]. To strengthen the assumption is also reinforced by the picture showing a female is cooking as seen in figure.1.

Another off-school activity handled by females is to take care of house. The verbal text implies girls are house-carers as described in the sentence 'Bilqis waters the plants in the garden' (Ch.4). The name 'Bilqis' in Indonesia is associated with a female name. This is also supported by the image photographing a girl watering the plants. In this respect, watering the garden as an activity to make the house looks green and beautiful is supposed to be the social responsibility of a woman or girl. This condition designates a domestic dichotomy between male (boys) and female (girls) regarding responsibilities at home [3].

Sociocultural values in the community's daily life suggest girls need to do gardening such as watering plants. Critically, the stereotyped way of 'girls water the plants' suggests caring for the house is a female domain obligation. It is supported that the textbook depicted boys handling others' house cores such as helping their father to wash the car. From these facts, gender roles have been socialized among students as they see these gendered social chores. Moreover, female characters are portrayed to do indoor activities such as reading a book, helping mom, drawing a picture, writing a diary, doing the homework, listening to the music, and cleaning the bedroom.





**Figure 1:** Three female characters are doing household chores.

### 3.2.2. On-School-related activities

Previous studies related to gender disparity in textbooks have focused on achievement and participation in the school domain [3, 15]. From the study, female students were depicted as diligent and having good grades. The current study also figures out similar findings that girls' good achievements as seen in Figure. 2. It is supported by the clause accompanying it that Fatimah is the best student. Fatimah as a female character is briefly praised for her achievement by holding up a trophy. Furthermore, verbal evidence in the reading section (Ch.7, grade V) reports a clause She is a diligent girl. The word, diligent as an adjective term showcases female characters being intent at school. [33] also reported similar findings regarding female superiority in classroom interactions. The current findings related to female characters with respect to the school domain reveal academic stereotypes.

Furthermore, demystification of female characters showcases women or girls as introvert-sensitive. In the conversation part, Aisyah talked to Fatima telling her feelings

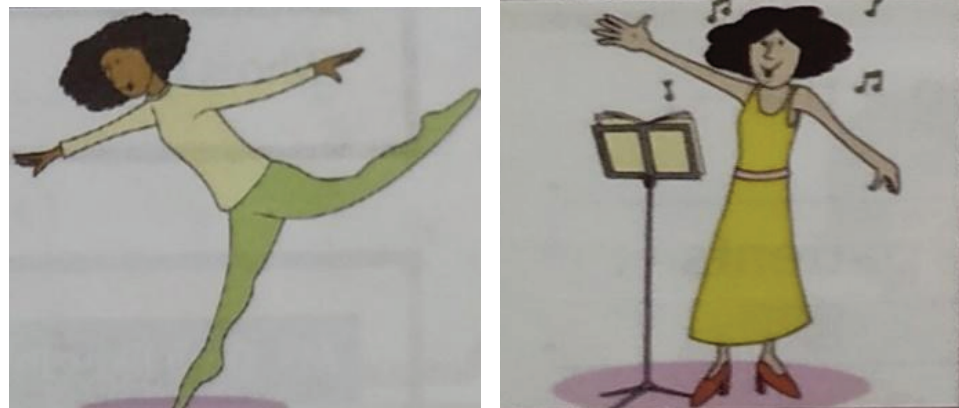


**Figure 2:** A female character is holding up a trophy.

and hope. It is interesting that the author exposed females as characters like to share emotions or feeling engagement. However, the other texts proved male characters tend to discuss physical involvement.

### 3.2.3. Hobby and interest

Gender stereotype about hobby and interest is actually neutral for both females and males. However, certain hobbies and interests normally pointed to one's sex are influenced by the socio-cultural of the society. The findings not only discover what female characters casually and always do but reviews critically the meanings beyond the linguistic evidence. Several clauses indicate female characters tend to read the book, listen to music, dance, and sing a song. These activities are categorized as low-risk activities since they are conducted mostly in the indoor domain and have no fatal risk. Further, Figure. 3 clearly rivals female activities such as dance and singing and all these activities deal with home-related activities [17].



**Figure 3:** Two female characters are doing their hobby and interest.

### 3.2.4. Female attire

As the textbook assigned to Islamic school, the visual and verbal texts contain Islamic norms and values as well. Figure. 4 illustrates two girls describing each other. Pictorial texts as provided in a bubble contain two clauses you wear a hijab. Hijab or also called a veil is a fabric to covers the head. Semiotically, the word wear is the material process that indicates a concrete action or the notion of wearing a hijab for women is a must. The exposure in both verbal and visual text further means reinforcement for Islamic female characters to wear hijab. Moreover, the overall data showcase most of the female-character pictures are portrayed in hijab. This finding reveals that the author sticks to his promise as stated in the title of the textbook to provide an Islamic-based English textbook.

The study reveals some new insights about female characters depicted in English language textbooks published by an Indonesian private publishing company. Though the myriad of gender-related issue studies has portrayed primary and secondary school levels, little works to focus the study on the elementary level and Islamic school context. The findings showcase the existence of the ideology of Islamic values obviously represented from the female pictures depicted with veil [20] and female attire with body covering cloth style (closing Aurat- forbidden body part to be seen for Muslim female). These findings seem to introduce learners to 'set-normal' or the forced- and set belief that certain points of view and knowledge about how to act out based on certain gender in Islam.

As in Figure 5, the implied message drawn from these pictures is whether in the mix-interaction (male-female) or same-sex interaction (female-female) students need to wear Islamic-based attire. A boy with Peci, a male Islamic head cover, and an Islamic suit teaches students the norm of dressing. This indicates how to dress while you are

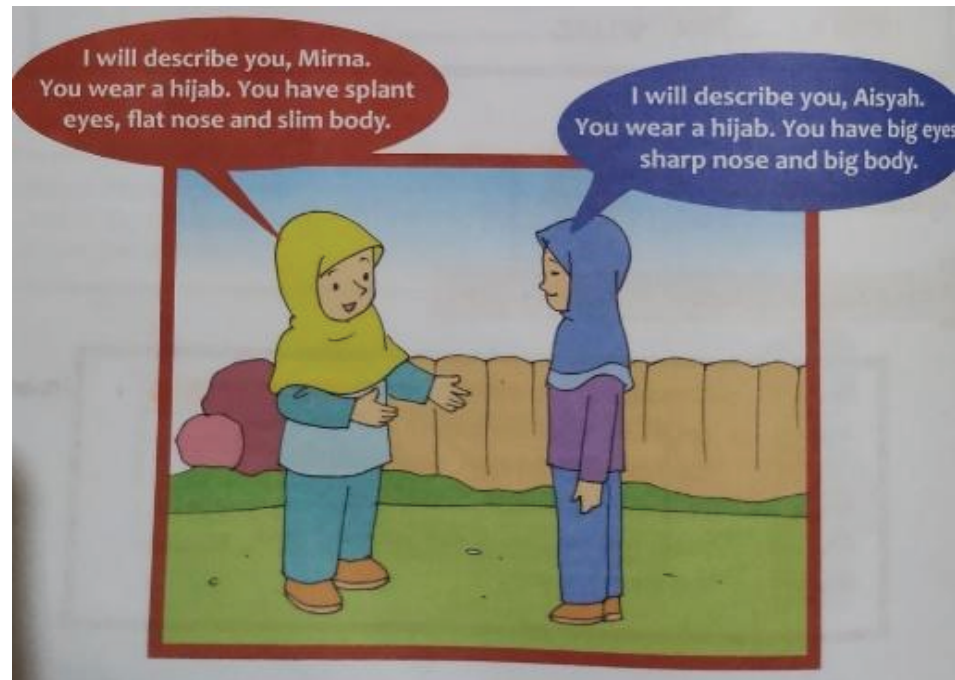


Figure 4: Two girls wearing hijabs are talking to each other.

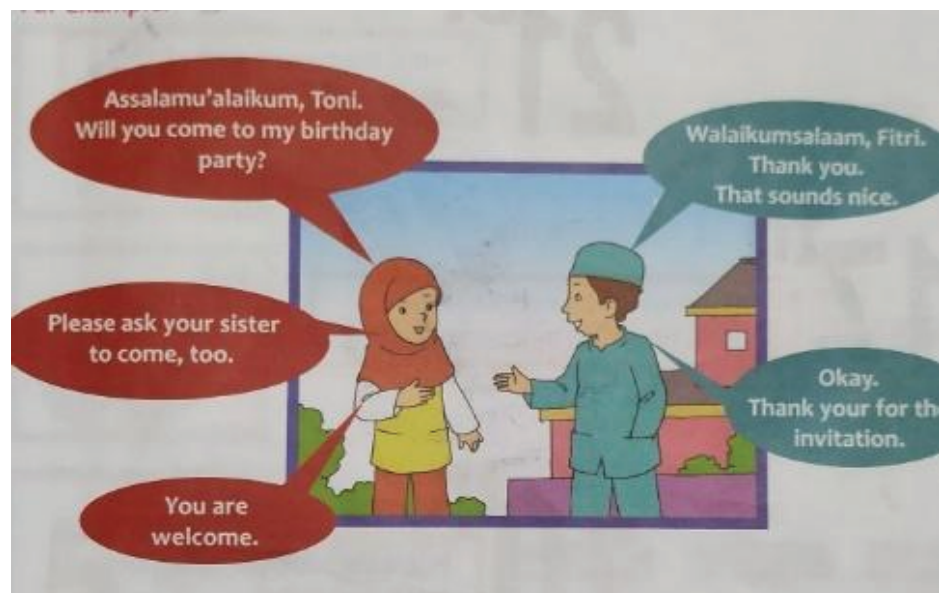


Figure 5: Pictures of female and male characters in Islamic attire.

meeting up with other friends, especially in the mix-sex interaction. In the same vein, females are described to wear veils and long sleeves shirts as to cover their Aurat even in the same-sex context. In the picture, a daughter is cutting the birthday cake with her mother beside her. These facts actually can be interpreted to drive the students to a certain ideology. As the textbook is designed for Islamic schools as target users, the

contents may be ideologically laden as the product of authors' and publishers' perspectives of social construction [29]. Frankly, the environment surrounding the people also determines the characteristics of being 'feminine' and 'masculine' and what should or not do by males and females.

The findings of gender segregation later suggest the values adopted by society still situate women in subordinate positions. This phenomenon still showcases that the social construction related to gender equality needs more attention [15]. The obstacle to improving the social values actually comes from the culture of the society and the politics of the country where the community is located. As a mega-diverse country, Indonesia has been endowed with a variety of cultures in which each of them sees gender equality differently. Patriarchal belief in some cases still exists among the traditional tribes though some modern societies have supported gender equality and equity. The cultural aspects and social environment play an important role to portray gender depiction in a society. They decide what kind of work that can be performed by men or women, the kind of clothes can be possibly worn by men and women, the kind of knowledge that is allowed to be acquired by men and women, and many other related gender-specific roles in social life. This is also supported by [34] argue gender can then be seen as a broader, more complex term since gender roles assigned are different in each society and culture.

The characteristic of specific gender may change over time and place based on cultures, classes, and many other aspects. The roles may be changed from time to time as the consideration to match the current situation. Considering this matter, gender equality then can be possibly achieved by designing supportive circumstances around it. Further, [35] also argued that to realize the intention of gender equality in the national scope, it needs actions from the institutional level. Therefore, all educational institutions are highly expected to be sensitive to gender equality matters.

Discussing gender injustice in society is complex because it basically questions established social structures and systems and involves individual involvement in relation to the privileges that are currently being enjoyed. Society tends to reject the new gender norm since the current gender construction is inherent and socialized through religion, culture and the country is felt to be something that is right and should exist in society. For this reason, it is necessary to initiate a gender transformation agenda, namely efforts to improve gender equality from individual to society scope.

The gender transformation movement has the goal of improving the status of women and increasing the dignity and strength of women. This movement is actually not a form of revenge against men but to create better relations between men and women. This

relationship accommodates equal rights and obligations so that there is no discrimination in social status. Gender transformation is well-achieved when the government and society cooperatively construct social changes by prioritizing gender equality. The realization may be implemented in educational sectors. When the learning sources and the teachers have awareness of gender mainstreaming, learners as the following generation may live with better equal gender life.

## 4. Conclusion

The unrivaled presentation of female- and male-related topics and characters in EFL textbooks indicates the need for critical awareness of gender in educational sectors [15]. In this study, there are several recommendations that can be used as an agenda in the future as an effort to respond to gender injustices that are still found. First, because patriarchal beliefs have existed long before in Indonesia, efforts to be aware of gender equality need to be instilled at the education level, especially in the provision of well-gendered material. The bias that is described in the learning material represented in the textbook must be dismissed. Therefore, for authors and other relevant stakeholders, a gender-related quality check is highly recommended before textbook publication.

For English teachers, gender sensitivity is very necessary because they are important agents in creating students' social perspectives. They can provide explanations and advice on balancing gender in a number of conditions to encourage students to act appropriately. For teachers, integration can be done by providing material related to the role of sex in society such as novels, plays, heterosexual romantic love poetry, lessons on natural and health knowledge about reproduction, and the history of gender roles. Therefore, even though the blueprint for a subject has been outlined, the executors in the field are still in the teacher's hands in the classroom. The same opportunities for success and development for boys and girls in the learning process at school are actually guaranteed by the curriculum [36]. However, the findings suggest there are some gender biases in currently widely used textbooks. School textbooks should provide knowledge, information, illustrations, and images that promote gender-equitable norms.

## 5. Authors' Contributions

The first author contributes to writing the article and collecting and analyzing the data. Meanwhile, the second author contributes to collecting the data, analysing the data, and completing the article.

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