

Beyond the Pages: Investigating Gender Stereotype in EFL Textbooks Used in Seventh Grade of Junior High School

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Abstract

This study investigates gender stereotypes in the Indonesian EFL textbook English for Nusantara for Grade VII, published under the Merdeka Curriculum. Although textbooks are central learning media, they may subtly reproduce gendered norms that shape learners' perceptions. This research aims to examine how male and female characters are visually and linguistically represented through Sunderland's six dimensions of gender stereotypes: invisibility, occupational roles, relationship stereotypes, personal characteristic stereotypes, disempowering discourse roles, and degradation. Using qualitative content analysis with a deductive coding approach, the study analyzed illustrations, or pictures from selected units containing speech bubbles or passages. The findings show that while the textbook achieves relatively balanced visibility between genders, several traditional stereotypes remain. Female characters are predominantly portrayed as nurturing, polite, passive, and imaginative, while male characters are associated with competitiveness, adventurousness, dominance, and physical strength. Occupational representations remain limited, with women mostly depicted as teachers and men engaging in outdoor and technical activities. Some indicators of progress appear, such as female involvement in sports and male participation in household tasks. The study concludes that English for Nusantara presents a transitional depiction of gender partially reinforcing traditional norms but also displaying emerging signs of equality highlighting the need for more gender-responsive textbook development.

Keywords: DCA; EFL textbooks; Gender Equality; Gender Stereotypes; Textbook Analysis; Visual Representation.

1. Introduction

Gender-related issues have increasingly become a central topic of academic and public discourse in recent decades. Within social sciences, gender is widely understood not as a biological attribute but as a social construct that shapes expectations, norms, and gender-based roles assigned to individuals (Kaufman et al., 2023). One of the most persistent phenomena linked to gender is gender stereotype, which influences how societies perceive and evaluate men and women. According to the United Nations Human Rights (2014), gender stereotypes refer to oversimplified assumptions regarding the traits and roles that males and females are expected to possess. These stereotypes are often prescriptive, dictating not only what individuals are but what they should be. Prentice and Carranza (2002) emphasize this prescriptive nature by arguing that societal expectations reinforce specific attributes for instance, viewing women as warm and sympathetic and expecting them to behave accordingly, or associating men with strength and agency and perceiving these traits as their societal obligations.

Gender stereotypes become problematic when they shape individuals' opportunities, decisions, and behaviors in ways that contribute to inequality. They may limit aspirations, reinforce traditional power structures, and normalize gender-based marginalization. In Indonesia, as in many other countries, gender stereotypes remain deeply rooted in cultural and social norms. Efforts to reduce these stereotypes require the involvement of institutions across the nation, and education is



considered one of the most strategic sectors capable of reshaping public perceptions (Sumar, 2015). Schools serve not only as spaces for academic knowledge acquisition but also as environments where values, attitudes, and social understandings



including gender roles are transmitted. Among the learning resources used in schools, textbooks play a particularly significant role.

Textbooks are central to language education because they structure classroom activities, offer language input, and guide instructional practices (Richards, n.d., p. 1). For teachers, textbooks provide teaching guidance, pedagogical ideas, and standardized learning sequences. While for students, they serve as primary references for understanding lessons and achieving learning goals (Richards & Richards, 2015). In addition to delivering subject matter, textbooks implicitly shape students' perceptions of social norms, behaviors, and identities (Gebregeorgis, 2016). Their influence extends beyond linguistic content to the dissemination of values including those related to gender. For this reason, biased or stereotypical gender representations in textbooks may reinforce unequal power relations and limit students' understanding of gender equality.

Existing research has repeatedly shown that EFL textbooks often contain gender bias and gender stereotypes. Several Indonesian studies have revealed persistent unequal representations of males and females in English textbooks (Tyarakanita et al., 2021; Fahriany, 2018; Ariyanto, 2018). These issues include the underrepresentation of female characters, unequal occupational roles, stereotypical depictions of daily activities, and gendered linguistic patterns. Yonata and Mujiyanto (2017) likewise reported male dominance in leadership and technological contexts. Also, Islam and Asadullah (2018), discovered that Indonesian secondary English textbooks heavily favored male characters in illustrative representations, indicating systemic patterns of gender bias in ELT materials. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often rely on varied analytical approaches and emphasize specific linguistic or semiotic features. This creates inconsistencies in how gender stereotypes are identified and categorized across different studies.

The theoretical concept of gender stereotype has been widely discussed by scholars. Matsumoto and Juang (2004) describe gender stereotypes as psychological or behavioral traits culturally associated with males and females, whereas Brannon (2017) defines them as assumptions regarding appropriate behaviors based on gender. Eagly's Social Role Theory (1987), cited in Prentice and Carranza (2002), connects gender stereotypes with traditional social roles and unequal power structures. These theoretical foundations help to explain why stereotypical gender portrayals persist in learning materials. Research on gender stereotypes in textbooks has employed multiple analytical frameworks. Ariyanto (2018) applied Leeuwen's (2008) multi-semiotic analysis, while Fahriany (2018) analyzed adjectives, proper names, and pronouns. Agni et al. (2020) drew from Porreca (1984), Lee (2014), and Qatawneh and Rawashdeh (2019). Meanwhile, Tyarakanita et al. (2021) utilized Sunderland's (2006) language sexism along with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) narrative representation. These varied frameworks highlight different aspects of representation, but they also show the lack of a unified analytical model.

Despite these contributions, there remains a methodological gap in Indonesian ELT research: the limited use of Sunderland's (1994a) comprehensive categorization of gender stereotypes. Sunderland (1994a), as cited in Mukundan and Nimehchisalem (2008, p.159), proposes six dimensions of gender stereotypes which are invisibility, occupational roles, relationship stereotypes, personal characteristic stereotypes, disempowering discourse roles, and degradation. Compared to other frameworks, Sunderland's model offers a more systematic and multidimensional approach for identifying explicit and implicit stereotypes. However, only a few Indonesian studies have employed this framework, leading to a lack of consistency in categorizing gender stereotypes across textbook analyses. This gap indicates the need for research that applies Sunderland's categorization in a clear and focused manner.

Furthermore, studies focusing on Indonesia's newest curriculum materials remain limited. The English for Nusantara textbook, published in 2022 under the Merdeka Curriculum, marks a major shift in instructional content and pedagogy. Yet, research investigating its gender representation is still scarce. Since textbooks play a crucial role in shaping students' social understanding, examining gender stereotypes in this newly implemented textbook is essential particularly using a robust and comprehensive framework that has been underutilized in previous studies.

Therefore, the present study aims to address this methodological gap by analyzing gender stereotypes in the English for Nusantara Grade VII textbook using Sunderland's (1994a) six-dimensional categorization. This framework allows a consistent and structured identification of stereotype patterns within the textual and visual content of the textbook. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by expanding the use of Sunderland's framework in Indonesian ELT research and practically by informing future textbook development.

Based on the gaps and issues described above, the present study seeks to answer the following research question:

"How are gender stereotypes represented in the pictures of male and female characters in the English for Nusantara Grade VII textbook based on Sunderland's (1994a) categorization?"

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative deductive content analysis (DCA) to examine gender stereotypes in the EFL textbook English for Nusantara for Grade VII. Content analysis was selected because it enables the systematic and objective study of recorded communication. Lac (2016) characterizes content analysis as a scientific method for classifying and evaluating information across various communication forms, including books and visual materials. A deductive approach was applied based on the analytical categories Sunderland's six gender stereotype categories predetermined. As noted by Catanzaro (1988), as cited in Elo & Kyngäs, (2008), DCA is appropriate when researchers seek to retest existing categories in new contexts. The object of this research was the textbook English for Nusantara for Grade VII, published by the Ministry of

Education and Culture of Indonesia in 2022. Units 1, 3, and 5 were selected because they contain illustrations that potentially encode gender representation. Only visual materials accompanied by speech bubbles or short passages were included, while incomplete or irrelevant visual data were excluded to maintain interpretive accuracy. Data were collected through document analysis, a method defined by Bowen (2009) as a structured process for examining and interpreting printed or digital documents. The researcher identified relevant visual-textual elements in the selected units and extracted them based on their relevance to gender representation. These elements were then prepared for analysis using Sunderland's predetermined categories. To ensure trustworthiness, this study employed peer debriefing, a technique described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a process in which a researcher exposes their analytical reasoning to a knowledgeable but impartial peer. This process supports reflexivity, uncovers overlooked assumptions, and helps strengthen the credibility of qualitative interpretations.

The analytical procedure followed the three-phase deductive content analysis framework proposed by Graham (2021) which are: (1) Preparation Phase: The researcher repeatedly reviewed the selected textbook units to identify meaning units related to gender portrayal. The predetermined categories from Sunderland guided the initial identification process, (2) Organization Phase: Each meaning unit was coded and classified into one of Sunderland's six categories. This phase emphasized systematic classification rather than generating new categories, consistent with the deductive analytic logic. Coding sheets and notes were used to maintain consistency, and (3) Reporting Phase: The findings were presented category by category, supported by examples from the textbook. This phase described how gender stereotypes emerged across the units and how each meaning unit aligned with the analytical framework.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discussions of the study, which aim to identify and analyze the gender stereotypes reflected in English for Nusantara for Grade VII. The findings indicate that the textbook still reflects traditional gender stereotypes, although some elements of gender equality are emerging. Male characters are predominantly depicted with masculine traits such as competitiveness, dominance, physical strength, and adventurousness, while female characters are portrayed with feminine traits such as kindness, nurturing, imagination, warmth, and affection (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000). However, some characters challenge these conventional roles: females are shown as competitive and daring, participating in activities like badminton and pencak silat, while some male characters display communal and cooperative behaviors. These examples suggest a partial shift toward more balanced gender representation. In terms of invisibility, male and female characters appear with similar frequency, and degradation is absent, indicating the absence of overtly sexist content. Nevertheless, some traditional patterns persist, such as the portrayal of female characters in teaching roles and male characters in physically active or outdoor roles, as well as relational stereotypes reflected in the use of patriarchal naming conventions.

3.1 Findings

A. The dimension of Invisibility

Table 1 shows that the male characters is the character that less visible in English for Nusantara for Grade VII. The data shows that the number of female characters visibility reached 35 (50.72%), while the number of male characters visibility reached 34 (49.28%) out of a total of 69 characters analyzed. Thus, in terms of percentage, the gender representation in this textbook is relatively balanced, although women are slightly more dominant. This is a good development of gender equality in the textbook where usually female characters appear fewer than male characters

Table 1. The Frequencies of Male and Female Invisibility

Chapter	Data ID	Character	
		Female	Male
Chapter 1	P. 13, P. 16, P. 24, P. 26, P. 27, P. 33, & P. 36.	13	12
Chapter 3	p. 101, p. 106, p. 118, p. 119, & p. 120.	10	16
Chapter 5	p. 206, p. 208, & p. 212.	12	6
Total		35(50.72%)	34(49.28%)

B. The dimension of occupation stereotype

The occupation stereotype was divided into jobs and activities. Table 2 shows that female characters (2) appear more frequently than male characters (1) in job representations, all of which are depicted as teachers. This limited occupational variety suggests that female characters are confined to traditional, nurturing, and educational roles, reflecting a common stereotype of women being associated with teaching and caregiving professions. In terms of activities, male characters (26) appear more frequently than female characters (16), showing a dominance of male representation in action-oriented and outdoor activities such as fishing and playing mobile games. While, the female characters shown several times in the activity that related to imagination such as reading and drawing. It shows that male characters dominate in activities that refer to physical and competitive aspects.

Table 2. The dimension of jobs in occupation stereotype

Chapter	Data ID		Female	Male
1	p. 35, p.37, & p. 27	Jobs		
		Teacher	2	1
Total Jobs			2	1

Table 3. The dimension of activities in occupation stereotype

Chapter	Data ID		Female	Male
1	p. 16, p. 21, p. 31, p. 33, & p. 35	Activities		
		Fishing	-	5
1	p. 21, p. 24, p. 30, p. 31, p. 33, & p. 36	Playing Mobile Game	1	6
1	p. 24	Drawing Manga	1	-
1	p. 30, p. 33, & p. 36	Reading a Novel	3	-
1	p. 33, & p. 36	Playing Badminton	2	-
1	p. 45	Playing Basketball	-	1
3	p. 118, p.119, p. 120, & p. 133	Housework	8	14
5	p. 222	Pencak Silat	1	-
Total Activities			16	26

C. The dimension of relationship stereotype

The relationship stereotype is demonstrated by naming of the family after the male character, "the Rahmansyah's family," rather than using the female's name. Table 3 shows the use of the father's/male's name as family identity that reflects a relationship stereotype in which females are portrayed as subordinate or attached to their identity with males. In other words, Mrs. Posma's existence is presented not as an independent individual, but through her relationship with Mr. Rahmansyah.

Table 4. The Dimension of Relationship Stereotype in English for Nusantara for Grade VII

Picture	Relationship gender stereotype
Section 2 – Reading a. Look at Picture 3.7 and answer the following questions.  Picture 3.7 The Rahmansyah's family cleaning up	The title "The Rahmansyah's family cleaning up" present a stereotypical representation of gender in the relationship.

D. The dimensions of personal characteristic stereotype

Table 4 shows that male and female characters in English for Nusantara for Grade VII are largely represented in line with the gender stereotype dimensions proposed by Diekman and Eagly (2000). Male characters are frequently associated with masculine traits, such as being competitive, adventurous, physically strong, and dominant. For example, a male character who enjoys playing mobile games reflects the masculine trait of competitiveness, while another who goes fishing represents the adventurous dimension. The portrayal of a male student playing basketball despite using a wheelchair also reinforces the stereotype of physical strength. Male dominance is additionally visible when one male character introduces a female character and provides personal information about her, aligning with the masculine dimension of dominance (Diekman & Eagly, 2000). Female characters, on the other hand, are depicted with feminine traits, particularly those related to communal and relational roles. A female character who reads novels is portrayed as imaginative, a feminine cognitive trait identified by Diekman and Eagly (2000). She is also evaluative, reflected through her comments and appreciation of her surroundings an attribute consistent with Parvis and Gojian's findings as interpreted by Ariyanto (2018), which characterize women as more self-reflexive and evaluative. Additionally, female characters are shown as kind, warm, and affectionate, supporting Brannon's (2016), as stated by (Ramadhan et al., 2019, p. 191) explanation that women are typically associated with communal roles.

Although the textbook predominantly reproduces traditional gender stereotypes men as agentic and women as communal there are a few non-traditional representations that indicate emerging gender equality. A female character participating in badminton demonstrates competitiveness, a masculine trait in Diekman and Eagly's (2000) model, while another female character performing pencak silat reflects the masculine trait of being daring. Likewise, a male character who works cooperatively with others displays communal qualities, which Brannon (2016), as stated by (Ramadhan et al., 2019, p. 191) notes are commonly attributed to women.

Table 5. The Dimensions of Personal Characteristic Stereotypes in English for Nusantara for Grade VII

Gender	Personal Characteristic Stereotype	Data ID
Female	<i>Passive, Being Protected, Caring, Nurturing, Patient, Imaginative, Evaluative, Kind, and Warm.</i>	p. 13, p. 24, p. 27, p. 30, p. 35, p. 36, p. 37, p. 106, & p. 210.
Male	<i>Competitive, Adventurous, Strong, and Dominant.</i>	p. 21, p. 30, p. 31, p. 35, p. 45, & p. 208

E. The dimension of disempowering discourse roles

Table 4.4 shows the frequency of disempowering discourse roles by male and female characters in English for Nusantara for Grade VII. The frequency of female characters talking first is fewer than male character (2 vs 1). It's indicated that Male characters still dominant in terms of disempowering discourse on roles.

Table 6, The Frequency of Disempowering Discourse Roles in English for Nusantara for Grade VII

No	Chapter and Page	Female	Male
1	Chapter 1, p. 24		✓
2	Chapter 1, p. 26	✓	
3	Chapter 3, p. 106		✓

F. The dimension of degradation

The definition of degradation is blatant sexism to the point of misogyny (Sunderland, 1994a in Mukundan and Nimehchisalem, 2008, p.159). English for Nusantara for Grade VII doesn't presented the gender stereotype in the terms of degradation.

3.2 Discussions

This section discusses the findings on gender stereotypes in English for Nusantara for Grade VII, connecting them with established theoretical frameworks and previous studies. The analysis draws primarily on the gender stereotype categories proposed by Sunderland (1994a) which are: (1) invisibility, (2) occupational roles, (3) relationship stereotypes, (4) personal characteristics, (5) disempowering discourse roles, and (6) degradation.

The first gender stereotype categories is invisibility. Invisibility is imbalance in representation, where either males or females appear less frequently (Sunderland, 1994a in Mukundan and Nimehchisalem, 2008, p.69). Sadker et al. (1991, p. 315), as cited in Nasrullah (2016, p. 43), stated that invisibility is among the most harmful forms of bias, and that achieving gender equity must become a central concern in educational research as well as in initiatives aimed at reforming and improving schools. In terms of percentage, the representation of male and female characters in the textbook is relatively balanced, with females appearing slightly more frequently. The more balanced visibility observed here suggests a positive shift toward gender equality.

Regarding occupational roles, the textbook presents only one profession, namely teacher, which appears three times (twice for female characters and once for a male character). This distribution still reinforces the traditional stereotype that associates women with caring and nurturing professions. The data also reveal that male characters are more frequently depicted engaging in housework (14 occurrences) than female characters (8 occurrences). This finding aligns with Nisak et al. (2020), who identified a growing trend toward more balanced domestic role representation in updated Indonesian EFL materials. Despite this progress, masculine coded outdoor and physical activities, such as fishing and playing basketball, continue to be associated primarily with male characters, whereas creative, domestic, or home-based activities like reading and drawing manga remain linked to female characters, thereby reinforcing conventional gender expectations.

Relationship stereotypes also appear in the textbook when female characters are presented primarily in relation to male figures. This pattern is evident in Table 3, particularly in the illustration entitled “The Rahmansyah’s family cleaning up,” where the family identity is attached to the male character. Such naming conventions reflect symbolic patriarchy and reinforce the idea that women’s identities are defined through their relationship to men. This finding is consistent with Ariyanto (2018), who noted that Indonesian educational materials frequently preserve patriarchal naming patterns that position men as central figures while situating women as secondary or complementary.

In the dimension of personal characteristic stereotypes, the textbook portrays both male and female characters in alignment with traditional gendered personality dimensions described by Diekmann and Eagly (2000). Male characters are depicted through masculine traits, including competitive, adventurous, dominance, and physical strength. These traits are reflected in activities such as fishing, playing competitive games, initiating conversations, and participating in basketball despite using a wheelchair. In contrast, female characters are associated with feminine traits such as imaginative, kind, warm, and affection, illustrated through their involvement in activities such as reading novels, expressing positive judgments, and showing curiosity about their surroundings. These portrayals are consistent with Brannon (2016), who explains that men are typically depicted as agentic, whereas women are characterized as communal. Nonetheless, the textbook also presents several non-traditional depictions that challenge conventional gender boundaries. For instance, a female character engaging in badminton demonstrates competitiveness, a trait categorized as masculine, while another female character practicing pencak silat exhibits daring behavior, also identified as a masculine trait. Additionally, a male character showing cooperative behavior reflects communal qualities more commonly associated with femininity. Although these progressive examples appear only in limited instances, they signal an effort toward presenting more egalitarian gender representations.

The next dimension, disempowering discourse roles, concerns who initiates conversation in dialogues. Sunderland (1994a) explains that when males speak first more frequently, it indicates dominance within interactional structures. In this textbook, males initiate conversations slightly more often than females (2 vs. 1), suggesting that verbal dominance still leans toward male characters. This result supports the findings of Karsena et al. (2024), who observed that Indonesian EFL textbooks often grant male characters more opportunities to open dialogues.

The final dimension, degradation, defined by Sunderland (1994a) as blatant sexism or misogyny does not appear in the textbook. The absence of degrading content indicates adherence to contemporary educational standards that prohibit overtly discriminatory or misogynistic depictions. Overall, while English for Nusantara for Grade VII shows several positive developments toward gender equality, it still reflects a number of traditional gender stereotypes, particularly in occupational associations, relational positioning, personality traits, and discourse roles.

4. Conclusion

This study examined how gender stereotypes are represented in the EFL textbook English for Nusantara for Grade VII), using Sunderland's (1994) six dimensions: invisibility, occupational roles, relationship stereotypes, personal characteristic stereotypes, disempowering discourse roles, and degradation. The analysis covered both visual and linguistic representations of male and female characters.

The study's findings have several implications for English language education and textbook development in Indonesia. Textbooks serve not only as language learning tools but also as cultural artifacts that shape learners' perceptions of social roles and gender. Balanced representation in textbooks can promote critical thinking, gender awareness, and respect for equality among students, whereas stereotypical portrayals risk reinforcing biased norms. Teachers play a key role in mediating these representations by fostering critical discussions and using supplementary materials to challenge traditional stereotypes. For textbook writers and publishers, incorporating gender-inclusive visuals, equitable dialogue participation, and diverse character roles is essential to support modern educational values and the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on critical thinking. Policymakers and curriculum developers should also establish gender-sensitive evaluation criteria to ensure that textbooks align with principles of justice, equality, and human dignity.

To conclude, English for Nusantara for Grade VII reflects a transitional stage in gender representation: while traditional stereotypes persist, there are small but meaningful efforts toward equality and inclusivity. Continued evaluation, gender-sensitive material design, and pedagogical awareness are crucial to fostering textbooks that genuinely promote gender equity in Indonesian education. Future research could expand this analysis to other grade levels, subjects, or publishers, and apply complementary methods such as Critical Discourse Analysis or Multimodal Analysis to uncover more nuanced aspects of gender construction in educational materials.

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