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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Integrating Gender Equality Perspectives into Urdu Subject Textbooks at Secondary School Level

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ABSTRACT

Education is crucial in developing learners' comprehension of society, relationships, responsibilities, and social values. In secondary schools, textbooks hold great importance as students are forming their identities, ambitions, and perceptions of social roles. Gender equality in education involves more than just ensuring that both boys and girls have equal access to schools. It also necessitates focus on what students face in the curriculum and textbooks. Global evidence shows that textbooks in various settings still tend to under-represent women or depict them in traditional and stereotypical roles. UNESCO has stressed that curricula and textbooks need to be devoid of gender bias and should encourage equality in gender relationships. This study explores the significance of incorporating gender equality viewpoints into Urdu textbooks at the secondary level. It examines the ideas of gender, gender equality, gender representation, and gender stereotypes; clarifies the connection between language education and gender socialization; highlights key aspects in which gender equality can be illustrated in Urdu textbooks; and addresses difficulties and approaches for creating gender-sensitive Urdu educational resources.

KEYWORDS

Gender Equality, Urdu Textbooks, Secondary Education, Gender Representation, Gender Stereotypes, Language Education

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Introduction

Education involves more than just passing on subject knowledge; it also influences learners' values, beliefs, attitudes, and views on society. Schools, educators, programs, and educational materials all play a role in this process. Textbooks convey social messages via narratives, poems, biographies, and conversations, shaping students' perceptions of gender roles, duties, and successes. This is especially significant during the secondary stage when teenagers shape their identities, ambitions, and perspectives on future professions. Urdu education holds significant importance as Urdu literature showcases a variety of social experiences and cultural values through different literary expressions. Incorporating gender equality does not necessitate eliminating cultural or traditional literary elements. Instead, textbooks can showcase these elements while encouraging balanced and inclusive viewpoints. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring efforts emphasize that textbooks can affect views on social and gender norms, with women and girls often being under-represented or depicted in conventional roles in numerous educational resources.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the role of secondary-level Urdu textbooks in promoting gender equality and reducing gender stereotypes.
2. To identify the major dimensions of gender representation in Urdu textbooks, including visibility, agency, occupational roles, leadership and social responsibilities.
3. To examine how gender equality can be integrated through textual, literary, visual and activity-based content in Urdu textbooks in relation to SDG 5 and SDG 4.7.
4. To identify the research gap regarding the systematic integration of gender equality perspectives in secondary-level Urdu subject textbooks.

Understanding Gender and Gender Equality

Gender refers to the socially constructed expectations, roles, behaviors, and relationships that societies attribute to individuals based on their gender. It is thus beneficial to differentiate these socially created aspects from biological sex. Gender roles are acquired from family, community, media, religion, peers, educational institutions, and other societal structures. For instance, when kids consistently observe women doing domestic tasks and men engaged in outside jobs, they might start to view these situations as normal or anticipated. NCERT's teacher-training resources also address gender as a social construct and recognize gender socialization and gender roles as significant issues in education. Schools may either replicate these expectations or offer students chances to challenge them.

Gender equality signifies equal rights, respect, opportunities, and involvement for people irrespective of their gender. Equality does not necessitate that all individuals share the same experiences; instead, it focuses on equitable opportunities and acknowledgment. The Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the United Nations focuses explicitly on attaining gender equality and empowering women and girls in all situations. Consequently, gender equality in education encompasses much more than just equal enrolment

Equality between genders and objectives for sustainable development

Gender equality is closely linked to SDG 5: Attain Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls. The 2030 Agenda explicitly recognizes gender equality in SDG 4.7. A language textbook can support SDG 4.7 by including narratives, poetry, and exercises that promote respect for human dignity, equal opportunities, non-discrimination, gender cooperation, rejection of harmful stereotypes, and appreciation for women. Likewise, SDG 5 cannot be accomplished solely through laws or financial measures. Education plays a crucial role over time in transforming attitudes and societal norms.

Importance of Gender Equality in Secondary Education

Secondary education plays a vital role in the academic growth of students. Gender-responsive educational resources can aid students in realizing that skills, jobs, and duties need not be dictated by gender. This method's significance is backed by global educational research. NCERT's resources regarding gender and education also highlight issues related to gender socialization, gender roles, gender discrimination, and gender matters within curriculum and classroom activities. Thus, Urdu textbooks at the secondary level can act as a significant avenue for fostering more equitable and inclusive perspectives on gender.

Role of Urdu Textbooks in Gender Socialization

Language is tightly linked to culture and social identity. اردو ادب کی ایک بڑی روایت ہے جو انسانی زندگی کے مختلف پہلوؤں کی عکاسی کرتی ہے۔ Narratives and verses can depict women and men as unique individuals with varying traits, goals, and skills. Thus, examining gender in language textbooks necessitates consideration of both explicit statements and the messages communicated indirectly. While a textbook may not explicitly say that women ought to stay at home, consistent representations of female characters as homemakers, caretakers, or supporters of male family members, contrasted with male characters who frequently

make choices or hold esteemed positions, can convey a comparable message. UNESCO's studies on textbooks highlight this issue: women might be included in textbooks but are often limited to traditional or domestic roles. Therefore, the goal should not only be to boost the quantity of female characters.

Review of Related Literature

Current research shows that textbooks are not impartial sources of information; they convey social values, identities, and expectations as well. This is especially significant regarding gender, as the portrayal of women and men in educational resources can affect learners' views on suitable social, educational, and professional roles. A significant study in this field was carried out by **Jabeen and Ilyas (2012)**, who investigated gender role representation in Urdu textbooks from the Sindh province. The research centered on Urdu textbooks for primary education released by the Sindh Textbook Board and utilized content analysis to investigate how gender roles are portrayed. The results showed evidence of gender inequality and stereotypical role representation in the chosen textbooks. Male characters appeared more prominently in public and leadership roles, while female characters were often linked to household duties. In a similar manner, **Ali and Hussain (2019)** examined gender representation in English and Urdu textbooks at the primary level in Pakistan. The researchers analyzed textbooks from three publishers: AFAQ, the National Book Foundation, and Oxford University Press, employing qualitative content analysis. Their examination took into account the presence of male and female characters, images, narrators, actions, and word choices. The research indicated an increased prominence of males in characters, visuals, and storytelling. It also discovered that women were mainly linked to household and family-oriented tasks, while boys were more often depicted in work, play, and social interactions. A more recent study by **Saher, Mehmood, and Farhad (2023)** analyzed gender portrayal in English textbooks for high-secondary schools in Pakistan and India. Employing quantitative content analysis, the researchers explored gender representation through textual and visual aspects. Their results revealed a significant disparity in representation, with women making up merely 23.4% of the total representation across the assessed indicators. The problem of gender representation is also apparent in studies analyzing textbooks in various languages. **Thalho (2025)** performed a comparative critical evaluation of Grade 8 Social Studies textbooks in English, Urdu, and Sindhi published by the Sindh Textbook Board. The research employed content analysis and critical discourse analysis, utilizing feminist theory, critical pedagogy, and social constructivism. The results revealed an unequal focus on male figures and conventional gender roles, whereas women's contributions were represented to a lesser extent. تحقیقات اردو تعلیم میں اقدار پر یہ بھی ثابت کرتی ہیں کہ زبان کی درسی کتابوں کے ذریعے منتقل ہونے والے سماجی پیغامات کا جائزہ لینا کتنا اہم ہے تحقیقات برائے امن کی تعلیم اردو نصاب میں ایک اور متعلقہ نقطہ نظر۔ Bashir and Akbar (2024) investigated how much peace education was included in the elementary Urdu curriculum for Grades 6–8. Their analysis revealed mentions of tolerance, brotherhood, gender equality, and environmental consciousness, but also noted a scant discussion of human rights, democracy, justice, and non-violence. The researchers determined that the Urdu curriculum holds significant potential as a cultural and educational tool for advancing peace and social values, suggesting a more structured incorporation of these themes. The examined literature highlights the concealed curriculum within textbooks. In addition to clearly defined learning goals and content, textbooks may convey more subtle messages via their examples, characters, illustrations, activities, and methods of representation. In this context, Saher et al. (2023) found that gender disparities were apparent not only in the quantity of male and female representations but also in the professional and social roles linked to them.

The literature assessed indicates that the analysis of textbooks must evaluate both overt and covert representations. A textbook might clearly address women's education or equality, yet still perpetuate conventional gender roles through its narratives and visuals. Collectively, the analyzed studies demonstrate three key insights. Initially, gender disparity and stereotyping have been recognized in academic textbooks across various South Asian settings. Secondly, research focusing on Urdu textbooks has revealed unequal representation and conventional gender roles.

Research Gap

However, an important research gap remains. Existing studies have examined gender representation in primary-level Urdu

textbooks, English textbooks at the secondary level, and Urdu-medium Social Studies materials. There is comparatively less focused research on the systematic integration of gender equality perspectives within secondary-level Urdu subject textbooks themselves, particularly through a framework that examines equality, representation, agency, occupational diversity, women's contributions, gender stereotypes and explicit/implicit gender-related content together.

Major Dimensions of Gender Equality in Urdu Textbooks

Gender equality can be integrated into Urdu textbooks through several interconnected dimensions.

Balanced Representation of Women and Men

The initial aspect is quantitative depiction. A gender analysis of textbook characters must assess the frequency of women's appearances, their locations, their dialogue, their roles in decision-making, the jobs they hold, and their status as central figures. UNESCO's examination of global textbook data shows that women continue to be under-represented in various educational resources.

Representation of Women in Diverse Occupations

A key sign of gender equality is the representation in various occupations. Women ought not to be portrayed solely as mothers, homemakers, educators, or caregivers; educational materials can instead depict women in a. Women can hold various professions and public positions, such as scientists, doctors, engineers, authors, reporters, artists, administrators, and business owners. Likewise, men ought not to consistently be shown in roles of power. This representation assists students in recognizing that jobs and duties are not inherently dictated by gender.

Women's Education and Intellectual Contribution

Urdu textbooks may feature the biographies and literary works of female writers, poets, educators, scholars, and social reformers. Women's inclusion shouldn't be restricted to specific sections on "women." Their input can be incorporated throughout the textbook. A biography of a female poet can serve to teach literary appreciation while also highlighting women's intellectual and creative contributions to society. This method prevents viewing women as an "extra topic" and acknowledges them as a fundamental component of intellectual and cultural history.

Challenging Gender Stereotypes

A gender stereotype is a generalized notion that attributes specific traits, skills, or roles to individuals based on their gender. Widespread gender stereotypes involve beliefs that may attribute specific skills or roles to individuals based on their gender. Typical gender stereotypes encompass beliefs that boys inherently possess bravery, girls are inherently emotional, men are natural decision-makers, women are caregivers, and that science predominantly belongs to boys. Textbooks can confront these beliefs with thoughtfully crafted narratives, illustrations, and activities. For example, a narrative can depict a girl tackling a challenging issue, spearheading a community project, or chasing a career in science. A male figure can engage actively in domestic duties. UNESCO advises that educational materials depict both women and men in diverse roles and actively confront stereotypes.

Gender Equality through Urdu Literature

Urdu literature provides considerable opportunities for integrating gender perspectives because literary texts naturally deal with human relationships and social experiences.

- **Stories-** Stories can present women and men as active participants in social life.
- **Poetry-** Poetry can introduce students to themes such as dignity, freedom, education, equality, courage and social justice.
- **Biographical Writing-** Biographies can highlight women who made contributions to literature, education, science, social reform and public life.
- **Dialogues-** Dialogues can demonstrate respectful communication between girls and boys and can challenge assumptions

about appropriate roles.

- **Essays-** Essays can address contemporary issues such as women's education, equal opportunities, social responsibility and the importance of mutual respect. Through these literary forms, gender equality can become part of ordinary language learning rather than an isolated theoretical concept.

Gender-Sensitive Language in Urdu Textbooks

Language necessitates thoughtful attention. Textbook authors ought to refrain from using language that unjustifiably portrays one gender as the default human experience. Language that is sensitive to gender does not imply that the language becomes unnatural. For example, tasks can incorporate both male and female names, and illustrations can display girls and boys involved in educational, social, cultural, and professional pursuits. This is especially crucial since students might absorb recurring language structures. UNESCO has highlighted that inclusive textbooks need inclusive language, varied representation, and a focus on human rights.

Illustrations and Visual Representation

A gender-sensitive Urdu textbook must depict women and girls in roles that go beyond household and caregiving tasks like cooking, cleaning, childcare, or merely being passive observers. Simultaneously, men and boys should not be portrayed solely as leaders, professionals, decision-makers, explorers, scientists, or figures of authority. A more equitable visual representation can illustrate both women and men engaging in academic, domestic, cultural, social, and professional environments. UNESCO's research indicates that gender inequality in textbooks is often apparent in both images and written content. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 emphasizes that educational materials should depict various genders with respect and empowerment while being mindful to prevent stereotypes.

Gender Equality in Textbook Activities and Exercises

Gender equality must extend beyond course material. Textbook activities may prompt students to explain the importance of equal educational opportunities for boys and girls, recognize women who have made societal contributions, explore ways to share household duties, and compose brief reflections on respect and equality. These activities motivate students to go beyond rote learning and interact with social issues using language.

Integrating Gender Equality without Losing Cultural Context

A key factor is that textbook development that responds to gender must be culturally aware. The goal is not to dismiss cultural customs or literary legacy. Urdu textbooks may still encompass family connections, cultural customs, historical stories, and literary legacy while showcasing individuals with respect and variety. A well-rounded strategy may encompass valuing family and community, recognizing equal importance for girls' and boys' education, valuing women's intellectual input, shared duties, reciprocal respect, and chances for both genders to engage in social and professional activities. Therefore, gender equality can be incorporated without detaching the textbook from the social and cultural realities of students.

Indian Educational Context

The Indian education policy landscape is progressively focusing on fairness and inclusion. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes gender as a key aspect of educational inclusion and advocates for actions to decrease. The 2023 National Curriculum Framework for School Education offers especially pertinent advice for curricular resources. NCERT has created resources focused on gender equality, gender socialization, gender discrimination, and gender-sensitive teaching and learning methods. Thus, incorporating gender equality into Urdu textbooks aligns with the wider goals of Indian educational policy. NCERT offers textbooks and educational materials in Urdu, Hindi, and English via its digital platforms, highlighting the ongoing

importance of language-specific resources in school education.

Gender Equality and Inclusive Education

Gender equality must be considered alongside broader aspects of social diversity. Girls are not a uniform group. The experiences of girls and women can vary based on their socio-economic status, whether they live in rural or urban settings, their disabilities, language, social groups, and family situations. Therefore, a gender-responsive textbook should refrain from depicting just one kind of girl or woman. For instance, textbook material can depict women from various social and professional settings

Teacher's Role in Using Gender-Responsive Urdu Textbooks

A well-crafted textbook by itself cannot guarantee gender equality in classroom practices. Educators can recognize stereotypical texts and encourage students to analyze them thoughtfully instead of accepting their messages blindly. For instance, if a narrative depicts solely women engaged in domestic tasks, a teacher might inquire about who takes on similar roles in students' households, if duties can be divided, and why certain jobs have historically been linked to either men or women. Questions of this nature can transform textbook reading into an introspective and analytical learning experience. UNESCO's efforts on gender-responsive teaching likewise highlight identifying gender-related obstacles, challenging stereotypes, and fostering equal involvement.

Challenges in Integrating Gender Equality into Urdu Textbooks

Numerous difficulties can emerge when incorporating gender equality into Urdu textbooks. Conventional societal stereotypes can affect textbook content since educational resources are created within the communities they cater to. Insufficient representation of female authors and contributors can result in certain experiences being overlooked, while an overreliance on conventional literary sources might present an incomplete view if modern women's experiences are omitted. Token representation is another issue since merely including one or two female characters does not automatically establish gender equality. Despite balanced textual content, stereotypical images can still perpetuate conventional gender roles. Textbooks might also miss a thorough gender assessment prior to release, and educators may need training to identify implicit biases and engage with textbooks critically. UNESCO's evidence shows that textbook reform is more successful when gender analysis, stakeholder involvement, training, and ongoing review are included in the development process.

Strategies for Developing Gender-Responsive Urdu Textbooks

A methodical strategy can be utilized for creating gender-sensitive Urdu textbooks. Prior to publication, textbooks must be subjected to a gender audit that evaluates the representation of male and female characters, dialogue participation, job and leadership roles, household duties, visuals, and the equilibrium between overt and subtle messages. Textbook committees must intentionally incorporate women's literary works alongside men's and offer students a range of role models from various professions and social roles. Images ought to illustrate collective responsibilities and varied job involvement, and activities should motivate students to recognize and converse about stereotypes instead of uncritically accepting them. Educators ought to undergo training in gender-sensitive teaching methods and the analysis of textbooks, while gender representation should be assessed regularly due to evolving social contexts and educational priorities. UNESCO's suggestions also highlight the need for frequent gender audits, inclusive involvement in creating textbooks, research-informed revisions, and training for individuals engaged in textbook production.

A Suggested Framework for Gender Analysis of Urdu Textbooks

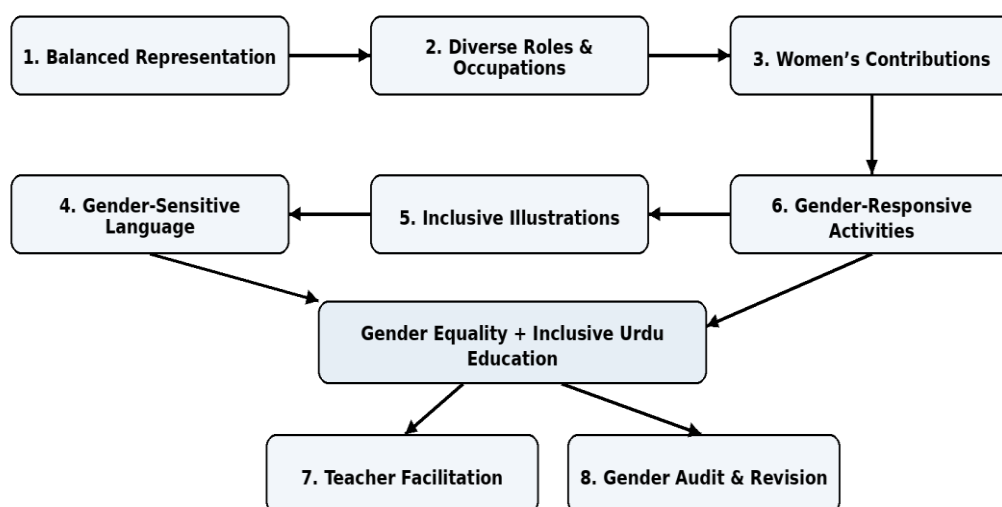
Future research can explore gender equality in Urdu textbooks by analyzing interconnected aspects like visibility, roles, occupations, leadership, language, illustrations, literary portrayal, activities, inclusivity, and the handling of both explicit and

implicit messages. This framework is especially beneficial for content-analysis research as it transforms the wide notion of gender equality into measurable categories.

Dimension	Possible Indicators
Representation	Number of male and female characters
Visibility	Frequency of appearance
Agency	Decision-making and independent action
Occupation	Professional roles represented
Leadership	Women and men in leadership positions
Domestic roles	Distribution of household responsibilities
Education	Representation of girls' and women's education
Literary contribution	Representation of women writers and poets
Language	Gender-sensitive or stereotypical expressions
Images	Balance and diversity of visual representation
Stereotypes	Presence or absence of traditional gender assumptions
Social values	Equality, dignity, respect and non-discrimination
Activities	Gender-responsive exercises and questions
Role models	Diversity of female and male achievers

This framework can be particularly useful for a content-analysis study because it converts the broad concept of gender equality into observable categories.

Suggested Framework for Gender-Responsive Urdu Textbooks



Implications for Urdu Language Education

Incorporating gender equality into Urdu textbooks may lead to various educational outcomes. Initially, it can enhance the social relevance of language acquisition. Additionally, it has the potential to expand students' ambitions. Third, males also gain advantages. Education for gender equality involves more than just girls. Fourth, Urdu textbooks that are responsive to gender can aid in fostering critical thinking skills. Ultimately, these textbooks may support the broader goals of SDG 4.7 and SDG 5 by linking education to equality, human dignity, social justice, and sustainable development.

Conclusion

Gender equality is a vital aspect of modern education, with textbooks significantly influencing the transmission of social

values to young students. In secondary school, students are shaping their identities, ambitions, and comprehension of social interactions. Urdu textbooks hold significant potential here as language and literature offer chances to involve students with human experiences, cultural values, social connections, and ethical dilemmas. Incorporating gender equality into Urdu textbooks doesn't necessitate discarding cultural heritage or conventional literary styles. Global findings show that gender stereotypes continue to exist in numerous educational resources. (UNESCO, 2020a, 2020b). The Indian education system offers a suitable policy basis for tackling these issues. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 clearly demands curricular resources that portray genders with respect and empowerment, steering clear of stereotypes. In the end, an Urdu textbook that responds to gender needs must include more female characters. It ought to offer equitable visibility, varied representation, equal respect, significant autonomy, and chances to challenge stereotypes. This strategy can enhance inclusivity in Urdu education and aid in cultivating learners who appreciate equality, respect, and social responsibility.

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