

Primary Level Teachers' Response to Gender Representation in Textbook Contents

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Abstract—This paper explores altogether 10 primary teachers' views on gender representation in primary level textbooks. Data were collected from the teachers who taught in private schools in the Kailali and Kathmandu districts. This research uses a semi-structured interview method to obtain information regarding teachers' attitudes toward gender representations in textbook contents. The interview data were analysed by using critical skills of qualitative research. The findings revealed that most of the teachers were unaware and regarded gender issues as insignificant to discuss in primary-level classes. Most of them responded to the questions personally and claimed that there were no gender issues in their classrooms. Some of the teachers connected gender issues with contexts other than textbook representations such as school discrimination in the distribution of salary among male and female teachers, school practices of awarding girls rather than boys as the most disciplined students, following girls' first rule in the assembly marching, encouraging only girls in the stage shows, and involving students in gender-specific activities such as decorating works for girls and physical tasks for boys. The interview also revealed teachers' covert gendered attitudes in their remarks. Nevertheless, most of the teachers accepted that gender-biased contents have an impact on learners and this problem can be solved with more gender-centred research in the education field, discussions, and training to increase awareness regarding gender issues. Agreeing with the suggestion of teachers, this paper recommends proper training and awareness regarding how to confront gender issues in textbooks.

Keywords—Content analysis, gender equality, school education, critical awareness.

I. INTRODUCTION

THIS research explores the opinion of teachers regarding gender representation in textbooks. A total of 10 teachers (4 males and 6 females) were interviewed using the semi-structured interview method to acquire their views on the gender issues in textbook contents. These teachers were selected from private schools who taught various subjects at primary levels in various schools. This study claims that teachers play a critical role in the gender socialisation of students when delivering the text contents [1], [2]. In fact, critical awareness in teachers can encourage students to question the text contents if required and build critical thinking regarding the representations. Recent textbook research in the Nepalese context claims that there is gender bias in primary-level textbooks [3], [4]. However, there are very few studies in the Nepalese education context that explore the opinions of teachers regarding these contents. Thus, this research intends to explore the views of teachers about gendered content in various subjects. The teachers' names are presented as codes to

maintain their privacy.

II. RELATED LITERATURE

Gender representation in textbooks has been one of the extensively explored areas in school education research. The studies in this field claim unequal and biased gender representation in the textbook contents with negative impacts on the learners [5]-[9]. It is found that the intensity of bias in developing world textbooks is more than in the textbooks of developed nations [6]. However, gender bias in textbooks is claimed to be found in almost all parts of the world [6].

Though textbooks are regarded as one of the most impacting factors in school education [6], researchers claim that teachers also play a critical role in classrooms regarding how the text content is delivered in classrooms [10], [11], [2]. There are relatively few studies that explore how teachers tackle gender representation in textbooks while teaching. Limited studies conducted in this field claim that it is impossible to predict the teachers' approach to the text contents as various teachers have diverse ways of tackling the texts [10]. A study conducted on the primary level teachers suggests that teachers lacked awareness regarding the gendered contents in the textbooks [11], [12]. Another study of Northern Ireland, though not about teachers' response to textbooks' gender representations, claims that despite limited training teachers attempted to challenge the gender equality issues in classrooms [13].

In the context of Nepal, there is very little educational research that focuses on the gender context in textbooks [3], [14], [4], and even limited studies on how teachers deal with such content. We want to fill this gap by exploring the opinions of primary-level teachers regarding their thoughts about gender representation in textbooks to infer how gendered content is dealt with by teachers in classrooms.

III. QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS WITH GENDER LENS

Saldana and Omasta [15] regard qualitative research methods as the method that analyse human lives, thus human actions and experiences are the primary focus of such research. This research is qualitative because the study is based on the attitudes of teachers regarding the gendered contents in the primary level textbooks collected in their natural social life. Since teachers' opinions are the primary focus of this study, the interview method was used to access data from the teachers. This method was used because it is the best technique to obtain subjective information from the participants [16]. Data were

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condensed and categorised into groups according to the content patterns noticed in the interview response. A one-to-one semi-structured interview technique [17] was used to allow flexibility of response to the participants through online platforms.

A gender lens was adopted, as presented by Connell [18], who regards gender as a process embedded in social relationships impacting both males and females. She regards social institutions such as schools as one of the sites where gender is practiced and promoted. However, she also claims that gender order can change with social efforts.

Based on Connell's perspective on gender [18], teachers were asked questions about their awareness regarding gender representations without emphasising only the female underrepresentation in textbooks, their strategy of tackling the biased gender representation, and their opinion regarding reducing biased gendered contents. The responses from the teachers were recorded and later transcribed and translated for data analysis. Although there are various ways of data analysis within qualitative methods, this research adopts Saldana and Omasta's [15] approach of qualitative analysis involving condensing data, noticing patterns, unifying seemingly different things, understanding social practices, and interpreting the routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships as reflected in the interviews.

IV. RESULTS

The interview results from the teachers indicated various issues regarding their response to gender representations in textbooks. These issues are categorised into seven multiple topics related to teachers' gender awareness, gendered opinion, their dealing with the gendered contents in classrooms, their response regarding the impact, their opinion about the solutions, and the issues beyond textbooks suggested by the teachers as important in the school context. These issues are dealt with individually under the various topics below.

A. Teacher's Lack of Awareness

During the interview, it was noticed that most of the teachers did not think of gender representations while teaching textbook contents. Only one among 10 teachers claimed that she was aware of this issue, and she responds critically to such content in textbooks. Two of the teachers regarded gender as an inappropriate topic for children of primary level due to their young age. For example, teacher MD responded, "My children are around 8 years old. This age is very immature to understand and discuss gender equality that you mentioned." Similarly, teacher MUD said, "I am feeling awkward even thinking about gender representations in mathematics textbooks." Even after we presented them with some screenshots from textbook contents, only six teachers among 10 responded and four of them either did not identify gender bias or simply ignored them.

Some teachers had ambiguous views regarding their thoughts on gender content. They at first mentioned that there are improvements in textbook content with more female-based content; however, they also claimed that the text content about historical figures and social contributors lack female role models from the Nepalese context. This indicates that teachers

are not much aware of gender contents in the textbooks. Or they are comparing the previous curriculum textbooks with even limited female representations with the ones they are using. As the teachers lacked awareness regarding the gender representation in textbooks, they potentially deliver the contents at face value impacting learners' attitudes.

B. Gendered Opinions of Teachers

It was found that some of the teachers were reflecting their internalised gendered attitude while presenting their opinion about gender equality. These attitudes were reflected in their gender-blind points at some of the representations in the textbook contents, their justifications of biased gender treatment of students, and their internalisation of some attributes as male and female.

Teachers' gendered opinions were noticed in their various remarks. For example, teacher SA related some of the qualities such as attentiveness, disciplined behaviours, and good study, to female students. He also had an opinion that physical work should be given to boys as they are physically fit and decorative work should be given to girls. He accepted that allocating soft tasks to girls is justifiable because they are physically less powerful than males. Similarly, another teacher NG regarded a text content that presented a wife in a professional job and her husband in a farming occupation as forced equality. It was inferred that she had normalised that husband are generally in higher professions than their wives. Teacher SL associated women as a source of food, generalising cooking and serving as a female job. When giving an example of inclusion in text content, BL teacher gave a popular example of a man named 'Ram' which is a cliché male noun often used in various examples. Ram's counterpart Sita (a female name who is the wife of Ram) is relatively less used in examples. This suggests how male names are more popular among teachers and frequently used in examples than female names. Lastly, teacher NP marked that only females were represented as neighbours in the illustrations in the text content and ignored the fact that all the neighbours mentioned in the text content were male names. He also said that along with the illustration of girls playing skipping, should be an illustration showing "a group of boys playing football." This indicates his gendered attitude regarding sports. It seems that these gender attitudes of teachers along with text contents are contributing to the gender inequality in schools.

C. No Discussion of Gender Contents in Classrooms

It was noticed that among 10 teachers, only one teacher from Kathmandu claimed that she discusses gender aspects from textbooks critically. All other teachers suggested that they did not discuss gender content in classrooms.

Altogether nine out of 10 teachers did not mention discussing such issues in classrooms. Teachers gave various reasons justifying their act of not including gender issues in classrooms. For example, one of the mathematics teachers claimed that he makes minimum use of textbooks and uses his self-developed examples to discuss mathematics problems in the classroom so, there was no necessity of discussing gendered issues from

textbooks. Teacher SL said, “No, we do not remember about gender while teaching most of the time”. Teacher SJ and MD said that gender issue is not appropriate to discuss in the classroom due to the young age of the children. Teacher SA mentioned there were no gender issues in textbooks. These responses from teachers indicated that they are not much concerned and aware that there are gender issues in textbooks and they are important to discuss in the classroom.

D. Acceptance of Negative Impacts of Biased Representations

Out of 10 teachers, only six teachers who could identify the gender bias in text contexts accepted that these types of content impact the learners. For example, teacher MD in response to a biased image in the textbook said, “I think these things also affect children and it suggests that girls should do works as portrayed in the picture such as she should be obedient, but boys can do whatever they want”. Teacher SL said, “...since we should teach text contents, these contents may affect students’ mindset”. Teacher NG was able to give an elaborated response regarding this issue:

Textbooks presented only specific genders in specific situations such as only males were depicted as wounded and diseased. This gives false information to the learners as both males and females are equally vulnerable to accidents and disease. Just as in the textbooks, for example, if we close our eyes and think of a doctor we cannot think of a female doctor, the text contents are feeding these kinds of images to children. Also, a robber in an illustration is a male, with long hair, and a gun. Some occupations and activities in textbooks are also specified as girls’ and boys’ promoting gender stereotypes. (NG, Nepali Language teacher, Female, Kathmandu)

Teacher NG also accepted that gender-biased content may also impact the teachers as these contents are not looked at critically when teaching in class.

The above findings suggest that teachers agreed on the impacts of the biased content on the learners. And they accepted that biased content should not be delivered in classrooms. However, due to the lack of motivation to address these issues in the classroom, most of them do not address them.

E. Teachers’ Relating to Gender Issues Personally

Teachers had the tendency of taking the question regarding gender equality personally. When the teachers were asked if they had encountered any gender bias in the textbook contents, they responded to the question personally. For example, teacher BL, a Mathematics and Science teacher said, “I just make my own material for teaching including students in the classroom, so I do not need to address this”. Teacher NP said, “But, in order to motivate girls, I behave equally with them and motivate them when they feel down.” Teacher SP responded, “We rather focus on the seat arrangements of boys and girls. Gender-related teachings are not done in the primary level”. Teacher SA said, “There is no problem in gender with our school, but I hear that outside there is gender discrimination.” Teacher PP said that she also interferes when she sees boys, not including girls in

their games. In this way, the teachers responded rather personally when they were asked about gender issues in textbooks.

Teachers were also asked to share some events where they had noticed gender issues in other text contents. Responding to this question, NG said that once she was questioned by a female student about a text content where the property was being distributed only among sons. She confessed that only after the female students’ remark she rectified that girls also get parents’ property. Another teacher, NT, also confessed how she was aware that stories like ‘Beauty and Beast’ promote gender stereotypes. In this way, even without the proper motivation and training, teachers were somehow trying to counter the gendered contents and they were at least aware that there should not be any gender issues in schools.

F. Teachers’ Positive Mindset about Solving Gender Problems

Teachers were optimistic regarding the solution of gender problems in education including in textbooks. They even suggested some recommendations about how this problem can be addressed. Some of the comments from the teachers regarding the solution to gender issues were: “Teachers should not just depend on the textbook contents, instead they should make their own contents” (BL, male, Mathematics teacher). “Teachers should explain how the picture is biased” (PP, female, Science teacher). “I think, at first there should be gender awareness trainings to teachers and its implementation in the classroom” (NG, female, Nepali language teacher). “A teacher can interfere in promoting gender equality” (SL, male, Mathematics teacher). “We should discourage this” (MD, female, Mathematics teacher). “Textbook writers should get rid of their gender stereotypical thinking and include the things that challenge gender stereotypes” (NT, female, English teacher).

Altogether, five out of 10 teachers came up with some suggestions that can help solve this problem. These teachers claimed that it was due to greater gender social contexts that the textbooks contain gendered content. They even accepted that gender-bias is not only limited to textbooks but found everywhere in Nepalese society. And they added, this problem can be solved by awareness regarding this issue. They emphasised talks about gendered content in textbooks, training for teachers, textbook writers, and curriculum designers, teachers’ self-initiatives in developing more inclusive content for lessons, and teachers’ critical interference in the contents that present biased representations.

The above findings suggested teachers had creative ideas and suggestions that can be used to deal with gendered issues in textbooks.

G. Teachers’ Concerns Regarding Other Issues

Although the research primarily focused on the gender issues depicted in textbook contents, due to semi-structured interview method, teachers also mentioned some critical issues prevalent in Nepalese school education. Some of these issues went beyond the textbook contents such as teacher SJ mentioned that there are gender issues regarding the distribution of salary

among male and female teachers. She said that female teachers are given less salary even though they have the same responsibility and workload due to the biased attitude prevalent in the school management. Likewise, teacher SL critiqued the textbook contents focusing only on the Hindu mythical stories ignoring the children from non-Hindu backgrounds who might be unaware of the characters and context in the stories resulting in poor academic outcomes as questions are asked from those lessons. He also said that some text contents carry wrong morals such as 'we should respect rich people.' He also commented that Nepalese textbooks excluded sexual minorities. Teacher NT commented on the issue of same-sex friendships promoted by the textbooks that potentially contribute to gender inequality. Likewise, Teacher SL, Teacher BL, and Teacher NP also emphasised the inclusion of multiple castes and ethnicities in the lesson contents to make children feel involved in the pedagogy. Teacher MD commented that some of the school practices are also discriminatory such as awarding the majority of girls as disciplined students, the ladies' first rules in assembly march pass, prioritising girls in the stage programs, etc. These remarks by the teachers suggested that along with gender bias in textbook, there are other gender issues in the Nepalese school education system that need rectification. Also, gender awareness trainings for both teachers and textbook writers can contribute to gender inclusive contents and greater social equality.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings from the teachers' responses regarding the gender bias content in textbooks, it can be concluded that teachers lack proper training and motivation to use their critical awareness regarding textbook contents. Although the National curriculum framework [19] and the Primary curriculum [20] focus on gender equality, there are still gender bias contents in textbooks [3], [14], [4]. From the teachers' interviews, it was clear that most of the teachers' do not regard gender representation at the primary level as an important issue to discuss in the classroom. Both of these issues in the Nepalese education seem to reinforce and reproduce gender inequality in school education. Although the lack of teachers' training regarding gender issues is not limited to the Nepalese context [11]-[13], this seems to be one of the obstacles to meeting gender parity in pedagogy.

Having said that, it would be unfair not to mention the limitations of this research. Due to the limited participants from inadequate locations, the findings from this research cannot be generalised. This research is also narrow as it only includes the opinions of private school teachers, and it does not represent the opinions of the teachers who teach in government schools. However, since private schools are one of the major sectors contributing to education in Nepal with a maximum number of students, it is expected that this research contributes to findings related to an important issue in the Nepalese education context. Being a male-dominated country where gender discrimination is seen in almost every sector, it is seen that education policies have prioritised women in education. Nevertheless, it is not well implemented in the pedagogy as there are still gendered

contents in the textbooks, and teachers are not motivated to address this issue in the classrooms, especially at the primary level. Thus, it is expected that this research would contribute to awake concerned authorities, educators, and stakeholders to take this issue seriously and make necessary amendments.

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