

**Exploring Gender Stereotypes in First-Grade School  
Textbooks in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

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## **Abstract**

Textbooks perform a crucial role in providing pupils with knowledge and transmitting subtle cues about the desired norms, ideals and values of society. Previous studies have consistently shown that stereotypical representations of gender in school textbooks represent a prominent source of gender bias and discrimination, particularly in patriarchal societies where male privileges are underwritten by formal and informal social, legal and cultural practices. This study provides a content analysis of gender representations in a sample of 15 first-grade textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, focusing upon the pictorial, in addition to discursive, representations of gender. The study finds that gender stereotypes are prevalent across a wide range of domains including: traits and characteristics; activities and interests; occupational roles; and physical appearances and attributes. Female characters are also underrepresented compared to male characters. Crucially, unlike male characters who are portrayed in a wide array of settings, female characters are primarily depicted in a domestic context. As a result, the representation of gender in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks embeds a rigid binary system of gender hierarchies while reinforcing some of the most pervasive gender stereotypes. Most notably, the findings in this study show that textbooks continue to promulgate the myth that the natural habitat for women and girls is the home. Drawing upon a range of theories, the study argues that these stereotypical representations of gender in school textbooks perpetuate gender inequalities through socializing young children into accepting the hegemonic ideas of patriarchy. Only by dismantling the norms and assumptions upon which stereotypes are founded can school textbooks facilitate a more equal and nuanced representation of gender.

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## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

## **Introduction**

This study focused on exploring the presence and nature of gender stereotypes in Saudi Arabian first-grade school textbooks. In this respect, it is worth noting that the Saudi government has recently undertaken notable social and economic reforms by embarking on the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative. One major aspect of this vision is empowering women and promoting gender equality in various fields, including education (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021). In spite of these ongoing efforts, Saudi Arabian society has long been marked by gender segregation and differential treatment between women and men (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2024; Sirri, 2024). Therefore, this study aimed to examine whether these historical biases are still present and reflected in the Saudi school textbooks currently in use. This is particularly important for first-grade students, as their textbooks are considered to be the first official books that young students engage with, which can subsequently play a crucial role in shaping their minds and reinforcing such biases (Aldossari, 2025).

This study employed a comprehensive research methodology by utilizing both quantitative and qualitative content analysis in order to thoroughly examine textual and visual representations of gender. This examination was conducted across all currently used Saudi first-grade school textbooks, seeking any potential patterns of gender stereotypes and underrepresentation of girls and women characters. This study assessed the ratio of male to female characters, their portrayed occupational roles, assigned traits, and overall representation; it also aimed to assess the extent to which these textbooks reinforced or challenged existing gender stereotypes. Eventually, this

investigation was especially pertinent and timely because of the current comprehensive social reformations occurring in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

## **The Importance of This Research**

Gender roles are acquired through a variety of social and cultural factors, including families, schools, the media, and religious institutions, whose influence is particularly important in determining how individuals define themselves and express their gender and the possibilities and limitations that they may face in different aspects of their lives (Chen et al., 2023; Corrado, 2009). More specifically, in educational settings, gender roles can be shaped by messages that are conveyed through various means, including school textbooks. As previous studies have shown, instructional materials have the power to transmit gender stereotypes that influence students' understanding and subsequent performance of their social roles and activities. Thus, these embedded gender stereotypes, in turn, may hinder the full potential of the students by perpetuating negative and restrictive views of gender identity (Mkuchu, 2004; Zhou, 2025).

A body of empirical research that was conducted on the topic of gender stereotypes has revealed that there were high levels of gender stereotyping evident not only in the text but also in the illustrations used in school textbooks. Furthermore, these findings were broadly consistent across many countries, indicating a widespread issue that warrants further attention and action (Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Hall, 2014; Lee & Chin, 2019; Lee & Collins, 2009; Sovic & Hus, 2015; Tajeddin & Janebi, 2010). In the Saudi context, there has been little attention paid to examining gender stereotypes in school textbooks, particularly in the case of first-grade textbooks. In spite of that, a study conducted by Abiky (2019), which examined gender stereotypes in two major English

language textbooks used by Saudi female high school students, found that the main role of women in these textbooks was considered to be mostly housework, while the professional and working side was attributed mainly to men. However, this representation is far from accurate when compared to the current situation that young students witness around them. Currently, in Saudi Arabia, a significant part of social expectations and roles has changed (Aldossari, 2025; Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2024). For example, both women and men can participate side by side in a variety of job occupations. Also, it is not uncommon to see many women driving their vehicles independently and many men contributing to domestic chores. As the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's government continues to pursue significant social and economic reforms in recent years, it is very important to ensure that these changes are reflected in the educational materials, specifically in regard to issues related to women's empowerment.

On the other hand, from a historical perspective, it is worth noting that the formal enrollment of female students in the Saudi education system did not occur until 1959, amid strong opposition. Moreover, it was not until 2002 that the first textbook including images of women, albeit veiled, was introduced (Taylor, 2003). Therefore, further investigation and analysis are required to fully comprehend the extent to which these factors may or may not have influenced the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in Saudi Arabia's educational system. This, in turn, emphasized an urgent need for research efforts examining the portrayal of gender in first-grade Saudi textbooks, which represented a significant gap in the existing body of research that this study aimed to address in a thorough and comprehensive manner. By examining all first-grade textbooks in greater detail, this study evaluated and interpreted how women and men were portrayed in both text and illustrations.

As demonstrated, previous scholarly efforts around the world have analyzed gender stereotypes in school textbooks, but many have been constrained by several methodological limitations. These limitations frequently included depending on a limited corpus of analyzed textbooks, relying on an insufficiently comprehensive array of indicators for robust content analysis, focusing solely on textbooks designed for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, or concentrating only on analyzing either textual or illustrative components (Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Collins & Lee, 2008; Tajeddin & Janebi, 2010). Therefore, to take the previous studies' limitations into consideration, this study employed a much more comprehensive set of indicators for content analysis, examining both the text and illustrations in all first-grade school textbooks recently used in Saudi elementary schools.

The way in which women are represented in school textbooks needs to accurately reflect the diverse range of roles, responsibilities, and identities that they embody. As Shahnaz et al. (2020) underscored, while it is important to acknowledge and celebrate the invaluable contributions that women have chosen to make as mothers and caregivers, it is equally important to depict them in professional roles as well. Women have achieved significant attainments across various scientific and academic domains, and despite their contributions, the findings revealed a highly androcentric environment (Hurtado-Reina et al., 2024; Thelwall et al., 2022). Therefore, the balanced representation of these contributions should be more visible. As such representation, which showcases women in a variety of occupational roles, empowers young girls to aspire beyond stereotypical boundaries (Aldegether, 2023). The early years of childhood education are critical foundation years, as they shape children's perceptions and beliefs that, in turn, influence life

trajectories (Scholz-Kuhn et al., 2025). It is, thus, crucial to ensure that school textbooks accurately mirror, or ideally, proactively project the evolving socio-cultural landscape of Saudi society (Alrowais, 2023).

## **Research Aim and Questions**

The aim of this study is to critically examine the ways in which gender stereotypes are represented in first-grade textbooks used in Saudi public schools. In line with this aim, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the ratio of male and female characters in texts and illustrations in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks? Is there a variation in proportion between the texts and the illustrations?
2. What are the gender differences in occupational representation in first-grade textbooks?
3. What traits are assigned to male and female characters in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks?
4. To what extent does the portrayal of gender in first-grade textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia reinforce gender stereotypes?

## **Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis was organized into six main chapters. Following this introduction is Chapter One. This chapter explored the context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and offered insight into the geographical, cultural, socio-political, and religious background. Also, it presented an overview of the current Saudi education system, as well as tracking the history of education within

the country, with a particular focus on the evolution of girls' education from the 1950s to the present.

In Chapter Two, a thorough literature review was conducted. It first explored key concepts such as gender, sex, and gender stereotypes, and then discussed the extant theoretical and empirical literature on how school textbooks serve as vehicles for transmitting cultural norms. Building on this, the chapter reviewed existing research on gender stereotypes in educational materials and highlighted the gaps that this study seeks to address.

Chapter Three described the methodology of this study. This chapter explained the ontological and epistemological positions taken, presented the theoretical and analytical framework that guided the analysis, as well as the research design. The chapter demonstrated the study sample and elaborated on the data collection and analysis procedures, while also addressing the ethical considerations involved in the research.

The fourth chapter presented the results that answered the study's research questions by exploring the ratio of male and female characters in both texts and illustrations in Saudi first-grade school textbooks. This was followed by detailed data on the occupational roles, actions, and attributes assigned to male and female characters. The results were further illustrated through tables and figures.

Chapter Five provided a critical discussion of the study results in relation to the research questions. This chapter interpreted the findings and reflected on the implications of gender

representations in these textbooks. In addition, it examined the variations in gender representations across different subjects and their potential impact on students. This chapter also situated these findings in the broader context of gender inequality in Saudi society.

The final chapter, Chapter Six, was the conclusion of the thesis. In this chapter, a summary of the key findings and their implications was discussed. Also, this chapter provided recommendations that aimed to eliminate gender stereotyping in school textbooks, as well as paved the way for future research efforts to address gender representation in these textbooks.



The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is located in Southwest Asia, is a sovereign state with a population of 35,300,280 in 2024 (General Authority for Statistics, 2024a). Established in 1932 by King Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman Al Saud, the country encompasses an area of approximately 900,000 square miles, making it the largest country in the Middle East and covering 80% of the Arabian Peninsula. The country's official language is Arabic, and Islam is the official religion, which forms the basis of the country's legal system.

When it was unified in 1932, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was relatively impoverished, with most of its population living in poverty or semi-poverty according to Abir (2020). However, this situation drastically altered after 1938, concluding what is known as the *pre-oil economy era*, when an important discovery was made within the nation's borders (Abir, 2020). Specifically, the discovery of vast oil led to the transformation in the country's economic fortunes. As Alamri (2011) noted, this discovery proved to be a watershed moment for the Kingdom, setting the stage for decades of economic growth and prosperity. Thus, the revenue generated from the abundant natural resources of Saudi Arabia has significantly contributed to the country's development. Alamri (2011) also notes that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is classified as a high-income country, but it has yet to be classified as a developed country. According to data from the Central Intelligence Agency (2021), as of 2021, the Kingdom's estimated population reached 34.78 million, exhibiting a growth rate of 1.62%. This rate positions Saudi Arabia as the 60th globally in terms of population growth.

## **1.3 The Saudi Socio-Political and Religious Context**

In recent years, a series of social and cultural reforms have been undertaken in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia under Saudi Vision 2030, led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Therefore, the socio-political and religious context that has historically shaped the nation's sociocultural structure must be explored in order to comprehend these reforms.

### **1.3.1 Conservative Islamic Interpretations and their Societal Impact**

Back in 1744, a pivotal alliance was made between two prominent figures at that time, namely Imam Muhammad ibn Saud, founder of the First Saudi State, and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the Islamic scholar who was the proponent of the Salafi doctrine later referred to as "Wahhabism". The descendants of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud have since continued to rule the modern state. This alliance has been marked as the beginning of the First Saudi State, which was founded upon a shared vision of Islamic governance and principles. The alliance stipulated that Imam Muhammad ibn Saud would be the leader of the Saudi State and Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab would be the leader of religious affairs (Alrasheed, 2010).

As a result of this alliance, Imam Muhammad ibn Saud established a state based on Sharia law, which was influenced by Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab's interpretation of Islam. This interpretation was characterized by an emphasis on purifying the faith from what was considered innovations and polytheistic practices. Subsequently, this doctrine not only shaped the country's religious framework but also had a strong influence on its social structure, including education, the judiciary, and cultural life (Alotaibi, 2020).

This influence has contributed to certain societal challenges in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which stemmed from narrow interpretations adopted by some followers of this doctrine. Thus, the Saudi society has experienced concerns regarding the marginalization of minority groups and the restriction of individual freedoms. Moreover, these interpretations' strong emphasis on strict religious practices had, at times, limited the expression of the nation's rich cultural and intellectual heritage, which in turn raised questions about the compatibility of these interpretations with the pluralistic values of contemporary societies (Alrasheed, 2010).

Later, the Saudi government sought to introduce some reforms that were widely viewed as insufficient to achieve meaningful change. Thus, at the same time, these measures did not significantly reduce the power of influential Wahhabi scholars, as the Wahhabi religious establishment served as the basis for the religious legitimacy of the royal family (Alrasheed, 2010). As a result, strict interpretations of Islam continued to shape everyday life in the Kingdom. Nevertheless, according to Alarabiya (2022), in a recent interview with *The Atlantic*, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman emphasized that during the early period of the Saudi state, the Arabian Peninsula faced a problem in which only the students of Mohammed ibn Abd Al-Wahhab possessed the ability to read and write. Therefore, history was written solely from their perspective. He further noted that many extremists have used these writings to advance their own agendas.

One area where the influence of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam is particularly relevant is the educational system. Several studies have pointed out that Islamic textbooks have often presented a narrow doctrinal perspective that may not reflect the diversity of recognized jurisprudential perspectives (Alotaibi, 2020; Latifah, 2024). For instance, the Wahhabi

interpretation of Islam has been taught for many decades throughout the Islamic Studies curriculum in all grades of Saudi schools. To be more specific, the Islamic Studies textbook *Tawhid*, which is mandatory by the Ministry of Education for all grades, was created based on an explanation of the *Book of Tawhid*, authored by Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (Ministry of Education, 2008). It is prudent to note that the dominance of Wahhabi interpretations in the Islamic Studies curriculum has historically emphasized strict gender roles, which may have influenced the ways in which women are represented in Saudi school textbooks (Latifah, 2024). This consequently has raised serious concerns among international human rights organizations as well as education specialists about the potential impact of such teachings on young minds and wider society (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2018). In response, the Saudi government has been pushing efforts to revise and update these curricula to ensure they reflect a more balanced understanding of moderate Islam and its practices.

The Wahhabi interpretation of Islam has also played an influential role in shaping Saudi Arabia's sociocultural landscape, most notably in defining women's rights and roles within the society. For several decades, this interpretation supported legal and social structures that imposed restrictions on women's mobility, autonomy, and participation in public life (Mobaraki & Söderfeldt, 2010). Gender segregation and limitations on women's roles were central principles of this doctrine. The Wahhabi doctrine restricts women's rights because it interprets Islamic teachings in a manner that seeks to maintain social control, enforce gender segregation, and uphold a traditional, patriarchal societal structure. For example, until recent reforms, women were not granted the right to drive; they could not obtain a passport or travel without the consent of a male relative. Women as well had to comply with a strict dress code that was monitored by the religious

police. This dress code required women to wear a black *Abaya*, which is a loose-fitting robe, and a *Niqab*, which is a face veil, whenever they were in public. Also, options for women to pursue education and employment were limited. Women were not permitted to practice law or study architecture, engineering, or political science. They were not allowed to participate in the leadership of political and religious affairs. Thus, these policies and practices limited women's opportunities and shaped gender dynamics in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Alvi, 2014; Rohmaniyah & Woodward, 2012).

More than two centuries after the emergence of the Wahhabi movement, there was another movement that emerged, known as the Awakening, *Sahwa* Movement, which also played a significant role in influencing religious and social discourse in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This movement was characterized by its conservative approach to religion and its emphasis on traditional gender roles (Wright, 2001). This movement, which originated in 1979, drew ideological inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood and quickly gained traction across various parts of the Muslim world. The movement "was based on a belief that society was taking a long nap, which had led to the Westernization of society" (Alwedini, 2016, p. 39). The fundamental objective of the *Sahwa* movement was to restore the principles of Islamic doctrine as a holistic approach to life within society (International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, 2012).

The *Sahwa* movement, which swept across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, was met with widespread approval from large segments of society at that time. Thus, most Saudi citizens viewed this movement as a positive social transformation, because it was thought to promote greater adherence to Islamic values and teachings. However, it is worth noting that during this period,

there were more extremist interpretations that also contributed to the proliferation of radical ideologies and practices (Ulrichsen & Sheline, 2019). Accordingly, the *Sahwa* Movement stands as a critical moment in Saudi Arabia's history, marking a period of sociopolitical change and transformation.

One of the key ideological themes of the *Sahwa* movement is centered on women and their role in society. The leaders of this movement argue that the Westernization of society began with women (Alwedinani, 2016). As a result of this movement, women were subjected to a system that restricted their rights and opportunities, which contributed to limiting their ability to participate fully in Saudi society. This imbalance had a profound impact on Saudi women's lives, as they were often excluded from political and economic decision-making processes, as well as from certain educational paths.

For instance, followers of the *Sahwa* movement adopted particularly strict and conservative interpretations regarding women's roles and appearance in society. They linked the act of unveiling the hijab to the Westernization of women. As a result, rulings were issued prohibiting women from appearing unveiled in public as well from driving vehicles in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Alwedinani, 2016). These restrictions led to a significant disparity in the rights and opportunities available to both women and men. According to Mobaraki and Söderfeldt (2010), the power of religious movements and misinterpretations of Islam have created significant barriers to the advancement of women's rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as these misinterpretations have resulted in numerous challenges for women across the country.

In spite of the historical influence of these movements, their power in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has gradually diminished, coinciding with the release of Saudi Vision 2030 (Fatikhin et al., 2024). This decline can be attributed to the Saudi government's efforts to consolidate its authority and redefine the influence of religious figures in the public sphere. Under the leadership of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the government has proactively empowered moderate clerics while concurrently containing opposition from ultra-conservatives, which in turn confines dissent largely to online platforms (Alkarni, 2018). This top-down approach has proven instrumental in dismantling institutional barriers to social and economic reforms, ensuring that religious interpretations are aligned with the objectives of Vision 2030, which includes the modernization of the education system and the enhancement of women's participation in the workforce (Kinninmont, 2017).

Nonetheless, there are still efforts being made to ensure that women in Saudi Arabia are granted their rights. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman stated that Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab is not a representative of Saudi Arabia. He asserted that, currently, it is not possible for anyone to impose any of these schools' perspectives as the only way to observe religion in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He also acknowledged that this may have occurred, at certain points in Saudi history, due to certain events, especially in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s. The government has, however, framed its current trajectory as a return to the roots of a 'pure Islam,' which is a path that aligns with the social and economic objectives of Vision 2030 (Alarabiya, 2022). Even though the recent reforms have marked notable progress, the legacy of earlier religious movements continues to shape many aspects of women's lives in contemporary Saudi society, particularly in cultural attitudes and social expectations. In this

respect, this historical background is fundamental to this study, as it helps to understand the context in which Saudi school textbooks were produced and to what extent the representation of gender in these textbooks may reflect the wider historical and cultural context.

### **1.3.2 Education and Gender Disparities**

It is worth noting that the concept of women's seclusion in the Arab Muslim world is a relatively modern phenomenon. Throughout history, women in these societies have been actively involved in sociopolitical and economic life, paving the way for significant developments in these areas (Hamdan, 2005). However, over the past few decades, Saudi women have often been identified as nurturing mothers and homemakers, regardless of their educational backgrounds, career interests, and qualifications. Thus, in most cases, women have faced limited career opportunities and have often been relegated to teaching or social work positions within all-women environments.

It is important to acknowledge the fact that due to societal and cultural norms and barriers, girls and women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were not permitted to receive public education prior to the year 1958. The first government-run school for girls was established in 1959, which marked a momentous milestone in the history of education for women in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the education provided to girls was markedly different from that of boys, with a main focus on domestic skills and Islamic studies. In addition to that, the curriculum for girls was limited, and their opportunities for higher education were severely restricted (Alamri, 2011).

Until the late 1990s, there was a broad belief within Saudi society that the main purpose of educating girls was to prepare them for their future roles as wives and mothers (Aldegether, 2023; Alwedinani, 2016). As a result, the education that girls received focused on teaching them subjects and skills that were deemed appropriate for their domestic duties, rather than those that would prepare them for a career or a leadership role in the public sphere. This approach to education was limited, preventing women from reaching their full potential and achieving success beyond the confines of their homes (Sabbagh, 1996).

When delving deeper into the history of girls' education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a significant disparity can be noted between the official establishment of boys' and girls' schools. To be precise, boys began receiving access to public education more than 30 years before girls. The first public school for boys was established in 1926, while girls had to wait until the 1950s to gain access to formal education (Ministry of Education, 2020b). In addition, the higher education opportunities available to men were substantially broader than those available to women. For example, in that period of time, men were often encouraged to pursue higher education abroad, with the Saudi government covering all related expenses. In contrast, women had extremely limited options for higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as most colleges and universities were restricted to men only (Dakhiel, 2017).

Accordingly, the gender gap in the education system affected various aspects of life in Saudi society. For decades, it has deprived women of the skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary to participate fully in the workforce, which, in turn, has limited their potential and denied the country their talents (Almutarie, 2025). However, in recent years, the Saudi government has

taken numerous steps to address this disparity, in which it focuses on providing women with more equal educational opportunities and empowering them to play more active roles in the country (Quamar, 2020). Thus, the historical delay and restrictions placed on girls' access to education can help to explain and interpret how gender is represented in Saudi school textbooks.

### **1.3.3 The Right to Equitable Education**

The principle of the right to education is deeply rooted in modern educational theory, which can be traced back to the seventeenth century in Europe. This principle is based on the basic idea that everyone is equal and has the right to an education, regardless of their background or any other discriminatory factors. This principle has been widely accepted and implemented globally, including in international human rights law, and it continues to be a crucial aspect of the educational system today (Meijer, 2016).

Moreover, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Covenant on the Rights of the Child (CRC) both promote equality. For instance, the first words of Article 2 of the UDHR stated that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (Meijer, 2016, p. 142). Also, in UDHR Article 26, it is stated that:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and

shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (Meijer, 2016, p. 145)

Meijer (2016) explains that human rights should be held equally by all people. They extend beyond the basic rights of life to include cultural, economic, social, and political rights that are necessary for the preservation of human dignity. As illustrated in the above paragraph, the right to education is a paramount endeavor that promotes egalitarianism in the context of human rights and children's rights formulations. Education is a basic entitlement for all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds. As Silas International (2016) states, an individual's future prospects largely depend on education. Education is important, as it has the power to shape and refine a person's values, beliefs, and ideas, which in turn shape their personality and character.

Therefore, education is critical for human development. It promotes development on multiple levels, including spiritual, social, economic, and personal (Upadhyay, 2022). People with a high-quality education are better equipped to think critically and logically, which can help them achieve their life goals (Upadhyay, 2022). Therefore, by providing foundational knowledge and valuable skills, education enables individuals to live and contribute meaningfully to their society (Ali, 2024; Shavkidinova et al., 2023). Additionally, education helps eliminate social stereotypes by encouraging tolerance and acceptance of diverse ideas and cultures (Mahmood, 2012). This perspective frames education beyond just a service but as a transformative tool for individual empowerment and societal progress, which is central to the argument for the universal right to equitable education.

In spite of these universal principles, the application of educational rights has not been uniformly realized. In the case of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for instance, gender disparities in education have historically limited women's contributions to human development. As Alsuwaida (2016) points out, the potential of women in advancing societal progress was often overlooked. To address such inequities, a human rights-based approach to education is fundamental in order to ensure that every child receives a quality education that respects and promotes their dignity and optimal development (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2007).

At the 2000 World Education Forum, the global community reaffirmed its commitment to improving and promoting early childhood care and education. It also shared the common purpose of ending gender inequalities in education by 2015. This commitment was grounded in the profound belief that education is not just a human right, but also a necessary means to ensure sustainable development and reduce inequality. Moreover, the forum recognized that a free and equitable supply of quality education for everyone is key to building a successful society (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2007). In recognition of education as a fundamental right, equitable opportunities for girls and women are essential for their full participation in the educational field and all aspects of their lives. In this respect, examining gender representation in Saudi school textbooks is particularly significant, as it reveals the extent to which the principle of equitable education is either reinforced or overlooked within the national curriculum.

#### **1.3.4 Recent Reforms and Vision 2030**

It is worthwhile to note that the Saudi government has made notable strides in educational reforms; however, a question that needs to be answered is whether these recent reforms are

reflected in Saudi school textbooks, especially in regard to gender equality in education. When examining the current political landscape in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it is evident that some substantial reforms have taken place in various sectors, including education, employment, and overall societal dynamics. However, according to Al Chami and Youssef (2024), in spite of these positive changes, the deep influence of conservative religious ideologies on societal norms and values in Saudi society cannot be ignored. This creates a complex and challenging situation when it comes to forecasting the future trajectory of gender equality and women's rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

According to the 2018 Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum (2018), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was ranked 141 out of a total of 149 countries, which, in turn, indicated a significant gender gap. In this respect, the Saudi government has enacted reforms that have resulted in a higher ranking in the 2024 Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2024). Some examples of these reforms include labor economics participation (Human Resources and Social Development, 2024); legal empowerment, where various laws have been amended to ensure gender equality, such as equality in job interviews, wages, and training (United Nations, 2024); and political empowerment where women have increasingly secured leadership positions, and appointments to the Shoura Council and ministries (Akeel, 2025).

The latest report from the World Economic Forum (2024) shows that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia ranked 126 out of 146 countries. This, in turn, reflects a positive shift made by the Saudi government, which is beginning to have a tangible impact on gender equality in this country. In addition, prior to the latest report, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC),

a principal organ of the U.N. responsible for promoting international economic and social cooperation, had nominated the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women for the 2018–2022 term. This commission is a global intergovernmental body that is dedicated to promoting gender equality and empowering women around the world. The Kingdom's nomination can be considered as a recognition of the country's progress in advancing women's rights and gender equality. It further reflects the importance of the country's commitment to promoting women's empowerment and participation in decision-making processes. However, this decision drew widespread criticism from the international community due to the Kingdom's historically restrictive gender policies (UN Watch, 2017).

However, it is worthwhile to note that after King Salman assumed the throne of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and appointed his son, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as Crown Prince in 2017, Saudi Arabia underwent a series of significant reforms under the umbrella of the 2030 Saudi Vision. The 2030 Vision serves as a roadmap designed to diversify the Kingdom's economy and promote its overall social and cultural development. One of the ambitious principles of this vision is the empowerment of women, which has been highlighted as a fundamental component. This project intends to increase women's access to education, employment, and leadership roles, thereby promoting gender equality and enhancing the overall well-being of women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021). An example of the outcomes of this vision is that, according to statistics, the percentage of women in the workforce in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has significantly increased over the past few years. In 2022, the proportion of women in the workforce was 30.1%, which marks a considerable increase compared to 13% in 2015 (General

Authority for Statistics, 2023). Moreover, in 2024, the labor force participation rate of Saudi women increased and reached 35.8% (General Authority for Statistics, 2024b).

Consequently, it can be noted that there have been positive changes in the promotion of women's rights and status within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as these reforms have improved various areas, including—but not limited to—education, marriage, travel, and job opportunities. One of the most notable legal changes in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was the lifting of the ban on women driving, which allowed them to drive their cars independently. Additionally, women can now engage in mixed-gender work settings and join job professions without the need for their guardians' legal approval. Furthermore, they no longer need to obtain legal authorization from their male guardians to travel abroad (Ulrichsen & Sheline, 2019). Therefore, these changes represent a historical shift in the daily lives of women in Saudi society, which in turn offers them greater autonomy and broader opportunities. Thus, examining gender representation in Saudi school textbooks is essential to determine whether the national curriculum reflects—or continues to resist—such social changes.

#### **1.4 The Education System in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

The education system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is divided into two sectors; general and higher education. It includes over 29 public universities, 61 private universities and institutes, and more than 43,233 schools run in most of the Saudi governorates (Ministry of Education, 2025). Saudi Arabia's education system offers children the opportunity to start their educational journey at a very young age. Fathers, or legal guardians, can enroll their children in kindergarten from the ages of three to five. Primary school is mandatory for all children. Children who have previously

enrolled in kindergarten may enter first grade at the age of five years and six months, whereas children who have not previously enrolled in kindergarten enter first grade at the age of six. Primary school lasts for six years, followed by three years of intermediate school. Intermediate schools are designed to expand on what students have learned in primary school and prepare them for secondary school. The Saudi government provides free education in all four education stages: primary, intermediate, secondary, and higher education. In addition, students receive textbooks, transportation, and a stipend for college students (Unified National Platform, 2021).

The Saudi government has consistently prioritized the development of the education sector. It has recognized education as a fundamental pillar for social and national progress. This commitment is demonstrated by a significant increase in funding. In more detail, the government's investment in education has grown significantly over the years, from a modest \$3.1 million in 1947 to a staggering \$51.2 billion in 2018. More specifically, the 2018 Kingdom budget allocated the largest share of its funding to the education sector (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2018). This prioritization is in line with the national goals to modernize the workforce, boost innovation, and reduce dependency on oil revenues (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021). These investments are necessary to keep pace with the country's fast growing population, which places immense pressure on its educational infrastructure (United Nations, 2019). The government has also implemented a comprehensive reform program that encompasses curriculum changes, new evaluation methods, and teacher training initiatives (General Authority for Statistics, 2017). This, in turn, is commensurate with the UNESCO 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to ensure equal access to quality education for all (United Nations, 2023).

On the other hand, the Ministry of Education holds a central role in supervising the production and use of school textbooks. Therefore, teachers are expected to adhere strictly to the approved textbooks and obtain approval from regional educational authorities before introducing any external supplementary materials (Albedaiwi, 2014). Despite the aim of this policy being to provide a standardized and consistent learning experience for all students across the country, it allows authorities to maintain a firm grip over the instructional materials used in Saudi schools, which may pose a hidden challenge in the Saudi education system. Jumiah (2016) argues that the dominant people in power often hold significant sway over the content presented in school textbooks. This can result in restricted diversity and lead to a narrow perspective, as the views of those in power tend to be the only ones represented.

## **1.5 The History of Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

The history of education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can be traced back to 1926, when the Directorate of Education was established, marking the beginning of formal education for boys. Over the years, the education system has experienced notable reforms. In 1952, during the reign of King Saud bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, the Ministry of Knowledge was established, which served as an extension and enhancement of the Directorate of Education. The Ministry of Knowledge was responsible for planning and supervising public education for boys in all three stages—primary, intermediate, and secondary. King Fahd bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud was appointed as the first minister of this ministry (Ministry of Education, 2020b).

In 1959, during King Saud bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud's reign, the General Presidency for Girls' Education was established, with a supervisory board headed by the Grand Mufti, Sheikh

Muhammad ibn Ibrahim Al Al-Sheikh (Albeshir, 2025). This initiative marked an important milestone in the progress of education in the Kingdom, as it aimed to provide education for girls. Initially, the General Presidency for Girls' Education had fifteen primary schools and one women's teachers' institute. As education progressed, the General Presidency of Girls' Education was merged with the Ministry of Knowledge in 2003. Dr. Khader al-Qurashi was appointed as the Deputy Minister of Knowledge for girls' education. One year later, the name of the ministry was changed to the Ministry of Education, reflecting its broader mandate to oversee education for both boys and girls. Today, the Ministry of Education is responsible for providing education to everyone in the Kingdom (Ministry of Education, 2020b).

In terms of higher education history in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the establishment of higher education dates back to 1949, when the College of Shariah and Islamic Studies began to accept men only. Later, in 1957, King Saud University was established, and the university started enrolling students in several colleges (Hakim, 2012). After many years, the Ministry of Higher Education was created in 1975 with the purpose of implementing the Kingdom's policy in the higher education sector. Over the years, the government has provided significant financial aid in the form of budgets that have enabled the establishment of new universities with specializations in a wide range of fields.

In a major move aimed at unifying efforts, the Ministries of Education and Higher Education were merged into a single ministry in 2015. This decision was made to create a more streamlined and efficient system that would further improve the quality of education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Today, the Ministry of Education is responsible for overseeing all

aspects of education in the country, from primary and secondary education to higher education and vocational training (Ministry of Education, 2020b).

## **1.6 The History of Girls' Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

It is imperative to consider looking into the history of girls' education in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues related to gender in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This historical trajectory illustrates how political, cultural and social factors have influenced girls' education in the Kingdom and how it has evolved over time.

### **1.6.1 The Beginning of Formal Girls' Education: 1950s–1990s**

#### **1.6.1.1 General Girls' Education**

Upon delving into the history of women's education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it becomes evident that a notable disparity existed in the initiation of formal education between boys and girls. In particular, it is observed that boys commenced their education more than three decades before girls (Ministry of Education, 2020b). The history of official education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can be traced back to 1926, when public schools for boys, but not for girls, opened for the first time (Ministry of Education, 2020b).

However, in the 1950s, there was a noticeable rise in the desire for formal education for young girls. This may be due to the influence of Saudi men who had studied abroad and were seeking wives who were also educated (Alyami, 2016). As a result, there was a growing recognition of the importance of providing girls with access to education. This trend paved the way for significant progress in women's education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Accordingly, in 1959, the General Presidency for Girls' Education was established, marking the beginning of official public education for girls. However, the establishment of girls' education in Saudi Arabia faced a significant roadblock in the form of religious opposition. The King at the time, King Saud, recognized the importance of educating young girls in his country and sought the support of leading religious scholars to make it possible. It was only through the persuasion of these religious figures that the necessary steps were taken to ensure that girls in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia received an education. King Saud's efforts were a critical turning point for the advancement regarding women's rights and access to education in the country (Alamri, 2011).

Following the official announcement of the commencement of public education for girls, there was a significant backlash from certain groups within Saudi society who were vehemently opposed to the King's decision. In response, these people took to the streets with their weapons, determined to forcibly shut down any and all girls' schools within their areas. As a result, the situation was tense and fraught with danger as authorities struggled to maintain order and prevent violence from erupting. Despite the opposition, however, the King remained resolute in his commitment to providing educational opportunities for girls (Hamdan, 2005).

Later, as cited by Alharbi (2014), the opponents convened with the King to request a revocation of the decision. However, the King asserted that there is nothing in the Quran—the holy book for Muslims—that explicitly forbids the education of girls, and God enjoins the pursuit of learning for every Muslim, which includes both men and women. He emphasized that it is a sacred

duty to uphold this divine commandment. In addition, the King informed those present that they were not bound to enroll their daughters in schools; it was an optional decision. Therefore, to appease the religious community, the education system was divided into two separate governmental bodies, namely the General Presidency for Girls' Education and the Ministry of Knowledge for Boys' Education.

Interestingly, the appointment of the head of the religious authority as the head of the General Presidency for Girls' Education served as a strategic measure to legitimize girls' education in the eyes of a conservative society (Alrawaf & Simmons, 1991). This joint responsibility provided a crucial religious endorsement for a reform that faced considerable opposition. The government's positioning of the institution under the oversight of the highest religious figure signaled to the public that girls' education would be conducted in a manner consistent with Islamic values and would not challenge traditional social norms. This arrangement, therefore, was a key tactic to balance the push for modernization with the need to appease the religious community and secure public acceptance, which indicates the gradual nature of these educational reforms.

As a result, these circumstances have shaped the criteria established for the girls' education constitution in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. According to the policy document of the Saudi Ministry of Education (2020a), the primary objectives of girls' education in Saudi Arabia are defined as follows. These objectives have also been discussed in academic literature (Albeshir, 2025; Alsuwaida, 2016; Hakim, 2012):

- Preparing girls through Islamic instruction in order to enable them to fulfill their mission in life, which, as stated in the official policy document (Saudi Ministry of Education,

2020a), is represented as becoming successful housewives, ideal wives, and good mothers. Additionally, the policy specifies that girls' education aims to prepare them for certain jobs that are presented as suitable to their nature, such as teaching, nursing, and medicine.

- The government cares about the education of girls and provides the necessary resources as much as possible to accommodate all girls who have reached the age of education. The aim is to provide them with the opportunity to receive the types of education that are appropriate to the nature of women and in line with the demands of the country.
- The policy regarding the interaction between men and women within the context of education strictly prohibits any physical mixing at all levels, with the exception of children in nurseries and kindergartens, where such mixing is allowed.
- The education of girls is conducted in an environment that upholds the values of decency, reverence, and chastity in accordance with the provisions of Islam.

Understood in this way, these historical developments and policy objectives highlight the extent to which girls' education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was framed within religious and cultural boundaries, setting the stage for how women's roles would subsequently be represented in Saudi instructional materials.

#### **1.6.1.2 Gaps and Absences within Girls' Curriculum: 1950s–1990s**

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, until a few decades ago, it can be noticed that only men were able to reap the benefits of girls' education since girls' education solely focused on preparing them to be dutiful wives for their future husbands, whereas boys had access to a wider range of subjects to study through the formal curriculum. Moreover, until the past few years, the boys' curriculum was different from what girls were taught. On the other hand, the curriculum for girls was primarily centered around religious studies and did not adhere to curriculum design and requirements for

formal education. As a result, the educational opportunities and experiences of girls and boys differed significantly due to the differing goals and purposes of schooling (Alasmari, 2020; Albeshir, 2025; Hamdan, 2005).

In addition to the differing educational goals for girls and boys, another factor underscored the differences in curriculum. There was a noticeable disparity in the quality of the curriculum content offered to boys and girls. The Ministry of Knowledge, which was responsible for creating the curriculum for boys, employed highly educated professionals who held education degrees. These individuals were versed in how to design educational programs. Indeed, the same cannot be said for the General Presidency for Girls' Education, which was responsible for developing the girls' curriculum. Instead of employing professionals with expertise in education, the individuals tasked with designing curricula for girl students were primarily religious men who lacked qualifications or experience in designing effective educational programs. As a result, the quality of education offered to girls was often lacking and was not as comprehensive as that provided to boys (Albeshir, 2025; Alharbi, 2014).

In accordance with the Saudi education policy, the main aim of providing education for girls is to develop their future roles as mothers and homemakers. Therefore, the Saudi education curriculum was designed to teach boys and girls different courses. When conducting a comparison between the curriculum offered to boys and that offered to girls, it became apparent that there were several subjects and areas of study that were lacking in the latter. The girls' curriculum was missing essential components, including, but not limited to, administrative and business studies, accounting, physical education, national education, and general and extracurricular activities.

Moreover, physical education was not included in the curriculum for girls at any educational level. This was mainly due to the belief that sports are not compatible with local traditions and customs guided by conservative Islamic religious authorities (Alghamdi & Aldossari, 2022; Mansour, 2014).

In addition, Home Economics education was exclusively intended for girls and not for boys. The curricular differences in elementary education reinforced traditional gender roles, a dynamic highly relevant to the study of educational reform and its societal impact. The assignment of a Home Economics course to girls, which focused on domestic skills such as cooking and cleaning, as well as sewing and designing clothes, and a National Education course on civic studies to boys (Aldegether, 2023; Alharbi, 2021; McGregor et al., 2023), directly shaped gender norms and limited future aspirations. This segregation trained girls for a domestic role, which also simultaneously excluded them from formal civic education that instills a sense of national identity and public participation. This early reinforcement of gender stereotypes through subject-specific curricula posed a significant hindrance to young girls, as it could limit their exposure to diverse career paths and restrict their imagined roles in society, thereby constraining their full participation in national development.

On the other hand, there was a shared shortage of education for both girls and boys in terms of general and extracurricular activities; however, this shortage has been more pronounced among girls due to gender segregation policies and conservative cultural norms that restricted their participation in public and physical activities (Almashari, 2023). These activities are often considered essential components of efficient education, which expand learning beyond the

traditional classroom to promote practical skills and holistic development (Kosarikov & Davydova, 2022). Some examples include educational and cultural trips to museums and archaeological sites, opportunities for cooperation with other schools, universities, and libraries, and education about important social issues and health care. Moreover, there was a shortage of opportunities for fieldwork, teamwork, and innovative research that is based on evaluation and brainstorming. Indeed, traditional teaching methods were predominant in most educational settings, with a focus on repetition and memorization rather than on analytic research methodology, creative thinking, personality development, and the development of skills (Almashari, 2023; Pawar, 2014).

### **1.6.1.3 Higher Education: 1950s–1990s**

In terms of the development of higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it is worth noting that the first college was established in 1949, exclusively for male students. However, in 1969, the General Presidency for Girls' Education faced a severe shortage of Saudi women teachers. This was mainly due to the fact that the Saudi educational system was heavily reliant on foreign labor. The involvement of non-Saudi teachers in the educational system has been ongoing for many years, as many Egyptian teachers were brought in to teach at girls' schools in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. To address the need for qualified educators, the General Presidency for Girls' Education established specialized colleges designed exclusively to train and educate women to become teachers. This move allowed them to employ more Saudi women teachers in their schools (Rugh, 2002).

At that period of time, women were not given the same educational opportunities as men. It was the norm for women who completed their education in public schools to either remain at home or join specialized training to become teachers at girls' schools. There were no majors available for women to study except for teaching and basic courses, such as cooking. This restriction had a significant impact on the curriculum taught at these girls' teaching colleges. The curriculum focused solely on preparing women for teaching and ignored other important aspects. This narrow-minded approach to education hindered women from achieving their full potential and limited their prospects for personal growth and development (Alharbi, 2014).

Therefore, it can be seen that in these decades, women were granted certain rights that allowed them to attend public schools and institutions of higher education. Despite the fact that these rights did not grant them equal opportunities in comparison to men, it was a significant step forward within a very conservative society. The recognition of women's right to education was a momentous achievement, as it opened new doors for them and allowed them to join some careers and opportunities that were previously off-limits. Although there was still a long way to go toward achieving true gender equality, this progress was a promising sign.

## **1.6.2 Girls' Education Aftermath 9/11 Attacks: 2001–2004**

### **1.6.2.1 General Girls' Education**

For a period of over forty years, persistent isolation existed between institutions of girls' education and those of boys. The girls' education, from elementary school up to higher education level, was placed under the jurisdiction of the General Presidency for Girls Education until 2002, while that of boys was overseen by the Ministry of knowledge (Hamdan, 2005).

Following the tragic events of 9/11, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia came under intense international scrutiny, particularly regarding its internal policies and societal structure (Azam, 2024). Similarly, the Gulf Wars also brought the world's attention to the events in Gulf countries as well as the situation of women in that region of the world. Notably, the 9/11 attacks shed light on the issue of women's rights in Saudi society more profoundly than ever before (Azam, 2024). As a consequence, the Saudi system, particularly its religious education system, faced widespread criticism in the aftermath of the event (Alharbi, 2014; Hamdan, 2005; Sulaimani & Elyas, 2017). Prokop captured the heart of this critique by asking to what extent the education system had been formed and used by various religious, political, and socioeconomic forces and interests (Prokop, 2003).

There has been significant criticism directed primarily towards schools and school curriculum, with concerns that they may have played a role in the rise of terrorism. Many have pointed to Islamic radicalism as a key factor, and as a result, numerous educators have petitioned the Saudi government to undertake reforms to their educational system. The hope is that such changes would help curb the influence of extremist ideologies (Karmani, 2005; Sulaimani & Elyas, 2017).

It is imperative to acknowledge and reflect upon the pivotal period in Saudi Arabian history that greatly impacted not only the political system, but also the educational system. This period was marked by significant terrorist attacks that highlighted the rise of extremist movements within the Islamic community. It has become increasingly evident that extremist Islamic ideologies,

which often favor Muslims over non-Muslims, men over women, and certain Muslim sects over others, have been gaining traction in various parts of the world (Alrasheed, 2010; Shea & Alahmed, 2008). This development was a cause for concern and underscored the importance of promoting peace, tolerance, and understanding across all communities. As a consequence, it was necessary to delve deeper and identify the underlying factors that may have led to the emergence of hostile sentiments or ideas. Therefore, the educational curriculum of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been subjected to rigorous examination and scrutiny (Elyas & Picard, 2013; Shea & Alahmed, 2008).

During that period, an ideological conflict emerged between two groups - the liberal activists and the conservative religious groups - concerning the educational curriculum. Each group firmly believed that their views reflected the society and aspired to employ their respective agendas in shaping the educational curriculum. Hence, liberal activists found that it is time to liberate girls' education from the authority of conservative religious groups (Alharbi, 2014). In the same year, a fire that broke out in a girls' elementary school in Mecca in March 2002 resulted tragically in the death of 15 young girls who lost their lives in the fire. The Saudi press reported that the presence of the religious police at the scene of the fire contributed to the high number of deaths among the young girls. The religious police obstructed the firefighters from accessing the girls' school, claiming that it would be sinful to approach the students and their teachers, who might not be wearing their hijabs. The incident was widely discussed in the Saudi press and covered by the international press. This caused great public outrage and sparked a debate regarding the role of the religious police in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Hamdan, 2005; Prokop, 2003).

This event, along with others, prompted the government to take a step toward reforming the education system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As a result, in 2003, the two separate educational entities were merged under one authority, the Ministry of Education, in an effort to improve the safety and education of girls in the country (Hamdan, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2020b; Prokop, 2003). However, this decision was considered to be controversial by a large segment of Saudi society since they thought it would be the first step in the process of social change that would ultimately lead to boys and girls being integrated into the same schools in the future (Alharbi, 2014).

#### **1.6.2.2 Limitations of Girls' Curriculum: 2001–2004**

Despite the fact that girls' education was under the Ministry of Education, girls' students did not receive the same education as boys. The curriculum for girls was still centering solely on preparing them to be good mothers, neglecting other crucial aspects of women's lives in the country. For instance, there was no emphasis on developing leadership skills among young girls, which is an essential factor in shaping their future and contributing positively to society (Alwedinani, 2016).

At this period in Saudi history, it can be noticed that the shortcomings of the curriculum for girls throughout the latter half of the last century were still present at the turn of the next century. As an example, girls were still prohibited from studying sports-related courses due to society's prevalent fear that such activities could have negative impacts on their lives. Even though Islamic principles do not restrict women from engaging in sports, cultural norms held sway,

disallowing women from participating in sports even in separate areas where men were not permitted to enter. As a result, women were deprived of opportunities to develop their physical abilities and explore their interests in sports (Mansour, 2014).

In addition, there has still been a significant lack of attention given to the subject of National Education for girls. Despite the fact that boys have been taught National Education subjects from their very first year of school up until their twelfth grade, girls have not been afforded this opportunity. This could be understood in light of the societal norms discussed earlier in this chapter, which shaped the perception that women were not considered capable of serving their country as part of their citizenship. This may have resulted in not offering education for girls in this subject and also being excluded from attending vocational schools, which are just as important as academic colleges (Alharbi, 2014).

### **1.6.2.3 Higher Education: 2001–2004**

After 2001, higher education for women underwent a remarkable transformation as universities across the country began to thrive, and many campuses were opened exclusively for women. These campuses offered a range of majors, such as teaching, medicine, biology, and computer science. They provided women with more opportunities to pursue their academic interests and build successful careers for themselves. However, Saudi societal barriers have limited the number of women who could pursue certain fields of study, such as medicine majors. This was due to cultural beliefs and traditions, as many families have prevented their daughters from studying medicine, fearing that it would threaten the family's honor. They argue that studying medicine would eventually lead to working in a mixed-gender setting, which goes against Saudi

tradition and custom. As a result, the number of women enrolled in medicine majors was low (Alwedinani, 2016).

On the other hand, in 2007, 93% of women university graduates in Saudi Arabia earned degrees in education or human sciences, which ultimately resulted in a gender imbalance within the Saudi labor market that has had a significant impact on the employment prospects of women graduates. This has led to high levels of unemployment for women who have completed university degrees (Pawar, 2014). Moreover, even though there were several female-only campuses, women still were not permitted to enroll in certain majors. For instance, there were no engineering and agriculture specializations on women's campuses. Therefore, women were unable to obtain a degree in these subjects, limiting their career prospects and potential for growth in the workforce (Alwedinani, 2016). One of the main contributing factors to this inequality is the societal expectation that girls should pursue certain areas of study while being discouraged or prevented from others. This perpetuates gender inequalities and hinders the progress of women in the country, as it limits their opportunities for personal and professional development.

### **1.6.3 Girls' Education: 2005–2015 (The Golden Era)**

#### **1.6.3.1 King Abdullah's Education Reform Project – *Tatweer***

During the reign of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud (2005–2015), girls' education began to thrive. The objectives in place during this period were intended for the benefit of both girls and boys, and hence, a key initial step was to ensure that both were offered the same curriculum. In this respect, King Abdullah consistently underscored the importance of

implementing educational reforms and expanding access to high quality educational resources. His commitment to education was a cornerstone of his leadership, as he recognized that a well-educated populace is essential for driving economic growth and promoting social progress (Quamar, 2020).

Therefore, as a moving step, in 2006, the King Abdullah Public Education Development Project, known as the *Tatweer* Project, was launched. The project was set out to achieve four specific primary goals: providing continuing professional development opportunities for all those working in education, improving curricula and learning materials, enhancing the school environment to facilitate better learning outcomes, utilizing information technology to improve the learning experience, and developing non-classroom activities and student services (Alsubaie & Shabib, 2023; Alyami, 2016; Tayan, 2017).

Additionally, the Saudi curriculum needed to be revised to align with international standards. Nevertheless, there were some opposing views, particularly from conservative religious groups who believed that it was impractical for girls to study the same subjects as boys. Despite this, the influence wielded by conservative religious groups within Saudi society had significantly declined compared to earlier times (Alharbi, 2014).

Additionally, in 2009, King Abdullah decided to give women, for the first time in Saudi history, a chance to be leaders in the Ministry of Education. Dr. Noura al-Fayez was appointed the Deputy Minister of Education Affairs for girls (Alharbi, 2014; Le, 2023; Quamar, 2013). Despite the efforts put in place to improve education in Saudi Arabia under this project, it is important to

note that its outcomes were limited. Curricula have been partly revised, and gender differences still exist (Alsuwaida, 2016).

### **1.6.3.2 Higher Education During the Reign of King Abdullah: 2005–2015**

During the reign of King Abdullah, the commitment to reform and recognition of some women's rights and roles significantly improved educational opportunities for women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In this matter, King Abdullah urged intellectuals to advocate for women's empowerment. He also inspired various government ministries, departments, and agencies to take measures to improve opportunities for women. King Abdullah's commitment to women's empowerment was evident in his direct engagement with women. On many occasions, he invited them to the Royal Court, personally welcoming them and even shaking hands, thereby breaking taboos that had previously existed (Quamar, 2020).

In addition, he received women's delegations, listened to their concerns, accepted their petitions, and assured them that their social conditions would improve. In 2010, the King also recognized and honored women scientists, doctors, journalists, and academics by conferring awards and appointing them to leadership positions. This was the first time that the scientific accomplishments of Saudi women were formally recognized. All of these actions helped promote a sense of inclusivity and progress toward gender equality in the Kingdom (Le, 2023; Quamar, 2020).

Additionally, women's enrollment in higher education reached record levels. In 2015, women holding bachelor's degrees outnumbered men by 56.3% (General Authority for Statistics,

2015). This, in turn, led to an increase in women's participation in the labor force, with women making up 13% of the total workforce in 2015 (General Authority for Statistics, 2019). Overall, King Abdullah's reign saw significant progress in promoting gender equality and empowering women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi government has taken numerous steps to promote and empower women in various sectors, including education, both directly and indirectly. One notable example is the first-ever allowance of issuing identity cards to women in 2001, which was followed by a mandate in 2006 that women must possess their own identity cards. Additionally, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in September 2000. This convention obligates the government to implement measures that ensure equal opportunities for women in education and other areas. These efforts demonstrate the Saudi government's commitment to advancing women's status in Saudi society (Quamar, 2020).

While this period marked a major phase of expansion in women's higher education, these developments should not be interpreted as evidence of full equality. Access widened in important ways, yet this expansion remained shaped by gendered boundaries in fields of study and also in wider social expectations regarding women's roles. In this sense, reform during this period was significant, but also partial and uneven.

### **1.6.3.2.1 Contrasting Approaches to Women's Higher Education**

During the reign of King Abdullah, two contrasting approaches to women's higher education emerged. First, in 2009, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) was established as the country's first co-educational university (Alotaibi, 2020). While this was a significant step, the majority of students were international. In 2015, Saudi students comprised just 35% of the university's student population (Alotaibi, 2020). Additionally, Saudi women's turnout for enrollment at this university was low for two reasons. The campus is located in a remote, isolated area from the rest of the country, which makes it difficult for families to allow their daughters to enroll. This reluctance stems from social expectations that women should remain under their family's supervision and not live independently away from their guardians. Moreover, the campus is a co-educational environment, which, in turn, has hindered women's enrollment due to existing societal barriers and cultural norms (Alshobakky, 2018). Furthermore, the establishment of this university faced opposition from conservative religious leaders. These leaders argued that the university would have a negative impact on the moral values of Saudi society (Alshobakky, 2018).

In contrast, the establishment of Princess Noura bint Abdulrahman University for Women in 2011 represented a more culturally accepted model of expansion. The university was designed to be one of the world's largest campuses, spanning 8 million square meters. This self-contained higher education city is intended to accommodate up to 60,000 women students (Quamar, 2020). The university was established with the aim of providing women with new educational opportunities that enable them to gain access to the labor market. The academic area comprises 15 colleges, each specializing in a particular field of study. These colleges include the College of

Medicine, the College of Nursing, the College of Pharmacology, the College of Physiotherapy, the College of Dentistry, and several others, such as the College of Administrative Sciences, the College of Law, the College of Computer and Technology, the College of Education, the College of Science, and the College of Languages and Translation. The university also boasts a housing area for staff and students that is equipped with public facilities, including mosques, schools, and recreational installations (Quamar, 2020).

It is worth noting that the construction of this grand project came at a significant cost, with a total expenditure of over SR20 billion, which is equivalent to approximately US\$5.3 billion (Alsubaie & Shabib, 2023). Nevertheless, the benefits of this investment are expected to be enormous, not only for the women students who will have access to world-class education, but also for the wider community, which will benefit from the economic growth and development that the university is expected to bring. Despite this significant investment and expansion of opportunities, there were still some fields that remained exclusive to men at other universities, which were not yet available for women. For instance, engineering majors were not initially offered to women in Saudi Arabia. Still, the university has plans to introduce these majors (Alasmari, 2020). These two institutions represent different strategies for advancing women's higher education, illustrating both the progress made and the persistent societal and cultural barriers.

#### **1.6.3.2.2 King Abdullah's Scholarship Program**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been dedicated to the advancement of higher education through the provision of scholarships for students to study abroad. It is imperative to note that Saudi men had access to government-sponsored study-abroad programs since 1926, which was

nearly 40 years before women gained similar access, albeit limited access. However, when King Abdullah came to power in 2005, he launched the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which substantially broadened opportunities for women (Abouammoh, 2018; Allam, 2025). The program is intended for “Saudis to know the world and for the world to know them so they can pursue their higher education goals and meet the demand for a national labor force while obtaining global experience and an understanding of other cultures” (Havril, 2018, p. 152). From a gender perspective, this program represented a major shift in women’s access to higher education. As a result, reports indicated that women comprised at least 20 percent of scholarship recipients in 2014 (Aldegether, 2020).

On the other hand, opponents of equal-gender educational opportunities argue that women should not pursue their studies abroad, as this may negatively impact their own personal and cultural identity. However, this perspective fails to acknowledge the numerous benefits that study abroad programs can offer students. For Saudi women, in particular, study abroad programs can be a powerful tool for the sake of advancing their career prospects and promoting gender equality when they return to their home country. When women study in diverse and inclusive academic environments, they can develop a stronger sense of their own capabilities and potential, as well as gain valuable experience working alongside people from different backgrounds and cultures. Thus, these experiences, in turn, can help break down cultural barriers and stereotypes, empowering women to occupy various occupational roles within their communities (Alsuwaida, 2016).

In this respect, despite its enormous benefits, the scholarship program was criticized for some obstacles that Saudi women faced when applying. For example, women were required to

obtain legal permission from their guardians, which they could not do because most Saudi families refused the idea of women studying abroad. They also had to have a male guardian accompany them during their studies abroad. This can be incredibly challenging, as it may result in a 30-year-old woman studying in the United States being accompanied by an 18-year-old male guardian (*mahram*). These requirements can limit opportunities for women and raise concerns about the persistence of gender inequality (Havril, 2018).

#### **1.6.4 Saudi Vision 2030 and Girls' Education: 2016–Present**

As mentioned earlier, a series of reforms improved girls' education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during King Abdullah's reign. These efforts were further institutionalized during the reign of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as part of a larger program of economic and social reforms to be accomplished by the year 2030. Launched in 2016, Vision 2030 aims to diversify the economy and improve the quality of life in the Kingdom (Suleiman & Ming, 2025). With this national transformation program, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has sought to strengthen the role of education in fostering a knowledge-based economy aligned with global standards (Saudi Vision 2030, 2020).

The Saudi Vision 2030 plan outlines a comprehensive set of goals for socio-economic development, with a strong emphasis on education, including the education of women. As stated in the Saudi Vision 2030 document, "Saudi women are yet another great asset. With over 50 percent of our university graduates being women, we will continue to develop their talents, invest in their productive capabilities, and enable them to strengthen their future and contribute to the development of our society and economy." (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021, p. 37). This strategic shift

has directly influenced policies around women's education, positioning it as a vital component of the nation's human capital development and economic diversification goals (Jawhar et al., 2022; Llanos-Antczak, 2023). This plan represents a significant step in the ongoing effort to improve access to education for women and girls throughout the country.

The Saudi Vision 2030 also includes goals to ensure that every child in the Kingdom, regardless of where they live, has access to quality education. These goals are supported through national initiatives such as developing early childhood education, refining the national curriculum, and training teachers and educational leaders (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021). Three years after its launch, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated that the vision had moved from the planning and design phases to implementation, and the initial outcomes were evident (Alarabiya, 2019).

#### **1.6.4.1 Educational Reform Under Vision 2030**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has implemented the Human Capability Development Program (HCDP), one of the Vision 2030 Realization Programs. The primary objective of this initiative is to “prepare citizens with the required skills, values, and knowledge to compete globally” (Human Capability Development Program, 2021, p. 7). Saudi Arabia's educational reform under Vision 2030 seeks to address the current emphasis on religious content in Saudi textbooks and curricula (Latifah, 2024). Thus, the reform proposes amending this content to focus more on technical and creative skills, as well as critical thinking. In addition, the reform aims to promote what is described in official policy discourse as more moderate religious teaching within the curriculum. This involves reducing religious oversight of the education system and enacting

policies framed as promoting religious moderation (Aldegether, 2020; Latifah, 2024). One major aim of this reform is to promote gender equality in education, ensuring that girls and boys study the same curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2022b).

To this end, all curriculum frameworks have been extensively reviewed and revised. Physical education has now been permitted to be taught to girls, and Life and Family Skills have been introduced to boys (Ministry of Education, 2022b). Critical thinking, philosophy, and cultural topics such as drama and music have been introduced, which were previously banned for both genders (Alotaibi, 2020). Teaching English classes became a mandate starting in the first grade, and optional Chinese language training is offered (Human Capability Development Program, 2021). Additionally, the curriculum has been restructured to emphasize moderate Islamic concepts and a sense of national belonging in subjects such as Islamic Studies and Social Studies (Latifah, 2024). The updated curriculum also emphasizes the development of essential skills, including decision-making, information management, project management, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021).

In regard to early childhood education, a notable initiative in 2019 allowed women teachers to teach young boys up to the third grade of elementary school for the first time (Aldegether et al., 2025). However, it is worth noting that the announcement indicated that there would be separate classrooms and different break times for boys and girls. As this policy is still new and optional for families, the ratio of boys enrolling in girls' schools in the first, second, and third elementary grades stood at 37.4% in 2021 (Ministry of Education, 2022a).

Alongside these reforms, the field of higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has recently witnessed major changes, particularly for women. As part of the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative, new fields have been opened for women. For example, and not limited to, launching more programs in engineering and allowing them to participate in the military (Eltoum & Abdelsalam, 2025; Ministry of Defence, 2021; Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, 2024). These fields were previously inaccessible to women due to barriers imposed by traditional customs (Alwedinani, 2016; Eltoum & Abdelsalam, 2025). This has led to greater participation of women in the labor market alongside men, providing them with financial independence and enabling them to become more vocal about their rights within their families and society. Some of them are now visible in the media and public spheres (Aldossari, 2025; Quamar, 2020).

#### **1.6.4.2 Leadership and Implementation within Vision 2030**

The approach, spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is distinct from the one taken by King Abdullah. Whereas King Abdullah's efforts were primarily focused on reforming the educational apparatus itself, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has adopted a more comprehensive approach to addressing the institutional hindrances to reform. Specifically, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has sought to address the issue of religious extremism and promote more market-oriented curricula (Latifah, 2024). This has involved initiatives such as reforming the religious police and excluding extremists (Alotaibi, 2020). These efforts have also involved empowering moderate religious clerics to participate in the education reform process to promote more moderate Islamic ideas (Kinninmont, 2017).

This approach acknowledges the pivotal role of religious institutions in Saudi society and seeks to integrate reform efforts with extant cultural and religious norms. This is especially true as the government undertakes significant social changes, such as the legalization of women driving and the introduction of public cinemas and music concerts (Alasgah & Alshammari, 2022; Shesha & Yusuf, 2021). As argued by Ismail (2023), the involvement of moderate clerics aims to mitigate possible backlash from conservatives and ensure that changes are perceived as compatible with Islamic values. However, as happened in previous reforms, there has been observable resistance from conservative religious groups and certain segments of Saudi society. These reforms have challenged long-standing taboos and led some to perceive the reform program as favoring liberal values (Alkarni, 2018). Nevertheless, the extent of these reactions has been limited to expressions of indignation on social media platforms (Alkarni, 2018). This dual approach, which empowers moderate voices while managing opposition, is pivotal to the successful implementation of Vision 2030's educational reforms, since it requires striking a balance between the need for modernization and the preservation of cultural heritage and social stability.

Overall, the efforts of the Saudi government, coupled with Saudi Vision 2030, have played a pivotal role in bringing the countless transformations that the country is currently experiencing on a daily basis. Additionally, some members of Saudi society's willingness and capability to transform have facilitated this change. It is worth noting that a considerable proportion of the population, particularly those under the age of 30, has received a high level of education abroad through scholarship programs. This has not only enabled them to acquire valuable skills and knowledge but has also contributed to their ability to be more receptive to change. According to Jamal (2021), in 2014, for example, there were 140,033 Saudi students studying abroad.

### **1.6.4.3 Current Challenges and Disparities in Girls' Education**

It is imperative to acknowledge that while many reforms have been witnessed in regard to improving women's status in education, some are still experimental and being gradually implemented. In terms of public education, for instance, despite the recent approval of the inclusion of physical education in the curriculum of girls' schools, the implementation of this reform is progressing slowly and gradually. This is because the approval came with certain conditions based on Sharia-compliant guidelines. Additionally, the lack of qualified women's human resources and adequate sports facilities in girls' schools has presented challenges to the successful implementation of this reform (Albaldi & Alsayegh, 2021; Nahari & Makopoulou, 2024). The slow pace is further exacerbated by concerns from ultra-conservatives about the modesty of physical education for girls, which has been a factor in the gradual implementation of these classes (Alghamdi & Aldossari, 2022; Nahari & Makopoulou, 2024). However, physical activity is essential for the health and mental well-being of girl students (Alrimali, 2023). Additionally, physical activity plays a significant role in disease prevention. Thus, Saudi women have alarmingly high rates of obesity, with 58.7% of women falling into this category (Alqarni, 2016), which can be attributed to the lack of physical activity. Another example is a new initiative to implement Standard Chinese as a third language in schools. However, the first phase of this initiative is currently underway, and eight secondary schools have been selected to participate. Lessons are taught exclusively to boys, but as the program progresses, the government plans to eventually extend this opportunity to girls as well (Berji, 2020).

On the other hand, public higher education programs were less available to women compared to men. For example, in Riyadh, the capital city, there were 71 colleges for men, while there were only 30 for women. Additionally, not all programs offered to men were available to women, such as real estate administration, theater, and cinema (Ministry of Education, 2023). When it comes to the topic of women being allowed to pursue certain majors, such as engineering, it is worthwhile to note that Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University is currently the only university in the Saudi capital city that has recently introduced more engineering programs for women. Despite this progress, it is essential to acknowledge that there is still a limited range of engineering programs available to women compared to those available to men (Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, 2020). Therefore, despite recent reforms, work is still underway to address the disparity in the quality of education received by women and men in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In this respect, such discrepancies can be attributed to different structural factors, including persistent curricular disparities, inadequate resources allocated to girls' education, and most importantly, the enduring influence of traditional gender norms that continue to limit women's participation in certain fields (Aldossari, 2025). Understood in this way, these structural disparities in educational provision and opportunities illustrate how gendered norms and policies remain embedded in the Saudi educational system. This background is essential to contextualize the present study, which investigates how gender representations are constructed and reinforced in Saudi first-grade school textbooks.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

This chapter's main focus was on education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, emphasizing the unique features and challenges prevalent in the region. It also provided an overview of the country's historical and cultural context, which has significantly influenced the development of the education system. Therefore, in order to understand the current state of education and gender in Saudi Arabia, the history of girls' education was explored in greater detail, including its evolution, significant milestones, and the various challenges encountered along the way. Tracing the evolution of education in Saudi Arabia highlights the challenges and opportunities that may have shaped how gender roles are represented in Saudi school textbooks.

## **2. Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of the existing literature that has been published on gender stereotypes in school textbooks. The literature review begins by providing a brief introduction to the concept of gender as it has been framed by feminist theorists as a means of establishing a conceptual framework in which the rest of the chapter can take place. Subsequently, the chapter turns attention to the problem of gender stereotypes. After defining what a stereotype is, the literature review explores how stereotypes emerge and the different ways in which they are embedded and experienced. The chapter also outlines why gender stereotypes are harmful both in childhood and over the life course, particularly for women and girls living in patriarchal societies with clearly defined (and segregated) gender identities and gender roles. It is also necessary to describe the different types and categories of stereotyping as a means of demonstrating the myriad ways in which gender stereotypes are constructed and maintained. After establishing what gender stereotypes are and why they are detrimental, the literature review turns attention towards analyzing the role and function of the textbook in socializing children in primary education. Finally, the chapter reviews the empirical literature that has been published on the representation of gender in school textbooks in a bid to assess what is currently known, and not known, about the topic.

## **2.2 Gender**

### **2.2.1 Feminist Theory and the Social Construction of Gender**

There has been a plethora of academic literature that has been published on gender. The overwhelming majority of the theoretical literature that has been published on gender has originated in western liberal democracies and is broadly labeled under the umbrella term of ‘feminist’ literature (Fealy, 2004; Friedan, 2010; McRobbie, 2008). While there are different variants of feminism and complex debates between different feminist schools, feminist theory has yielded immensely important insights that are crucial for making sense of the way in which gender is depicted in primary school textbooks. Most notably, feminist theory identifies a fundamental distinction between sex and gender: where sex is a biological fact bestowed by birth, gender is a social construct that has, according to advocates of feminist theory, been established in order to meet the needs of a male-dominated society (Donovan, 2012; Fealy, 2004; Tong, 2009). Understood in this way, gender is a malleable social identity, which, like other social identities such as race, is liable to change according to time, place and context. Gender identities have, according to feminist theory, been shaped by conditions and variables that are historically and culturally specific (Carastathis, 2019; Colebrook, 2004; Pateman, 1988).

Regardless of the different historical and cultural determinants of gender, feminist theory is founded upon the premise that the gender identities have always been conditioned in the first instance by patriarchy: a social and political system that is designed to support male privilege and disempower women and girls (de Beauvoir, 2011). This is an important issue to acknowledge in the context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where the institutions and practices of patriarchy have historically been underwritten by theology and government policies that have advanced men’s

dominant position in society and discriminated against women and girls (Kanie, 2017). As noted previously, this has entrenched gender inequalities throughout Saudi society.

It is not, however, the purpose of this study to explain the relationship between politics, patriarchy and gender in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or to present a critique of the Saudi government's gender policies. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that much of the literature that has been published on the social construction of gender identities in Saudi Arabia has been written in Western journals, thus reinforcing Eurocentric and Orientalist biases about gender in Islamic countries while at the same time reaffirming the distinction between gender in secular societies (where women and girls are presumed to have been set free from the bonds of patriarchy) and gender identities in traditional and/or religious societies (where women and girls are assumed to continue to live under the restrictions of a codified set of patriarchal conditions and laws). Mainstream feminist theory therefore overlooks different types and forms of subaltern feminism that exist in the Global South (Ballestrin, 2022). For instance, in a groundbreaking exposition of Islamist cultural politics, Mahmood (2011) discusses how liberal feminist ideals about agency and empowerment clash with the reality of women's embodiment of gender in Middle Eastern and Arabian Gulf countries. According to Mahmood (2011), women can exercise agency while at the same time conforming to stereotypical gender roles and gender identities the likes of which are prevalent in traditional societies. Mahmood (2011) thus calls for a social conception of feminist agency that accepts and addresses the complex dynamics of identity and representation in Muslim countries.

The issue is not, then, whether Saudi Arabia has a more restrictive and/or patriarchal construction of gender than in western liberal democracies from where feminist theories originated. Rather, there are two important issues that arise from feminist theory in the context of this research study. Firstly, feminist theory is founded upon the premise that patriarchal society is rigidly organized into two binary categories of social identity comprised of men and women (Colebrook, 2004; de Beauvoir, 2011). The patriarchal binary system is significant because, as de Beauvoir (2011) attests, separating society into two rigid gender categories has created fertile grounds for essentialist and universal conceptions of gender and, more importantly, the Othering of femininity. In particular, de Beauvoir (2011) notes that, in a patriarchal system, the condition of maleness is deemed to be the ideal social identity while femaleness is interpreted as a condition of weakness. Consequently, as Butler (2004) asserts, in a binary system, gender identities can only be established *in opposition to* one another. Feminine identities are thus constructed as a mirror inverse of the qualities of masculine identities (Butler, 2004; Colebrook, 2004). It is, then, only through coming into contact with the dominant hegemonic sex that femininity is brought into being (Butler, 2004, 2006). This is an immensely important issue to acknowledge in the context of the analysis of gender in school textbooks where, as we will see, the representation of female gender identities frequently occurs in opposition to that of the male identity, thereby reinforcing patriarchal assumptions about the inevitability of binary gender identities.

Secondly, because it is a social construct, gender is a concept that can be presented in different ways. Constructs of femininity and masculinity, of women and men, can, for instance, be represented discursively (for instance, through applying gendered language) and communicated pictorially (through images that are consistent with stereotypical ideas of gender identities) (Butler,

2011b). This is an important issue to acknowledge in the context of conservative societies in the Arabian Gulf, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where gender differences are undergirded to a significant degree by external markers of difference. As Hochel (2013) asserts, veiling practices in conservative Islamic countries are the most prominent example of gender identities being imposed upon women as a means of reinforcing gender differences, reaffirming male dominance and exerting control over women in patriarchal society.

Furthermore, in schools, the visible markers of difference between the genders are discernible in state-sanctioned school uniforms. Where boys in Saudi schools are mandated to wear a *thobe* with *Shemagh*, girls must wear a pink apron placed over a white blouse (see Figure 2 below). The segregation between the two genders is further reinforced through the physical separation between boy and girl pupils in the Saudi education system (Baki, 2004). Viewed from this perspective, the words and pictures that are presented through school textbooks are ideal vehicles through which the institutions of the state can promote and embed socially contrived and historically contingent gender markers and identities. This is an issue which this study intends to explore in greater depth through undertaking a content analysis of the construction of gender identities in primary school age textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.



*Figure 2. Saudi Ministry of Education mandated school uniforms for boys and girls in primary schools (Ministry of Education, 2025, p. 5)*

### **2.2.2 Men, Masculinities and Internalized Misogyny: The Insidious Effects of Hegemonic Masculinity upon the Representation and Embodiment of Gender**

There has been a rich body of theoretical literature that has been published on men and masculinities over the course of the past four to five decades. Like feminism, theories of men and masculinities are founded upon the premise that gender is a social construct and that men are socially conditioned to internalize, adopt and perform contrived gender identities and gender roles (Edley, 2017). In one of the most influential studies on masculinity, Connell (1995) identified four main typologies of masculinity: (a) hegemonic masculinity; (b) complicit masculinity; (c) marginalized masculinity; and (d) subordinate masculinity. Connell (1995, p.77) defines hegemonic masculinity as: “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” As a consequence, hegemonic masculinity aims to legitimize the existing system of gender inequalities and gender

stratifications in a patriarchal social order where women and girls are subordinate to men and boys (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity represents a trait-based approach to gender which assumes that each of the main typologies of masculinity is identifiable by its main characteristics. Hegemonic masculinity is, as Edley (2017) attests, the most desired type of masculinity within a given social or cultural context. However, hegemonic masculinity should not be understood as fixed or universal, since it may vary across different historical and cultural contexts. In many patriarchal societies, hegemonic masculinity is linked to attributes such as strength, self-reliance, assertiveness, superiority, and heterosexuality (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Additionally, as indicated by Moore and Stuart (2004), hegemonic masculinity is built on the notion that real men do not display their emotions, especially not in public. Hence, a hegemonic male is one who is not only strong and self-sufficient, but also one who is emotionally inexpressive. The traits of hegemonic masculinity therefore exist as a mirror inverse of the traits that are typically associated with femininity. Where the hegemonic male is represented as authoritative, active and, independent, femininity has often been associated with the traits of passivity and dependence (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Likewise, while hegemonic men do not exhibit their emotions in public, women are assumed to be highly emotional (and thus volatile and easily influenced by their emotions) (Edley, 2017). Consequently, as Messerschmidt (2018) argues, a primary function of hegemonic masculinity is to reinforce a rigid gender binary, positioning men as natural leaders and women as subordinates. This underscores the inextricable link between hegemonic masculinity and

patriarchy (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2018). This, as we will see, represents an immensely important issue to recall when attempting to understand the way in which gender stereotypes are represented in school textbooks.

Complicit masculinity refers to men who exhibit many, but not all, of the traits associated with hegemonic masculinity. For example, a man embodying complicit masculinity might be heterosexual and repress emotions but may not be highly athletic or physically strong. Although complicit masculinities do not actually embody hegemonic masculinity, as Messerschmidt (2018, p. 29) points out, through practice, they recognize some of the advantages of unequal gender relations and, as a result, “help sustain hegemonic masculinity.” According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), the majority of masculinities are complicit. Marginalized masculinities are representations of maleness that are viewed as different or not socially or culturally desirable. Marginalized masculinities are essentially a subculture of hegemonic masculinity, encompassing many of the traits and characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Marginalized masculinities are mainly distinguished by their ethnic, cultural, and racial identities (Wojnicka, 2021). Subordinate masculinity, on the other hand, refers to men whose traits noticeably diverge from hegemonic masculinity. For example, a man exhibiting subordinate traits may be emotional, uninterested in sports, unassertive, and compliant (Wojnicka, 2021).

The research published on masculinities consistently demonstrates that hegemonic masculinity not only subjugates femininity but also oppresses other forms of masculinity. For example, subordinate masculinities are considered inferior, while marginalized and complicit

masculinities face pressure to adhere to the idealized characteristics of hegemonic masculinity in order to gain acceptance (Connell, 1995; Evans et al., 2011; Moore & Stuart, 2004; Wojnicka, 2021). In this context, masculinity is viewed as a power dynamic between masculinity and femininity, as well as among various subordinate and suppressed aspects of masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2018).

It is important to recognize that the portrayal of stereotypical gender traits can have a constraining and alienating impact on both girls and boys. While women and girls have historically been constrained by the stereotypical roles, traits, and norms imposed by patriarchy, research into men and masculinities has shown that men and boys can likewise experience emotional, social, and psychological distress if they fail to embody the traits linked with hegemonic masculinity (Wojnicka, 2021). Boys may, for instance, reject and show disdain for their own self-image upon realizing that they cannot embody all of the traits associated with hegemonic masculinity (Barnes, 2012). Conversely, in an attempt to embody the traits of hegemonic masculinity, men and boys may behave violently or aggressively towards other men or towards women and girls (Alvi, 2014). This is particularly relevant for complicit and marginalized masculinities, which, as Connell (1995, p.79) argues, benefit from the subordination of women in the guise of what the author terms a ‘patriarchal dividend.’ This is an important issue to acknowledge and one that is central to understanding the nature of the relationship between femininity and masculinity in patriarchal societies. In particular, it is crucial to note that while stereotypical masculine traits and expectations constrain males and compel men to perform socially desirable roles, all masculinities take privilege over femininity in a social order that is underwritten by binary and oppositional gender identities (Evans et al., 2011).

In addition to subjugating femininity, masculinities – and the patriarchal ideologies and practices with which they are associated – create fertile grounds for the proliferation of internalized misogyny. Internalized misogyny can be defined as the involuntary internalization and acceptance by women of the sexist messages and prejudicial beliefs that are prevalent in a male-dominated society (Askanius, 2021). For example, women may believe that they are not as capable as men; that they are overly emotional and weak; that a woman’s ‘natural’ place is in the home caring for children and men; and that the primary function of femininity is reproduction (Askanius, 2021). Einhorn (2021) explains that internalized misogyny is harmful not only because it places significant limitations on women’s agency, hopes, and expectations but also because it causes women to subconsciously feel hatred or contempt towards themselves and other women. Therefore, internalized misogyny can lead women to have negative internal mental representations of femininity, thereby perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and discrimination (Askanius, 2021; Einhorn, 2021).

Studies have shown that there is a causal association between the assumptions and ideas of internalized misogyny and women’s self-esteem and perceived self-efficacy with women who have internalized misogynistic beliefs (whether consciously or unconsciously) being much more likely to have low self-esteem and a lack of self-efficacy due to the dysfunctional attitudes and identities that they have accepted and reproduced (Becker, 2010; Stevens-Watkins et al., 2014). Additionally, empirical research has also revealed that there is a positive correlation between the internalization of misogyny and religiosity (Dehlin & Galliher, 2019). Women and girls with

strong religious beliefs are more prone to accept and internalize sexist attitudes due to two main reasons: religious texts and practices often legitimize gender biases, and individuals with fundamentalist views tend to perceive the world in binary terms of right and wrong, leaving little space for ambiguity (Dehlin & Galliher, 2019).

This issue is of paramount importance, particularly in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where Wahhabi ideology promotes conservative and discriminatory gender stereotypes. These stereotypes legitimize veiling practices, gender segregation in educational institutions, the marginalization of women in the workforce, and, perhaps most notably, the practice of male guardianship (Rohmaniyah & Woodward, 2012). It can, therefore, be posited that the essentialist portrayals of women as domestic and dependent significantly contribute to the perpetuation of internalized misogyny, thus engendering a vicious cycle of self-loathing and underachievement for countless Saudi women (Rohmaniyah & Woodward, 2012). This study intends to contribute to our understanding of the ways in which gender identities, both masculine and feminine, are communicated and internalized through assessing the representation of gender in Saudi public school textbooks.

### **2.3 Gender Stereotypes and Gender Stereotyping: Function and Effects**

Gender stereotypes can be defined as widely held beliefs, views, and biases about gendered characteristics and gender roles that are understood to be appropriate for men and women (Berk, 2003). There has been a huge body of empirical and theoretical literature which has explored how gender stereotypes are embedded and experienced. It is widely acknowledged that although gender stereotypes are external characteristics which are attributed to groups based on their gender

identities, they are experienced subjectively as norms and expectations (Guimond & Roussel, 2001). Stereotypes can thus be thought of as internal working models (or mental roadmaps) that people instinctively draw upon in order to help them make judgements, solve problems and act in ways that are deemed appropriate in social situations (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). For this reason, the social psychologist Bar-Tal (1989, p. 227) considers stereotypes to be “frozen contents of knowledge”.

Stereotypes affect the person’s perception of *both themselves and others*. Consequently, stereotypes can be separated into two categories: cultural and individual. Cultural stereotypes refer to a set of beliefs that are widely adopted within a community, whereas individual stereotypes refer to assumptions that an individual holds about a social or cultural group (Yendell et al., 2024). This study is concerned primarily with cultural stereotypes, which are reproduced through state institutions such as schools. Prevailing cultural stereotypes about gender can affect a person’s beliefs and expectations about their own gendered identity as well as beliefs and expectations about how other people should look, act, and behave according to their visible markers of gender difference and their socially prescribed gendered identities (Colebrook, 2004; Guimond & Roussel, 2001). This is an important issue to underline. There are two reasons why this is the case.

Firstly, stereotypes are embedded through socialization: the processes and pathways through which individuals acquire the dominant identities, habits, and beliefs in any social system (Davies et al., 2005). There are a number of social agents that are essential for transmitting and embedding gender stereotypes. The family, for instance, performs a crucial role in promoting and sustaining gender stereotypes and in reinforcing hegemonic assumptions about gender from an

early age (Adams et al., 2011). In the family, young children learn to adopt and conform to gender stereotypes in two ways. On the one hand, gender roles and norms are transmitted through parents instructing children how to behave according to their gendered characteristics. For instance, a boy may be reprimanded for showing emotion, while, conversely, a girl may be discouraged from playing certain sports. Furthermore, as noted above, the clothes that boys and girls wear represent strong indicators of gender identities. In each of these cases, gender norms and expectations about the desired characteristics of gender identities are imposed by the institution of the family upon the child in an authoritative top-down fashion (Butler, 2011b; Colebrook, 2004).

On the other hand, young children will learn about gender roles and gender characteristics from observing their parents, siblings, and other family members. This was an issue that was explored in greater depth by Bandura (1977), whose social learning theory stipulates that young children learn how to act and think from observing the behavior of role models. In particular, Bandura (1977) argued that young children vicariously learn behaviors not solely by observing how role models act, but also by observing the consequences of certain behaviors. As a result, if, for example, a young boy observes a male role model acting aggressively towards a woman without receiving any adverse consequences, social learning theory posits that the boy will be more likely to vicariously learn and reproduce this behavior in his own life (Bandura, 1977).

Social learning theory represents a hugely valuable lens through which to view the effects of gender representations in primary school textbooks. From a conceptual standpoint, social learning theory shows how children can be unconsciously conditioned to accept what may appear to be self-defeating gendered characteristics, and to reproduce unequal and unjust gendered roles

(Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; MacBlain, 2014). Moreover, from an ideological standpoint, social learning theory – and the emphasis that is placed upon role modelling and the reproduction of socially desirable norms – can help us to understand why the institutions which produce school textbooks incorporate content that contains gendered stereotypes. In particular, it is prudent to note that, by including content that is heavily influenced by gender stereotypes, the actors and institutions responsible for delivering education and school curricula can perform a critical role in indoctrinating children in what are perceived to be acceptable social and cultural roles, norms, and identities through engaging in school textbooks (Lee, 2018).

Secondly, because gender stereotypes are internalized, they can have a profound effect upon the development of a person's self-concept: the sum of the way that a person views themselves based upon their life experiences, character, and self-identity. As a result, gender stereotypes can become part of an individual's beliefs about themselves, thus shaping and constraining expectations of self and others. Consequently, as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2014) states, gender stereotypes can have detrimental effects upon an individual's personal growth. Gender stereotypes have, for instance, been shown to limit individuals' potential, and perpetuate discrimination and inequality (Hasan, 2015). Unconsciously inculcated beliefs about gender can also adversely impact individuals' opportunities to explore their abilities based upon a flawed conception of gender norms and characteristics (Berger et al., 2022). Stereotypes can also create a false perception of a person's abilities and talents, and this can lead to missed opportunities and unfulfilled potential (Miao & Cagle, 2020).

Understood in this way, gender stereotypes can and frequently do leave a permanent psychological mark upon the individual. The psychological effects of gender stereotyping are experienced differently by men and women. For women, the negative effects of gender stereotyping increase the scope for the internalization of misogyny (Askanius, 2021; Einhorn, 2021). Conversely, for men, gender stereotypes that emphasize traits of strength, assertiveness, and physical power will further embed hegemonic masculinities as the most desirable type of masculine identity (Alvi, 2014; Barnes, 2012; Wojnicka, 2021). Consequently, power dynamics between masculinity and femininity, and between subordinate and suppressed aspects of masculinity, are exacerbated by the perpetuation of the myths that are promoted by gender stereotypes (Messerschmidt, 2018).

This has immensely important implications for thinking about the role and functions of stereotypes which are routinely presented to children in patriarchal societies. In particular, it is prudent to acknowledge that stereotypical gender traits can have a constraining and alienating impact on both girls and boys. Gender stereotypes that are steeped in patriarchal assumptions about the ideal roles of men and women do not, then, present harmless gendered caricatures; they promote and sustain deeply harmful biases and prejudices that have real-world consequences. This is particularly pertinent for children in primary school who typically lack the cognitive skills to critically analyze and deconstruct the gender stereotypes that they encounter in the family and in the school (Su et al., 2021). As Su et al. (2021) attest, due to their limited cognitive development, children in primary schools often misinterpret rules and norms as mandatory requirements. Consequently, rather than viewing a stereotypical representation of hegemonic masculinity as a social construct, young boys are much more likely to interpret this stereotype as a mandatory code

for male behavior. Similarly, young girls of primary school age are much more likely to interpret stereotypical domesticated representations of femininity as a rule for governing social conduct and behavior (Wood et al., 2022).

Wood et al. (2022), for instance, investigated gender stereotype knowledge and endorsement in two samples of UK schoolchildren: the first group was aged between 9 and 11, and the second was aged between 13 to 15. Wood et al. (2022) found that stereotype knowledge was significantly greater in the older age group compared to the primary school-aged group, and that older girls showed significantly higher levels of stereotype rejection than younger girls and boys. These findings suggest that younger children are much more likely to accept and endorse gender stereotypes than older children. Consequently, as Su et al. (2021) hypothesize, this may make primary school-aged children less tolerant of gender behaviors that do not correspond to stereotypical gender norms and roles, creating fertile grounds for the emergence of hegemonic masculinities and internalized misogyny. These findings underline the importance of exploring the representation of gender stereotypes in primary school textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where gender characteristics and gender roles are strongly shaped by the institutions of patriarchy, and where boys and girls encounter multiple agents and institutions which promote stereotypical gender identities.

### **2.3.1 Different Types and Categories of Gender Stereotyping: Characteristics, Roles, Physical Attributes, Activities, and Occupations**

There are a number of different types and categories of gender stereotyping. One of the most pervasive and pernicious forms of gender stereotyping is based upon the assumed traits and

characteristics of the two genders. Friedan (2010), for instance, argues that women and girls have been assigned gender-specific characteristics and traits based upon their socially and culturally contrived gender identities. Where men are assumed to be strong, authoritative, and autonomous, women are typically represented as being weak, passive, and dependent (Friedan, 2010). These assumed characteristics and traits have had (and continue to have) a profound effect upon gender roles and gender norms (Colebrook, 2004; Donovan, 2012; Fealy, 2004; Tong, 2009). Where masculine roles are associated with the norms of strength, leadership, and autonomy, feminine roles are associated with the norms of emotionality, caring, and empathy (Islam & Asadullah, 2018). In this way, the social construction of gendered characteristics and gender roles has cemented the idea that women are the 'weaker' sex who are less capable and more emotional than men (Brown & Stone, 2016). Furthermore, the intersection between gendered identities, characteristics, and norms has served to domesticate women, and to trap women and girls in what Friedan (2010) termed the 'feminine mystique': prevailing societal assumptions about what constitutes appropriate and desirable 'feminine' qualities.

Physical appearances also represent an important source for cultural stereotyping. As we have seen, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, there are clear visible markers of difference between men and women in the way that the two genders dress and appear in public (Le Renard, 2014). Women and men are also clearly distinguishable by their different physical appearances. Gender stereotypes that are rooted in physical differences are based both upon inherent differences that are biological in nature and upon socially constructed gendered identities. For instance, women and men are distinguishable by their different body sizes, facial features and physical attributes (Volkman, 2018). The majority of the literature that has been published on gender stereotyping

recognizes that physical markers of gender differences are often rooted in idealized visions of masculinity and femininity. For women and girls, beauty is widely perceived to be an ideal physical marker of femininity, while for boys and men, strength and physical prowess are commonly interpreted as the ideal characteristics of manhood (Kukkonen et al., 2024). The ideal feminine and masculine physical markers are determined to a significant degree by different cultural values and expectations, with different cultures promoting different visions of feminine beauty and masculine strength (Kukkonen et al., 2024). However, in all cases, it is prudent to note that physical stereotypes of gender serve to reinforce the binary distinction between men and women, and to perpetuate what are perceived to be the most desirable physical attributes for men and women to acquire (Griffin & Langlois, 2006; Kukkonen et al., 2024).

Activities and interests are also significant indicators of gender stereotyping. Cross-cultural research has shown that, consistent with stereotypes about masculine strength and physical prowess, masculinity is most commonly associated with activities and interests that are physically demanding, outdoor hobbies and sports (Bosak et al., 2018; Chalabaev et al., 2013). Conversely, stereotypical representations of femininity are not usually associated with physically demanding activities (Bosak et al., 2018; Chalabaev et al., 2013). Where women's interests are linked with sports or physical activities, stereotypical representations of femininity typically assume that women and girls take part in graceful activities such as dancing, rather than competitive activities such as soccer (Hermann & Vollmeyer, 2016).

Furthermore, building upon stereotypical characteristics of femininity, women's activities and interests are often located in the private sphere of the home (Hermann & Vollmeyer, 2016).

As Holm et al. (2015) attest, the gendered division of labor in the household has ensured that stereotypical representations of femininity are founded upon the premise that women enjoy activities such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the home. These activities are seldom associated with masculinity, particularly in patriarchal societies with strong binary divisions between the genders (Holm et al., 2015). In addition to domesticated activities, it is also assumed that women and girls are inherently inclined towards quiet activities and interests such as reading (Karniol & Gal-Disegni, 2009; Taylor, 2003). Men and boys, meanwhile, are most commonly assumed to enjoy problem-solving activities and interests that are based upon reason and logic (Karniol & Gal-Disegni, 2009).

Gender stereotypes about the interests and activities tend to influence stereotypes about men's and women's competencies in academic subjects. For instance, in a cross-sectional study conducted across 49 nations cited by Muthuri and Arasa (2017), it was discovered that there were notable gender disparities in mathematical self-concept. Specifically, the study found that women and girls tended to possess a lower mathematical self-concept in comparison to men and boys. This is a finding that has also been uncovered by Xie et al. (2023) who found that, even though there is no correlation between gendered perceptions of mathematical ability and mathematical attainment in schools, Chinese girls had a lower mathematical self-concept than Chinese boys.

Similar findings have been found in research which has explored the perceived competencies of boys and girls in reading and writing, with stereotypical assumptions about women enjoying reading affecting the way in which the genders think about reflective subjects such as literature (Ehrmann et al., 2019). Moreover, studies have also found that language learning

has been stereotypically framed as a feminine domain (Schmenk, 2004). Each of these findings draws attention to the crucial role that stereotyping and generalized gender-based assumptions perform in constructing learners' identities and in affecting the motivation for engaging with academic subjects (Richardson et al., 2012; Schmenk, 2004). This further underlines the extent to which gender stereotypes have real-world consequences.

One of the most profound ways in which gender stereotyping affects people's lives is in the representation of workplace and occupational roles. There has been a significant body of evidence which reveals how gender stereotypes can impact upon a person's choice of career and position within the workplace. Consistent with the most pervasive gender stereotypes outlined above, research has shown that men are more likely to work in roles and professions that are action-oriented, where women are more likely to work in domestic or caring roles, or to avoid working altogether in order to stay at home and take care of the family (Durand et al., 2022; Huff et al., 2022). Research has also shown that the impact of gender stereotyping on career choice is more pronounced in parts of the world where patriarchal customs, mores and norms remain largely unchallenged. For instance, Singh and Sebastian (2018) explored the relationship between gender and entrepreneurship in Gujarat, India, with the researchers reporting that, due to legal restrictions placed upon women's rights, women's only route into business exists through their fathers and/or their other male relatives.

Consequently, there is general consensus that the impact of gender stereotyping is more pernicious for women and, furthermore, that gender stereotyping in the workplace is experienced differently according to the context in which it occurs (Ehrmann et al., 2019; Huff et al., 2022).

Crucially, research shows that, in many cases, women are not aware of the insidious influence of gender stereotyping upon their career choices (or lack of choices). As Huff et al. (2022) attest in an exploration of women's workplace roles in Tanzania, for instance, women who have been exposed to the idea that they lack leadership qualities are much more likely to be satisfied with subordinate roles and/or to accept roles that are consistent with the stereotypical notions of women as a carer or mother. Likewise, as Olivares-Aising et al. (2022) report in a qualitative analysis of the occupational choices of middle-aged women in Chile, women who choose to stay at home and take care of children and women who have put their career on hold to allow their husbands an opportunity to advance typically struggle to link their own choices with wider stereotypes about the desired characteristics, roles, and behaviors of men and women.

The findings from these studies emphasize the extent to which unconscious and vicarious learning negatively influences the development of women's self-concept and subtly affirms the assumptions inherent in the most widely reproduced gender stereotypes (Olivares-Aising et al., 2022). As Huff et al. (2022) observe, this can help to explain why certain occupations (such as the nurse, librarian, or teacher) are intrinsically linked with femininity, while roles that are associated with strength and leadership (such as a soldier or a business executive) are inextricably intertwined with stereotypical assumptions about masculinity. The concept of a 'gendered' occupation is thus testimony to the pervasive influence of gender stereotyping upon people's self-concept and their interpretation of their self-worth (Berger et al., 2022; Huff et al., 2022). This, Singh et al. (2023) attest, is why women are said to encounter a 'glass ceiling' in the workplace: an invisible barrier to promotion and advancement that is held in place by taken-for-granted assumptions and stereotypes about what men and women are capable of. Understood in this way, internalizing

negative gender stereotypes can have an important effect upon a person's behavior and motivations over the life course.

These findings have been reaffirmed by research undertaken by Miao and Cagle (2020), who explored the negative impact of gender stereotypes on the development of identity in both women and men undergraduate students in the United States. This study employed semi-structured interviews with 30 participants. The researchers found that gender stereotypes negatively influenced both women and men participants' experiences in developing their identities from a young age. Women participants in the study stated that gender stereotypes continue to have an impact on their careers later in life. The study's findings indicated that gender stereotypes have an impact not only on women, but on all genders by narrowing the opportunities to participate in various life experiences. These results highlight the need for increased awareness and action to counteract the harmful effects of gender stereotypes (Miao & Cagle, 2020).

In addition, Swan and Wyer (1997) conducted a study that examined how men and women perceive their gender and social status among university students in the United States. The findings revealed that the awareness of men about their gender made them aware of their high social status compared to women, and thus activated concepts about themselves that emphasized their membership in this category of high status. On the other hand, women's awareness of their gender made them aware of their low status compared to men, motivating them to think of themselves in terms of conceptions that set them apart from other members of this low-status category. Overall, the study highlights how gender and social status can influence one's self-perception and identity.

Blaine and Brenchley (2020) also indicated that gender stereotypes impact how people evaluate men's and women's behavior. This can lead to promoting the belief that certain occupations can only be performed by either men or women, ultimately resulting in valuing them differently. Additionally, the process of socialization, particularly in regard to gender, has been found to contribute to the development of certain stereotypes that can create differences in self-concept between men and women. These gender stereotypes can have a significant impact on an individual's perception of themselves and their abilities, particularly in regard to their career choices (Blaine & Brenchley, 2020).

Each of these studies underlines the extent to which gender stereotypes, which are socially learned and internalized at a young age, profoundly affect the way that men and women view themselves and others through subtly affecting motivations and social cognitions. Moreover, each of these studies shows how gender stereotypes can take different forms and adopt different guises in different social situations. Together, the stereotypes about attributes, characteristics, norms, activities, and occupational roles have reinforced the view that the ideal man is one who is strong, independent, active, and successful in the workplace while, conversely, the ideal woman is passive, beautiful, quiet, and domesticated (Berger et al., 2022; Huff et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023). This study will explore each of the different categories and types of gender stereotypes identified above in greater depth. In particular, the research study will identify and describe the ways in which primary school textbooks in Saudi Arabia depict gendered traits and characteristics, norms, attributes, activities and interests, and occupational roles in a bid to understand how binary gender identities are constructed and maintained through representative modes of communication.

## **2.4 Textbooks: Role and Function in Public Schools**

UNESCO defined a textbook as “the core learning medium composed of text and/or images designed to bring about a specific set of educational outcomes; traditionally a printed and bound book including illustrations and instructions for facilitating sequences of learning activities” (2005, p. 4). School textbooks are an essential and indispensable part of the education system. The school textbook serves three principal functions. Firstly, the primary function of a school textbook is to transmit knowledge and to facilitate the learning process. Knowledge transmitted through textbooks is determined by school curricula and course materials, which are determined by a wide range of stakeholders, including educational policymakers and school leaders (Gebregeorgis, 2016).

Secondly, a school textbook should be understood as a teaching aid. The textbook is the principal resource that teachers will draw upon in order to guide their teaching practices and to set learning goals (Gebregeorgis, 2016). Textbooks are an essential learning and teaching resource in primary schools. Blumberg (2008), for instance, reported that students and teachers in Canada spend most of their classroom time, which ranges from 70 to 90%, using their school textbooks to guide classroom instruction.

Thirdly, textbooks serve a social function. School textbooks play a major role in transmitting cultural and social norms and expectations through their interpretation and presentation of knowledge (Yang, 2014). In some societies, like Saudi Arabia, where independent reading habits are not common, textbooks have an even more significant influence. As Alqahtani (2016) confirmed, Saudi students of all levels do not read enough, if at all. In such a society, school

textbooks serve as a primary means of conveying information and shaping students' beliefs and values, particularly in the areas of history, religion, and social norms. School textbooks are a powerful tool for shaping the worldview of students in Saudi schools.

As a consequence, it is essential to consider the integral role that the school textbook performs in shaping the socialization process (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009b). In addition to disseminating universal moral norms (for instance, about the importance of kindness and treating one another with respect), the primary school textbook is a reflection of historically and culturally specific values, ideals, and identities (Yang, 2014). The school textbook can communicate these values, ideals, and identities both covertly and overtly; implicitly and explicitly (Widdowson, 2007). Thus, some ideals and values can be communicated rather blatantly, while others are much more difficult to detect. Consequently, according to Brugeilles and Cromer (2009b, p. 16), "in their interpretation and presentation of knowledge, textbooks are (more or less consciously and deliberately) a vehicle for norms, values and models of social behavior through the representations that they contain." As noted previously, representations in textbooks can be both discursive and pictorial. In primary school textbooks, the use of pictures and images is necessarily much greater than it is in a secondary school textbook because, unlike secondary school textbooks, primary school textbooks are focused upon maximizing the child's core foundational skills such as numeracy and literacy (Gebregeorgis, 2016).

Much of the literature that has been published on the socialization function of the school textbook has tackled the issue from the perspective of hidden curriculum theory. Hidden curriculum theory is founded upon the premise that the curriculum is not a neutral plan for

organizing learning but, rather, a means for communicating implicit messages about what constitutes acceptable and/or desirable knowledge, behavior and social identities (Jay, 2003). Understood in this way, the school curriculum, underwritten by the textbook, transmits hegemonic ideas and norms that reflect the interests of the ruling classes (Kentli, 2009).

In addition to disseminating the interests of those in positions of educational, religious, and political authority, the hidden curriculum silences counterhegemonic voices and views, which present alternative ideas, identities and values (Kentli, 2009). This is an important issue to note and one that is central to understanding how to view representations of social identities promulgated through textbooks. In particular, it is crucial to note that the hidden curriculum stipulates that the tools and instruments that are used to communicate knowledge (in this study, textbooks) socialize pupils into accepting prevailing norms and values both through what is presented and through what is omitted (Jay, 2003; Kentli, 2009). Consequently, when exploring the content of Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks, it is essential to interpret representations of gender through exploring what has been rendered invisible as well as that which is in plain sight. Women's invisibility represents a subtle yet one of the most insidious forms of gender stereotyping because it serves to perpetuate the central myth of patriarchy: that men are more prominent (and thus more important) than women (Lee & Collins, 2010).

#### **2.4.1 School Textbooks and Representations of Gender: The Legitimization of Gender Stereotypes**

There are many ways in which school textbooks can impact students' attitudes and perceptions of gender roles. This, according to Hasan (2015), is because official educational

materials hold a considerable amount of power and influence over students who place their full trust in the information presented in these textbooks. This is especially true for younger students in primary school, who are less likely to question what they read and are more likely to believe what is presented in the educational materials and, as we have seen, are much more likely to accept informal cues and rules as mandatory requirements (Su et al., 2021). Furthermore, students spend a significant amount of time using textbooks, which, as Hasan (2015) attests, means that they are more susceptible to the messages that these school textbooks may deliver. Also, it is important to note that students do not only utilize their textbooks in the classroom; they also rely extensively upon textbooks in order to complete assignments and homework. As a result, textbooks have a pervasive influence upon students (Widdowson, 2007).

Therefore, it can be inferred that school textbooks can transmit gender stereotypes. This transmission can occur in various mediums within textbooks, not only through text and illustrations, but most importantly, also through the creators and authors of these textbooks, as they are responsible for the content and hidden messages conveyed in their textbooks (Hasan, 2015). In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Education is responsible for creating and producing the content that is incorporated into textbooks across the public school system (Ministry of Education, 2022b). The Ministry of Education has mandated the use of one set of textbooks for each grade level throughout the entire country in order to provide consistency and uniformity in the educational material provided to students (Ministry of Education, 2022b). Saudi textbooks cover a wide range of subjects and are aligned with the academic standards set by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2020b).

However, since the Saudi Ministry of Education mandates the use of these textbooks, teachers are also required to teach them, regardless of their content. This, in turn, means that students are expected to accept the content presented in these textbooks as the only valid knowledge without questioning or challenging it. Furthermore, as Jumiah (2016) argues, within this system teachers' roles are limited to transferring textbook content to their students by mediating students' understanding of these materials without being able to provide alternative perspectives or opinions. Thus, in this approach, there is no space for critical thinking; rather, it reinforces a singular point of view, which may result in limiting students' ability to develop a well-rounded understanding of the subject being studied.

As has been noted previously, Saudi Vision 2030 establishes an ambitious program for reforming gender norms and opening up pathways into education and work for women and girls. Reformists in the Ministry of Education have, in accordance with the aims and objectives of Saudi Vision 2030, sought to liberalize the language and the symbolic content that is promoted in public school textbooks. However, the representations of gender in Saudi public school textbooks continue to embed assumptions about binary gender identities that privilege men while disempowering and disadvantaging women and girls. For instance, the non-profit Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) routinely gathers information about school textbooks from across the world and monitors changes to the way in which a wide range of social, cultural and religious issues are addressed.

The most recent review published by IMPACT-se shows that the Ministry of Education has removed some content that promotes harmful representations of gender. For instance, a chapter

in a Grade 10 Islamic Studies textbook, which instructed students that women are not allowed to travel independently unless they are accompanied by their husbands or a male relative, was removed in 2022. Similarly, in a Life Skills and Family Education school textbook created for pupils between Grades 10 to 12, content which stated that, under Islamic law, men are superior to women and are responsible for them, has been removed and replaced with content, which outlines the duties and obligations of the two genders (IMPACT-se, 2023).

However, while some gender stereotyping has been removed from Saudi textbooks, there remains significant scope for gender bias and gender discrimination in public school curricula. For instance, an Islamic Studies textbook for middle school-age students teaches pupils that it is forbidden for a woman to imitate a man in terms of speech, appearance, movement and dress (IMPACT-se, 2023). The same text states that this is because masculine traits are “strength and roughness”, which are in stark contradiction to feminine traits of “softness, kindness, and tenderness” (IMPACT-se, 2023, p. 87). Thus, when women imitate men in any way, they undermine what is assumed to be a natural and timeless gendered social order. Furthermore, in a textbook on Islamic law designed for pupils in Grades 10 to 12, it is stated that women must obey men in the home and that the obedience of women is the cornerstone of a successful marriage and family life (IMPACT-se, 2023). This clearly reinforces some of the most potent patriarchal stereotypes that are disseminated in a strictly binary gendered social system. Crucially, this reference to gender stereotypes in the Islamic Studies textbook is accompanied by a Qur’anic verse, which states:

Shariah has given men guardianship over women in what is right.. It has commanded the woman to obey him in what is right, and all of this is in order for marital life to go on in the best way possible . . . The Almighty said: “Men are the caretakers of

women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially.” [An-Nisa: 34]. (IMPACT-se, 2023, p. 89)

This is not an aberration; unlike school textbooks in Western countries, hadiths and religious verses are commonly employed as a means of reinforcing hegemonic cultural views, norms and ideals in school textbooks in Islamic countries (Elyas & Picard, 2013). For instance, in another Islamic Studies excerpt for students between Grades 10 to 12, a hadith teaches students that “women who would be dressed but appear to be naked” are “inclined (to evil) and make others incline toward it” (IMPACT-se, 2023, p. 88). This, in effect, communicates to the students that women are always to blame for attracting any unwanted attention and, moreover, for animating the arousal and anger of men. Ultimately, there can be little doubt that the incorporation of a hadith serves to render the description of gender stereotypes official and, more importantly, beyond question. Interlinking gender stereotypes with religious doctrine can be assumed to have a powerful effect upon young students who read these school textbooks not only because young students are taught to believe what they read, see and hear in school, but also because the articulation of gender roles within hadiths serves to legitimize gender inequalities and gender stereotyping. As noted previously, then, the problem of internalized misogyny is likely to be significantly higher in cultures where religious beliefs represent such a prominent source of moral authority (Dehlin & Galliher, 2019).

#### **2.4.2 Teachers and Gender Stereotypes**

Stereotypes located in school textbooks do not exist in a vacuum; the way in which they are communicated performs an immensely important role in shaping the transmission of cultural knowledge (Hashim et al., 2018; Lee & Chin, 2019; Narahara, 1998a). For this reason, it is

imperative to consider the role and function of teachers in delivering the content in school textbooks and in particular, the way that they present stereotypes relating to gender. Some studies have explored teachers' perceptions of gender when selecting textbooks for their pupils. According to a study by Doyle et al. (2015), teachers tend not to consider gender equality as a criterion when they select books for their students. Rather, teachers in this study stated that the choice of school textbook was based upon academic and curricular needs, rather than the quality or quantity of gender representations (Doyle et al., 2015). Understood in this way, gender is not considered crucial when selecting which textbooks to teach in class.

These findings were corroborated by Tatar and Emmanuel (2001), who conducted a quantitative study involving 221 Israeli teachers, who were requested to complete a questionnaire to assess their perceptions of gender roles represented in school textbooks. The findings indicated that the teachers exhibited a significant lack of awareness regarding gender stereotypes and their potential implications in school textbooks. As a result, the researchers in this study recommended that teachers should be required to undertake courses to enhance their understanding of gender stereotypes and how they could affect students in the classroom (Tatar & Emmanuel, 2001).

These findings have been supported by research undertaken by Filipović (2018), who explored early childhood educators' perspectives of gender representation in literature for children in the Republic of Ireland. The researcher employed multiple data collection methods, including an in-depth content analysis of fifteen selected children's books, as well as reflective journal writings and professional conversations with eight educators from one early childhood center in Dublin. The study found that many educators lack a comprehensive understanding of the way in

which gender stereotypes continue to be represented in children's books. In particular, this study found that early childhood educators tend to assign limited importance to gender representation and its impact on children's perception of gender roles (Filipović, 2018). This is a significant concern, as gender representation can shape children's attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, the researcher in this study concluded that it is imperative that teachers remain aware and critical in evaluating the content of books used in their classrooms (Filipović, 2018).

Similar studies have corroborated the findings from these papers by outlining the extent to which the school represents a site for the reproduction and socialization of stereotypical gender roles. For instance, some studies have found that the subtle messages and attitudes that are exhibited by teachers reinforce existing gender norms and stereotypes in the classroom. In a qualitative analysis of gender representation in English language instructional materials employed in Iranian schools undertaken by Lee and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei (2020), it was reported that teachers often exhibit gender biases in the language that they use in the class and through their voices. For instance, Lee and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei (2020) found that teachers often assign certain tasks or interests to one of the two genders, therefore reinforcing the idea that some activities are 'for boys' while others are 'for girls.'. Furthermore, Lee and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei (2020) found that different standards of behavior were expected of the two genders in the classroom. While boys were often expected to push one another and to shout out in class, girls were expected to be obedient and to sit quietly and still when studying. This reinforces the assumption that gender is something which is constructed not only by stereotypical behaviors but also by stereotypical traits and characteristics.

These findings are important to note because they suggest that, if textbooks are themselves a crucial source of gender bias and gender stereotyping, then teachers' own biases and prejudices will simply reinforce these stereotypes by making them appear natural and inevitable. Crucially, Lee and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei (2020) found that teachers' gender biases are often manifest at an unconscious level. As a result, teachers' contribution to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes can be explained as a product of implicit biases and assumptions, which teachers bring with them into the classroom. In many cases, these implicit biases are products of when teachers were themselves students (Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020). This clearly underlines the extent to which the school represents a microcosm of wider society and a site for the internalization of some of the most pervasive gender stereotypes.

Similar results have been reported by Myhill and Jones (2006), who, after conducting interviews with teachers and students across different schools in England, found that teachers routinely apply different standards of behavior and expectations depending upon the gender of students. Where boys are often praised for their competitiveness, girls are offered encouragement when they are perceived to be helpful and kind (Myhill & Jones, 2006). This, in turn, reaffirms the stereotypical view that men are inherently strong and authoritative, whereas women are passive and compassionate. This study also found that teachers often overlook girls in the class while focusing more upon the actions of boys (Myhill & Jones, 2006). These subtle biases contribute to the assumption that boys' presence and views are more important than those of girls, who are often rendered invisible and undervalued in the class (Myhill & Jones, 2006). As was the case with Lee and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei's study, the researchers in this study found that biases are almost always implicit and unconscious. This underlines the need for more extensive teacher training to raise

awareness about gender stereotypes and the role that teachers perform in animating and reinforcing stereotypical gender norms, identities and ideas.

This is a theme that has also been uncovered in research undertaken by Koster and Litosseliti (2021), who explored ‘teacher talk’ about gendered school texts through observation of 32 Dutch language lessons in high schools in Germany and interviews with nine participating teachers. The findings revealed significant discrepancies between teachers’ self-articulated gender ideologies and teacher talk in class. Where teachers often spoke of the importance of facilitating gender equality in the classroom and of challenging the sources of gender stereotyping, teacher talk “mostly ignores gender-biased representations in texts” (Koster & Litosseliti, 2021, p. 1). The findings from this study imply that even where teachers have a pre-existing level of awareness about gender stereotypes, this does not protect against either the reproduction of gender stereotypes included in instructional materials or, more importantly, the unconscious deepening of their impact (Koster & Litosseliti, 2021).

These findings have been confirmed by research undertaken by Gajda et al. (2022), who conducted mixed methods research with a sample of 25 women teachers in Poland in order to explore perceptions of gender stereotypes within the school environment. After completing observational analysis of teaching methods and semi-structured interviews with the teachers, Gajda et al. (2022) uncovered four themes including: (1) teachers’ lacked awareness of the stereotypical behaviors of girls and boys during classes; (2) teachers’ lacked awareness of the possible causes of stereotypical behaviors exhibited by both girls and boys during classes; (3) teachers’ responses to stereotypical gendered behaviors in the class often deepen gender

stereotypes; and (4) teachers are insensitive to the gender polarized content of school textbooks. The third theme uncovered in this study is arguably the most significant to note because it uncovers the nature of the association between gender stereotyping in school textbooks and the communication of those stereotypes by teachers. In particular, Gajda et al. (2022) outlined what they call the ‘vicious cycle’ of gender stereotyping in schools where teachers unconsciously and unwittingly place students under a pressure to conform to stereotypical gender roles and identities, thus confirming expectations of how men and women ‘should’ behave, think and act (see Figure 3 below). Viewed from this perspective, teachers perform an immensely important (and often unseen) role in socializing children to reproduce wider social and cultural stereotypes (Gajda et al., 2022).

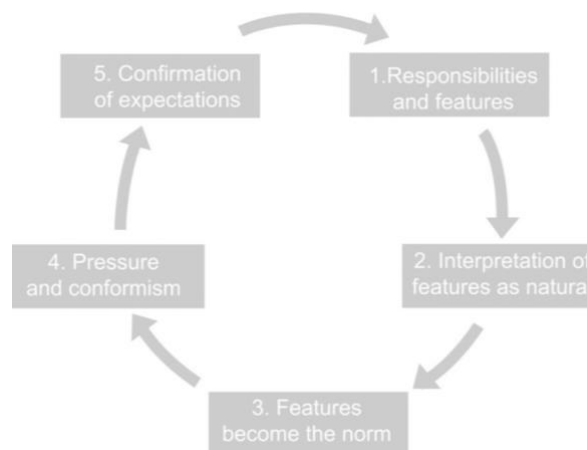


Figure 3. *The Vicious Circle of Stereotypes* (Gajda et al., 2022, p. 3)

The findings from Gajda et al.’s study have been reaffirmed by empirical research undertaken by Vu and Pham (2022), who conducted 18 classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with a sample of 12 secondary school teachers teaching English as a foreign language. As previous studies have shown, the results from this study revealed that while teachers state that they are intent upon stamping out gender biases in the classroom, gendered content in

school textbooks, whether this was manifest in a ‘traditional’ or ‘progressive’ manner, was largely absent from classroom discourse because, as the researchers state, teachers prioritized the transference of linguistic knowledge over gender ideology (Vu & Pham, 2022). This outlines the extent to which teachers have a dual task to perform in school. Where, on the one hand, teachers are increasingly required to address questions relating to equality, inclusion and diversity, on the other hand, teachers also have a requirement to teach students the core knowledge and skills that are required to pass formative and summative assessments (Vu & Pham, 2022). Ultimately, as several studies have shown, it is this second functional requirement that will be privileged more often than not by teachers (Gajda et al., 2022; Myhill & Jones, 2006; Tatar & Emmanuel, 2001; Vu & Pham, 2022). In particular, Vu and Pham (2022, p.11) reported that gender was not planned into teaching and classroom interaction primarily because the focus for teachers is to “‘transfer’ language knowledge to students by completing as many exercises as possible.”

This is an immensely important point to acknowledge and one that is central to understanding the crucial role that teachers perform in communicating, disseminating and embedding gender stereotypes in the classroom. In particular, it is crucial to note that the findings from Vu and Pham’s study suggest that there is a lack of critical thinking from teachers when it comes to the way in which gendered content is communicated in classrooms. Teachers may be unwilling or unable to identify and decode the hidden curriculum located in school textbooks (Vu & Pham, 2022). This, according to Vu and Pham (2022), has three consequences. Firstly, in failing to critically analyze the representation of gender in school textbooks, teachers fail to provide students with critical and reflective skills that they require in order to identify and challenge not only gender stereotypes, but also all other types of discrimination and bias based upon social,

ethnic, and cultural identities. Secondly, because teachers fail to identify the subtle ways in which the hidden curriculum is manifest, teachers do not recognize their own implicit biases. As a result, the unconscious socialization process uncovered by Gajda et al. (2022) continues uninterrupted.

Thirdly, the results from Vu and Pham's study do show that teachers lack agency in educational systems that are outcome-focused. With standardized school curricula increasingly focused upon outcomes rather than processes, it can be assumed that the pressure upon teachers to teach functional content will continue to outweigh any desire to impart knowledge about the critical thinking skills which are a prerequisite for challenging deeply embedded gender stereotypes (Vu & Pham, 2022). This can help to explain why the studies identified in this section have consistently found that even where teachers exhibit a relatively high degree of awareness about gender stereotypes and their social harms, this does not protect teachers or their students from the deepening of their impact when teachers are required to use instructional materials that contain gender biases (Gajda et al., 2022; Koster & Litosseliti, 2021; Vu & Pham, 2022).

However, while it is important to acknowledge how research studies have shown that teachers perform an integral role in embedding and reinforcing gender stereotypes in the classroom, it is also crucial to note that there are significant differences in the way that teachers think about and reproduce the gender stereotypes and biases that are embedded in school textbooks. Teachers in secular liberal democracies are much more likely to express an awareness of the importance of challenging gender stereotypes than teachers working in traditional societies with more patriarchal gender norms, roles and identities (Gajda et al., 2022). Moreover, the content located within school textbooks is substantially more likely to contain stereotypical traits, norms

and ideologies in patriarchal cultures than it is in countries and contexts where gender equality and the liberalization of gender identities are deeply entrenched (Vu & Pham, 2022). This is an important issue to acknowledge in this study, which explores how gender stereotypes are manifest in school textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where, as we have already seen, the Ministry of Education promotes predominantly patriarchal and traditional representations of gender.

## **2.5 Gender Stereotypes in School Textbooks**

There has been a large body of literature that has examined the depiction of stereotypes within school textbooks with a particular emphasis on gender-related stereotypes. These stereotypes are frequently evident in both the texts and visuals employed within school textbooks. This section of the literature provides an overview of the existing knowledge base of gender stereotyping in school textbooks across the world. The section focuses upon the main categories of gender stereotypes that have been previously identified in the literature review chapter.

### **2.5.1 The Visibility of Female and Male Characters in School Textbooks**

As has been observed above; in order to explore the way in which gender stereotypes are represented, it is prudent in the first instance to question whether and to what extent the two genders are visible in the content of school textbooks. In order to explore the visibility of the two genders, many researchers have conducted quantitative research of the number of representations of men and women in learning materials as a means of gauging the extent and prevalence of gender biases. The overwhelming majority of empirical studies have found a significant discrepancy between the number of male characters and female characters depicted, with the former being more

prevalent (Al-Qatawneh & Al Rawashdeh, 2019; Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Antiksari, 2011; Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Sovic & Hus, 2015; Tarrayo, 2014).

For example, Sovic and Hus (2015) conducted an investigation into the representation of gender stereotypes in school textbooks, focusing on three English textbooks for young learners aged six in Slovenia. The study revealed significant discrepancies in the ratio of male to female characters in the textbooks, with male characters accounting for approximately 60% and female characters accounting for roughly 40% of characters in the three textbooks. The researchers in this study also found that it was not merely the underrepresentation of female characters that indicated gender biases in school textbooks; the way in which characters were depicted was also indicative of deeply embedded gender stereotypes. In particular, Sovic and Hus (2015, p. 500) reported that, across the three English language textbooks analyzed, the male character completely “dominates the female character.” For instance, female characters are routinely depicted following the instructions and the lead of male characters. Consequently, even where female characters are present, they are rendered subordinate and invisible by their subjugation to male characters (Sovic & Hus, 2015).

Similar findings were reported by Lee and Collins (2009), who conducted an analysis of ten English language textbooks used for intermediate learners in Australia. The researchers aimed to scrutinize the content and language used in these textbooks to determine whether the progress achieved by women in Australian society was reflected in the way gender was presented in school textbooks. The researchers discovered that the textbooks predominantly featured illustrations of boys and men over girls and women, with a ratio of 1.35:1. In a following study by Lee and Collins

(2010), ten English language textbooks used in Australia were compared with ten English language textbooks used in Hong Kong. The research findings indicated that the textbooks portrayed male characters more frequently than female characters. These results suggest a clear gender bias in the portrayal of characters in English language textbooks, raising important questions about the representation of gender in school textbooks.

In a similar manner, a study conducted by Barton and Sakwa (2012) analyzed gender representations within a Ministry of Education-recommended English textbook for teaching secondary school students aged 14-15 in Uganda. The researchers implemented a mixed-methods approach to explore the subject matter through quantitative content analysis and through qualitative critical discourse analysis. The researchers found that, within the examined textbooks, there was a significant lack of representations of female characters in both text and illustrations. The figures showed that only 35.7% of the characters were female characters, while male characters accounted for 64.3% of the content. This starkly contrasts with the actual proportion of women to men in Uganda: a theme which is widely reported across much of the literature that has been published on the underrepresentation of women and girls in school textbooks across the world.

As previously noted, the extensive empirical literature that has been published on the incidence of gender bias in school textbooks has shown that societies that can be defined broadly as traditional or patriarchal are likely to incorporate a greater proportion of visible markers of gender inequality than in more liberal and secular societies. For instance, Ansary and Babaii (2003) analyzed gender stereotypes in two textbooks for teaching English as a second language in Iran,

with the researchers reporting that male characters were significantly more prominently featured than female characters. The researchers analyzed male-to-female characters ratios in the reading and dialogue components of the two textbooks. In the first textbook, male characters featured in 64% of the dialogue for teaching students English compared to only 29% of female characters. Similar discrepancies were prevalent in the gender representations of dialogue in the second textbook. Moreover, in this second learning material, there was an even greater disparity between the number of female and male characters in the reading component of the book with female characters only appearing in 9% of the text with male characters accounting for 82% of the textbook (Ansary & Babaii, 2003). The researchers subsequently concluded that “women, in terms of female-oriented themes presented in textbooks, are clearly underrepresented although they comprise almost half the population of the world” (Ansary & Babaii, 2003, p. 3).

These results have been supported by content analysis undertaken by Parham (2013) on a total of nine educational books designed to teach the English language to young children also in Iran. Upon a thorough examination of the illustrations featured within these books, it was noted that female characters were portrayed less frequently than male characters, amounting to a discrepancy of about 10% between the genders. Similar findings were reported by Dahmardeh and Kim (2020), who analyzed the representation of gender in five locally developed textbooks for secondary school students in Iran. The researchers uncovered a significant disparity in the frequency of women’s and men’s representation in both the texts and illustrations, with boys and men depicted more frequently than girls and women by a factor of between four and five times. Likewise, in Indonesia, Antiksari (2011) conducted a study to examine gender representations in a set of English textbooks for primary school students called Learn English with Tito. This study

applied critical discourse analysis to uncover the frequency of male and female character appearances. The results indicated that male characters appeared more frequently, with a total of 768 instances (60.24%), while female characters appeared in 507 instances (39.76%).

In the Philippines, Tarrayo (2014) conducted a comprehensive study using both qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to explore whether gender bias is present in six locally published English-language preschool textbooks or not. The findings revealed that there was a differential rate of 1.68% between the genders, with male characters appearing in 967 characters compared to 935 characters who were female characters. However, Tarrayo (2014) also reported that, while the English-language textbooks featured both genders, male characters appeared more frequently than female characters in the different illustrations that occur within the textbooks. Consequently, Tarrayo concluded that “when females do not appear more often than males in the text (as well as in the illustrations that reinforce the text), the implied message is that women seem to be not that important enough to be included” (Tarrayo, 2014, p. 28).

Al-Qatawneh and Al Rawashdeh (2019) used a content analysis to assess gender representation in an Arabic language textbook for ninth-grade students. This school textbook had been approved by the Ministry of Education in the United Arab Emirates for use in public schools. Quantitative analysis revealed that the total number of roles assigned to female characters was 99 compared to 292 roles assigned to male characters (Al-Qatawneh & Al Rawashdeh, 2019). As a ratio, then, male characters appeared almost three times more than female characters in UAE public school textbooks, thereby contributing to the underrepresentation of women and girls in UAE society. To date, several studies have explored the prevalence of gender bias in school textbooks

in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Abiky (2019), for instance, explored the representation of gender in two English foreign language textbooks (Traveler 1 and Traveler 2) that are widely used in Saudi Arabian secondary schools for female pupils. The results revealed an enormous difference in the representation of the two genders in the two textbooks under investigation. Across the two textbooks, female characters only appeared in one picture compared to a total of 71 appearances by male characters. These findings suggest a near total invisibility and erasure of female characters in Saudi Arabian textbooks (Abiky, 2019). Given that the textbooks are designed only to be used by girls, it can be assumed that the effects of this overwhelming underrepresentation of female characters have an insidious effect upon girls' perception of their own gender, agency and power (Abiky, 2019).

While the results found in Abiky's study reveal a substantial disparity in the representation of male and female characters, other studies that have focused upon Saudi Arabia have also uncovered considerable quantitative differences in the prevalence of the two genders in school textbooks. For instance, Aljuaythin (2018) analyzed the content of gendered representations in two English foreign language textbooks from the Smart Class, which are designed for Saudi elementary students of both genders. Aljuaythin (2018) found that approximately three quarters of all pictures in the textbooks depicted only male characters. In total, 244 pictures represented male characters only, while only 40 pictures portrayed female characters only. Furthermore, Aljuaythin (2018) reported that, when pictures included both of the genders, the depiction of male figures outnumbered that of female characters. Across the two textbooks investigated, only 10 pictures had an equal number of male and female characters. As a consequence, these findings not only reveal the extent to which girls and women are grossly underrepresented in textbooks used in Saudi

schools, they also show that textbooks subtly reinforce the assumption that male visibility is more important in public spaces than it is for women (Aljuaythin, 2018).

In spite of previous studies' findings, some studies have reported a slight improvement in the frequency of men's and women's representation in school textbooks. For instance, in a comparative study that examined similar matters of women's representation in school textbooks, Lee (2014a) analyzed a popular series of primary school English-language textbooks used in Hong Kong that was published in 2005, with the same series published in 1988 (12 books). This study aimed to investigate to what extent the improvement of women's status in Hong Kong in recent years has been reflected in the representation of gender in these primary school textbooks. The study findings revealed a perpetuation of women's visual and textual underrepresentation. However, the comparison found that although women have been underrepresented in both textbook series, there remains a greater degree of balance between the two genders today. Thus, gender equity and visibility of women both visually and textually have been increased in the more recent books. A similar finding was reached by Cocorada (2018), who used a qualitative approach and content analysis to examine gender stereotypes in school textbooks and then compared the results with past findings of different studies. This comparison indicated an improvement in regard to gender equity and an increase in women's visibility. However, in a review of over 200 books, Hamilton et al. (2006) found that there was no significant decrease in the underrepresentation of female characters and that sexism and misogyny evidently persist in the pictorial representation of women and men. Many of these books were published in the United States, highlighting a deeply ingrained approach to the representation of the two genders.

### **2.5.2 Occupational and Domestic Roles**

As noted previously, occupational roles represent one of the most prominent markers of gender stereotyping. Research studies have consistently shown that school textbooks reaffirm existing gender biases through a stereotypical depiction of the occupational roles that men and women perform. According to a study conducted by Matsuno (2002) on the topic of gender stereotypes in a series of Japanese textbooks, for instance, it was found that the portrayal of various occupations still emphasizes prevalent gender stereotyping. Specifically, this study revealed that men were predominantly represented in esteemed job positions such as manager, doctor, founder, and chief executive officer (CEO). In contrast, women were often depicted in terms of their relationships with others, such as mothers, wives, or nieces (Matsuno, 2002). As a result, while men were represented working in prominent roles in finance and the public sphere, women were relegated to the domestic sphere of the home which, as we have seen, constitutes one of the most obvious ways to perpetuate stereotypical assumptions about the ‘natural’ roles of men and women.

Similarly, Barton and Sakwa (2012) examined the representation of gender in a commonly used English-language textbook in secondary schools in Uganda. The study found that the textbook predominantly portrayed men in positions of superiority, with 73% of all occupations being held by men. On the other hand, women were only represented in 27% of the depicted occupations. This reinforces the assumption that men should perform the role of breadwinners within society. Furthermore, gender roles assigned to men and women have been vastly different in terms of occupational opportunities. For example, men were often granted a wider range of high-paying and high-status jobs, such as judges, doctors, and managers; at the same time, women were typically confined to domestic roles, such as babysitters, sewists, cooks, and servers (Barton

& Sakwa, 2012). These findings reveal a deeply misogynistic ideology about the place of women in a society built upon entrenched gender hierarchies.

Islam and Asadullah (2018), meanwhile, analyzed the representation of gender roles in public school textbooks in four Muslim-majority countries: Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh with the researchers reporting that female characters were typically portrayed in traditional and typically low-paying jobs such as machinery or as auxiliary health care workers while, conversely, male characters were overwhelmingly represented in occupations of authority and leadership in the business, the military and the public sector. In addition to being assigned low-paying occupations, female characters in this study were also strongly and persistently represented undertaking domestic activities such as cleaning, cooking and caring for the children. This gender stereotyping not only reinforces traditional gender roles but also perpetuates the gender wage gap in the four Muslim countries under investigation (Islam & Asadullah, 2018).

These findings have been replicated in empirical studies that have analyzed gender representation in Jordanian school textbooks. Hasan (2015), for instance, reported that women were mostly presented in home settings with their children, or in public marketplaces for shopping whereas men who were shown in work settings with high-paid jobs such as doctors or judges. Moreover, women were mainly pictured in indoor scenes, for example, sitting in a classroom or watching television at home (Hasan, 2015). Consequently, in addition to reinforcing the stereotype of women in domestic roles, school textbooks in Jordan also reaffirm the stereotypical assumption that women are passive actors in stark contrast to male characters who are predominantly represented in more active occupational roles (Hasan, 2015). Similar findings were reported by

Ansary and Babaii's (2003) analysis of the representation of gender in Iranian school texts with the researchers uncovering a sharp dichotomy in the occupational roles of men and women: where men were portrayed in active roles outside the home, women were almost exclusively shown in passive domestic roles in the home. Where women are shown working, they are, according to this source, always in menial roles, which reinforce existing gender hierarchies (Ansary & Babaii, 2003). For instance, women are represented as nurses but *only* in pictures which also show doctors. This is an important source of gender stereotyping, which disseminates the assumption of a stratified workforce in which men will always embody more dominant and authoritative occupational roles than women.

It is not only traditional societies and Muslim countries, which depict male and female characters in staunchly stereotypical roles in school textbooks. Crawford et al. (2024), most notably, conducted an extensive analysis of 1,255 English language textbooks from 34 countries that are publicly available online in order to explore the roles assigned to male and female characters. Occupations were deciphered discursively in terms of the nouns and pronouns given to occupational roles in this large sample of school textbooks. The results revealed that a clear majority of occupations co-occur with man rather than woman nouns and pronouns. Of the 20 most frequently cited occupations, all but the roles of 'domestic help' and 'nurse' co-occur more with man than woman nouns and pronouns. Thus, with the exception of these two roles, all forms of occupation are associated with men (Crawford et al., 2024). Across all of the texts, the occupations that appear most frequently with men are 'physicist', 'mathematician', and 'salesperson' with 'domestic help,' 'nurse' and 'religious official' most commonly associated with

female characters. This clearly underlines the extent to which women's occupations are subordinated to men.

Furthermore, the researchers uncovered a profound difference in the relationship between gender and occupational roles according to where school textbooks were published. In the high-income countries (Australia, the UK, and the US), 6 of the most common 15 occupations have a female bias or are roughly split evenly between the two genders. In South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, conversely, 14 of the most common 15 occupations have a male bias. Moreover, where, in high-income countries, women's occupations are strongly linked with managerial positions, in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, women's occupational roles are almost always linked to domestic roles such as 'carer', 'nurse' or 'domestic helper' (Crawford et al., 2024). This underlines the extent to which gender laws and cultural norms have an immensely important role to perform in shaping the way in which school textbooks represent men's and women's roles in society and the economy.

The findings from each of these studies ultimately reveal a high incidence of gender stereotyping in school textbooks in many countries worldwide, where high-status jobs are viewed as primarily male-dominated. In contrast, lower-status jobs are seen as more feminine roles, while the domestic sphere is almost exclusively assigned to women and left unoccupied by men. This is a concerning issue that needs to be addressed, as it can have a significant impact on the development of young students. Therefore, in order to solve this issue, school textbooks need to include more diverse perspectives and representations of women.

### 2.5.3 Characteristics/Traits

Most of the literature that has explored the representation of gender biases in school textbooks has addressed the problem of characteristics and traits which, as we have seen, are crucial bedrocks of the stereotyping process. Hasan's (2015) analysis of elementary school textbooks in Jordan, for instance, found that images of female characters were assigned traditional feminine traits such as being caring and loving, with these traits generated from traditional gender roles of mothering and child-rearing. In comparison, men were depicted as having traits that were considered to be more masculine, such as self-confidence, decisiveness, independence, and a sense of adventure (Hasan, 2015). The findings from this study thus reinforce the theoretical assumptions of the second wave of feminist theory which, as has been discussed previously, outline the extent to which women and girls have been subjected to a virulent process of Othering in male-dominated societies. In particular, these findings show how women have been represented as the mirror inverse of men in Jordanian textbooks, thereby perpetuating existing gender hierarchies and stratifications (Hasan, 2015).

All of the literature which has explored the representation of gender traits and characteristics in Arab and/or Muslim countries has broadly corroborated the findings from Hasan's study. Islam and Asadullah's (2018) quantitative content analysis of school textbooks from Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, for instance, revealed that the portrayal of female and male characters was significantly biased in each of these countries. The study found that female characters were predominantly depicted as weak, victimized, introverted, passive, subordinate, messy, depressed, kind, and compassionate. In contrast, male characters were portrayed with opposite personality traits, such as confidence, courage, activity, discipline,

responsibility, sensibility, vision, and legendary status (Islam & Asadullah, 2018). The findings from this study have been supported by Hall (2014), who conducted mixed methods research in a bid to explore how gender characteristics and traits are represented in Iranian secondary schools. Hall (2014) found that male characters were represented as independent and authoritative, while female characters were domesticated and imbued with passive traits. This leads Hall (2014, p. 260) to deduce that state-operated education programs are “indigenised to meet the country’s cultural and religious ideologies.”

This is a theme that is also uncovered by Amini and Birjandi (2012), who conducted a qualitative analysis of a sample of textbooks employed in Iranian schools. Like Hall, Amini and Birjandi (2012) found that there were huge discrepancies in the characteristics assigned to male and female characters. In particular, Amini and Birjandi (2012) found that female characters were often represented as careless and highly emotional, whereas men were productive and active, focused only upon their goals.

It is not only in Muslim and Arab countries where stereotypical traits and characteristics have been uncovered in school textbooks. In the United States, for example, Evans and Davies (2000) examined how masculinity and femininity traits were portrayed among characters in two elementary school textbooks. The findings from this study revealed that a significant portion of male characters were depicted as being aggressive (24%), argumentative (over 21%), and competitive (almost 36%), while the corresponding percentages for female characters were notably lower at 4.9%, 6.5%, and 11.4% respectively. These results confirm Connell’s (1995) theory of

men and masculinities by showing how the desired traits of men are those which are associated with hegemonic masculinity.

These findings have been supported by empirical research undertaken by Solbes-Canales et al. (2020), who assessed how gender stereotypes are socialized and normalized in Spanish schools. Solbes-Canales et al. (2020) reported that Spanish textbooks represented male protagonists as authoritative, strong, and prone to aggression where, conversely, women characters were depicted as subservient, passive and open to victimization. This confirms previous observations, which have shown how the ideal traits of masculinity are invariably depicted as the mirror inverse of the traits and characteristics associated with femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Edley, 2017).

Research into traits and characteristics has also shown how the two genders are positioned as opposites within specific subject areas. For instance, Donnellan (2024) conducted a content analysis incorporating a total of 1655 images from a series of six science textbooks authorized by the Japanese Ministry of Education for use in elementary school classes. Donnellan (2024) found that not only were there far fewer images of female scientists than male scientists, but also that there were subtle differences in the traits assigned to male and female characters in the textbooks. Where men were shown in high-status, decision-making roles, women were more likely to “be depicted in images connected to themes of domesticity than as scientists or in other professional situations” (Donnellan, 2024, p.1). Additionally, where men were represented as important characters for scientists to study, women were largely invisible from the methodological process (Donnellan, 2024).

Consequently, where men embodied the characteristics of scientific ‘brilliance’ and ‘genius’, women remained tied to traditional domestic themes involving childcare and the home (Donnellan, 2024). Similar findings have been reported in studies which have explored the representation of gender in math textbooks with, for instance, Xenofontos (2024) finding that male characters in school textbooks in Cyprus are consistently represented as embodying the traits of determination and inquisitiveness while female characters are mostly represented in auxiliary roles supporting the male characters leaving little space for female activism (Xenofontos, 2024). These studies show that gender continues to be represented within a binary system, and that essentialized differences serve to normalize what are artificial and socially constructed traits and gendered characteristics (Donnellan, 2024; Xenofontos, 2024).

In addition to showing how traits and characteristics are employed to essentialize binary gender identities, there is evidence that school textbooks allow female characters great flexibility in their traits. After having analyzed gender representations in a sample of mathematics and English language textbooks used in secondary schools in Germany, Italy, Lithuania, and the Netherlands, Jehle et al. (2024) found that women are generally permitted to display and perform non-conforming traits more freely than men. For instance, female characters will occasionally appear as strong, assertive, and authoritative, while male characters seldom, if ever, embody any of the traditional female traits of passivity, empathy, and domesticity. This, in turn, suggests that men are subjected to much stricter and more prescriptive stereotypes than women in school textbooks (Jehle et al., 2024). This study will assess whether this is the case in Saudi Arabia, where,

unlike in Western societies, women are expected to conform to a much stricter and less flexible set of traits and characteristics (Abiky, 2019).

#### **2.5.4 Appearances and Activities**

Almost all of the large-scale studies which have examined how gender stereotypes are represented in school textbooks have reported that appearances conform to socially desirable features and cultural expectations (Aljuaythin, 2018; Crawford et al., 2024; Hamilton et al., 2006). Girls and women have long hair, wear typical ‘feminine’ clothes and are almost always represented as pretty and slim while men and boys have short hair, wear stereotypical ‘masculine’ clothes and are mostly depicted as being strong and athletic in their features (Aljuaythin, 2018; Crawford et al., 2024; Hamilton et al., 2006). In Muslim countries, women’s and men’s appearances in school textbooks are strongly influenced by religion with, for instance, female characters invariably represented wearing a *hijab* while male characters will typically wear a *thawb*, especially in Arabian countries in the Gulf (Javed & Atta, 2024). None of these findings are surprising because, as Jehle et al. (2024) attest, school textbooks tend to reflect well-established gender norms rather than challenge them, particularly regarding the appearances of the two genders. The representation of women’s and men’s appearances is thus noticeable for a lack of diversity and the reinforcement of binary gender differences (Crawford et al., 2024; Donnellan, 2024; Xenofontos, 2024).

Research which has explored the activities and interests of male and female characters in school textbooks has likewise shown that textbooks support, rather than challenge, the existing status quo. Much of the literature outlines a fundamental qualitative and quantitative distinction in the ways in which male and female characters are depicted in their activities and interests in school

textbooks. On a quantitative level, male characters in school textbooks are represented undertaking activities and interests more frequently than female characters (Al-Qatawneh & Al Rawashdeh, 2019; Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Antiksari, 2011; Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Crawford et al., 2024; Sovic & Hus, 2015; Tarrayo, 2014). As a consequence, male characters are not only more visible than female characters, but they have also much more agency and self-determination to engage in their preferred activities and interests. On a qualitative level, male characters are represented undertaking more physical activities and interests compared to female characters (Crawford et al., 2024). The vast majority of studies which have explored gender representations in school textbooks have, most notably, found that male characters are often represented playing sports, building or making objects, engaging in leisure and recreation, and traveling and being active in public spaces (such as market places) (Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Crawford et al., 2024; Islam & Asadullah, 2018; Hasan, 2015; Lee, 2018).

This is not the case for female characters who are seldom represented playing sports, engaging in leisure or recreation, and traveling and being active in public. Where female characters are depicted playing sports and engaging in leisure activities, these are almost always gender-specific activities. For instance, girls often play typical 'feminine' sports such as swimming and engage in leisure activities such as shopping (Aljuaythin, 2018; Crawford et al., 2024; Hasan, 2015; Lee, 2014a). This reflects a deeply anachronistic and misogynistic representation of the relationship between gender and physical activities, which should be interpreted as being more a reflection of what men believe women are interested in rather than an accurate depiction of the heterogeneity and diversity of the lived experiences of girls and women in the twenty first century (Crawford et al., 2024). Furthermore, as Lee (2018) explains, the representation of women taking

part in stereotypically ‘feminine’ activities serves to reserve more active and influential interests for the use of men only. Thus, as noted previously, stereotypes perform a crucial role in perpetuating a binary and deeply hierarchical gendered system where women are always positioned as inferior to men.

While significant discrepancies and biases in activities and interests have been reported across the world, the differences are, perhaps not surprisingly, more stark in traditional societies with laws and norms that enforce essentialized gender identities. Research undertaken into the representation of gender in school textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has shown that activities and interests are sharply segregated according to gender identities. After undertaking mixed methods analysis of six English language textbooks from the *Mega Goal* series (published in 2023), for instance, Alqahtani (2024) found that women were depicted as being involved in a much smaller selection of activities that mainly revolved around children and family such as cooking, pushing a stroller or cleaning the home where, in contrast, men were represented undertaking and enjoying a very broad spectrum of activities and interests including exploring and traveling to maintaining law and order, playing and watching sports, and riding camels. Thus, the dichotomy between the active and agentic man continues to be offset by the idea of the inactive, unadventurous and passive woman who lacks agency and autonomy (Alqahtani, 2024).

Similar findings have been reported by Edres (2022) who undertook a content analysis of three volumes of three student books used to teach mathematics in Jordan. Like most other studies, Edres (2022) found that the majority of male characters were represented as being involved in sport, leisure and/or recreational activities while, conversely, female figures were represented as

being involved in school activities or what the author terms a 'static' posture: where the characters are represented merely as objects who 'do' nothing. The static posture is, according to Edres (2022), indicative of men's ownership of the female characters. While the male characters are busy engaging in activities and interests, the agency and mobility of the female characters are rendered virtually obsolete (Edres, 2022). This is an immensely important point to acknowledge. These findings not only indicate that there is a discernible lack of equality in the representation of gendered activities in school textbooks, but they also confirm the central tenets of feminist theory by showing how, in a patriarchal culture, women and girls are always co-opted and controlled by men.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The literature review has explored some of the most influential theories that have been developed to help us make sense of the role and function of gender. Feminist theories have been hugely important in shaping our understanding of the social and cultural construction of gender in patriarchal societies. Almost all of the literature that has been published on gender stereotyping is derived from the fundamental premise of feminist theory: that gender stereotypes are unfair and biased generalizations about men and women, which: (a) assign universal features and characteristics to the genders regardless of individual differences; and (b) aim to reinforce the privilege and power of men while disadvantaging and disenfranchising women. Hegemonic masculinity has significantly contributed to our understanding of the toxic role that stereotypical representations of masculine identities perform both in co-opting femininity and in overshadowing other, lesser desirable manifestations of masculinity, thereby reinforcing the finding that gender

stereotypes are not abstract or accidental representations of gender but, rather, arbitrary depictions of gender that serve instrumental social, cultural and political purposes.

The literature review has demonstrated how gender stereotypes have created fertile grounds for biased representations of gender traits, behaviors, occupations and social roles, and appearances and activities. School textbooks perform a crucial role in communicating and embedding these stereotypes both in the language that is used in textbooks and in the visual depictions of gender. Much of the empirical literature that has explored the representation of gender stereotypes in school textbooks has shown how male characters appear with significantly more frequency than female characters. This reinforces the stereotypes of men's visibility and, by association, women's invisibility. Moreover, where women do appear in many school textbooks, they are represented as auxiliaries of male characters. The static representation of female characters reinforces the myth of men's power while reaffirming the stereotype of women's passivity.

Consistent with feminist theories and the theories of masculinities, the literature review has shown how the stereotypical representation of gender characteristics and traits perpetuates the assumption that men are assertive and dominant while, conversely, representing women as submissive and compliant. Similar divisions are apparent in the stereotypical representation of gendered appearances, activities, occupations, and social roles. Male characters are invariably represented in positions of power and authority whereas female characters are either confined to the domestic sphere of the home or are assigned a very narrow and restricted spectrum of occupations, which largely confirms the stereotypes of women's empathy, caregiving and domesticity.

While the literature review has shown that gender stereotyping is prevalent across the world, there is overwhelming evidence that school textbooks' representation of gender conforms to more stereotypical visions of masculinity and femininity in traditional/patriarchal and religious societies than it does in secular societies. Previous research conducted on school textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has revealed that gender stereotypes conform to some of the most pervasive myths of patriarchy while at the same time embedding religious and cultural norms that segregate the genders. However, much of the literature that has been published on gender stereotyping in Saudi textbooks has focused upon material produced for secondary schools. Moreover, much of the literature has explored *either* the qualitative representation of gender stereotypes (for instance, through discursive analysis) or the quantitative representation of gender stereotypes (for example, through a content or statistical analysis). This study aims to address these gaps in the literature through exploring the representation of gender stereotypes in primary school textbooks and, furthermore, incorporating an analysis that combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

### **3. Chapter Three: Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In the preceding chapter, building upon previous research, the context for the current study was established, as well as the gap that this study seeks to address. As demonstrated in the literature review, previous studies have consistently found that women have been underrepresented and misrepresented in school textbooks. This underrepresentation can have a significant impact on the development of young students. Thus, such patterns reinforce the need to examine how these issues manifest in Saudi instructional materials. Therefore, the current study seeks to examine the ways in which Saudi school textbooks represent both genders. The rationale for focusing on gender representation in Saudi Arabian first-grade school textbooks is due to the fact that while there has been research conducted about the representation of gender in school textbooks, no previous research has analyzed gender stereotypes in Saudi Arabian first-grade school textbooks. By addressing this gap, the current study aims to contribute to the existing body of literature and provide insight into the representation of gender in these textbooks.

This chapter presents the study's methodological foundations by first justifying the ontological and epistemological stances and then explaining the theoretical framework underpinning the study. This will be followed by stating the specific methodology employed in order to address the research questions. More specifically, this chapter delves into the content analysis method, with particular attention to its strengths and limitations. It further provides an in-depth description of

the study sample and how the data were collected and analyzed. Finally, this chapter addresses the challenges and ethical considerations related to this study.

### **3.2 Ontological and Epistemological Stances**

Prior to initiating the methodological design of any research study, it is crucial for researchers to establish a clear epistemological position in order to ensure that their research is rigorous and valid. In general, unclear ontological and epistemological stances may lead to discrepancies in the research questions, methodologies, and interpretations of findings. Epistemological perspectives serve as a roadmap for researchers to follow when designing and conducting their research studies, as they aid in determining the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired (Alwedinani, 2016). Epistemology refers to “the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge and the process by which knowledge is acquired and validated” (Gall et al., 2003, p. 13). Also, Cohen et al. (2018, p. 5) refer to epistemology as the assumptions that one makes about “the very bases of knowledge – its nature and form, how it can be acquired and how communicated to other human beings.” In essence, epistemology is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for understanding how we come to know what we know and how we can be certain that our knowledge is accurate and reliable (Crotty, 2020). Hence, these assumptions influence the research design, including the selection of methods, the researcher’s role, and how findings are interpreted.

Ontology, on the other hand, is a philosophical discipline that deals with the study of existence and reality, as it is concerned with the nature of the world and what we can know about it. According to Ritchie et al. (2013), ontology aims to understand the fundamental nature of reality as well as the various ways in which it can be perceived and experienced. Bhattarai (2021)

emphasizes that ontological assumptions shape how researchers conceptualize the world and the phenomena being studied; therefore, different ontological perspectives influence the research questions, the methods, and the interpretations of findings. This is echoed in the work of Tuli, who argues that ontological perspectives form researchers' assumptions about the nature of reality, whether it is objective and independent of human perception or subjective and constructed through social interactions (Tuli, 2010). Understood in this way, it is immensely important that researchers clarify the ontological stance they undertake in their studies, which shapes their research methodologies and interpretations of data.

In conducting the current study, I adopted a constructivist perspective, that means I view reality as socially constructed and subjective (Ritchie et al., 2013). This in turn implies that knowledge is not a fixed entity but rather, it is a product of human interpretation and understanding. Thus, adopting a constructivist perspective in this study can help in providing a powerful lens in order to analyze gender stereotypes in Saudi Arabian first-grade school textbooks. This approach moves beyond a simple content analysis, as it helps to explore the deeper meanings and implications of gender representations in school textbooks. It also aids in identifying subtle biases and understanding how these representations reproduce gender inequality, as well as delving deeper into the social and cultural contexts that shape these representations.

According to Cohen et al. (2018), studying social phenomena requires examining the subjective experiences and viewpoints of those involved. This perspective aligns with constructivist and interpretivist approaches to research, which recognize the diversity of individual interpretations of reality and meaning as well as emphasizing the importance of personal

experience and individual perception in understanding social phenomena. Thus, this approach differs from the tenets of objectivism, which posits a single, objective reality that exists independently of human perception (Cronjé, 2006). As Ritchie et al. (2013) asserted, the meanings we attach to things and concepts are not fixed; instead, they are formed based on the context of time and place. Consequently, researchers are not able to claim that they capture the full social reality of a group or individual, nor are they able to provide an absolute and definitive interpretation of their findings. This is because the meanings and interpretations they reach are contingent on various factors, as they are in continual flux and cannot be fully controlled or accounted for.

Moreover, as discussed, constructivist and interpretive approaches view reality through people's beliefs and perceptions. Thus, there are various ways in which this reality can be understood and interpreted. This, in turn, makes knowledge a subjective construct because it is influenced by various personal and contextual factors (Alsaadi, 2014). Therefore, in this study, I view social phenomena and their associated meanings to be continually formed by individuals through their interactions. This ontological stance aligns with the nature of the current study, which aims to explore how gender is represented and reproduced via texts and illustrations in first-grade Saudi textbooks. This stance acknowledges that meanings around gender are not fixed, but they are shaped by cultural, institutional, and social contexts. This, as a result, has informed the formulation of the current study's questions and the interpretive approach adopted in analyzing the content of these textbooks.

Further, as noted by Wellington (2015), even when discussing the same phenomenon, people may interpret its meaning differently, which is due to their unique perspectives and individual experiences. This accentuates the subjective nature of social phenomena and the impact of personal interpretation on how we understand them. In other words, this implies that what might be considered 'true' in one context or from one point of view may not hold up under scrutiny from another angle. This position is particularly relevant to the current study, which examines the gender representations in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. Thus, representations of gender are not neutral or objective; rather, they reflect specific cultural and political perspectives. Consequently, different interpretations of the same content may emerge based on the analytical lens applied. Adopting a critical and interpretive approach enables this study to uncover how gendered meanings are encoded and conveyed through school textbooks.

Turning to epistemology, I adopted an interpretivist perspective, which emphasizes close interaction between the researcher and the social reality in which the two are not completely independent but have an impact on one another. As Alsaadi (2014) describes, this interaction means that the researchers cannot distance themselves from the research process. In this respect, researchers are continually constructing meanings and interpretations based on their own experiences and reflections, as well as the experiences of their participants. Therefore, it is important to note that our understanding of both knowledge and social phenomena, such as gender in the current study, is heavily dependent on our reflections and interpretations rather than simply relying on empirical data. However, it is essential for researchers to be aware of their own biases and the limitations of their methods when conducting this type of research.

Regarding this view, the findings of social research are inevitably subjective. According to Cohen et al. (2018):

Social science is seen as a subjective rather than an objective undertaking, as a means of dealing with the direct experience of people in specific contexts, where social scientists understand, explain and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants. (p. 17)

Consequently, gender cannot be viewed from a constructivist perspective as a purely objective phenomenon that exists apart from the individuals involved or their environment. Instead, I view gender as the result of continuous interactions between people. It encompasses more than just physical characteristics but rather constitutes a multifaceted concept that individuals perform through their interactions with others. This perspective is consistent with the conceptualization of gender discussed in the literature review (see Chapter 2). In line with this understanding, and given that social research involves interpretation and is shaped by context, I applied content analysis as a research method in the current study to delve into how gender stereotypes are embedded and transmitted through texts and images in first-grade school textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As an insider researcher, I drew upon my personal knowledge and expertise in order to critically analyze and interpret these instructional materials with the aim of revealing how gender roles and expectations are represented and reproduced.

As discussed, researchers need to establish clear ontological and epistemological stances when conducting their studies. These philosophical perspectives form how researchers approach their studies and influence research questions, methodologies, and interpretations of findings. Therefore, this study adopted a constructivist ontological perspective, which regards reality as

socially constructed and subjective, and an interpretivist epistemological stance, which emphasizes the close interaction between the researcher and social reality. This approach is particularly relevant for studying complex social phenomena such as gender stereotypes in school textbooks, as it allows a deeper exploration of how gender roles and expectations are portrayed and reinforced in these instructional materials while also enabling a more critical application of content analysis to examine the underlying social and cultural contexts that form these representations.

### **3.3 Theoretical Framework**

It is imperative for researchers to establish a coherent theoretical framework when conducting primary or secondary research. A theoretical framework provides the researcher with a conceptual road map around which they can plan and orient their study (Creswell, 2013). In the context of this study, which investigates how Saudi first-grade textbooks construct and communicate gender stereotypes, a theoretical framework functions as the guiding structure through which the selection of materials, the coding scheme, and the analytical focus become logically connected. In this study, the framework is therefore not only descriptive but also interpretive: it guides how gendered images and texts are read, and how their potential influence on young children's early socialization is understood.

Theoretical frameworks can also help the researcher to develop the research questions, shape the methodology and research design and, more importantly, inform the way in which researchers interpret and analyze the data that they acquire over the course of the study. In this research, the framework plays this role by clarifying how textbook representations function as gendered messages and why certain patterns identified in the content analysis are sociologically

meaningful. A theoretical framework should, as Creswell (2013) attests, enable the researcher to connect all parts of the study and to provide a rational and evidence-based approach for making sense of the main issues and themes that arise during the research process.

There is a wide variety of theories that can help the researcher in this study to make sense of the role and function of school textbooks in communicating and embedding gender stereotypes. While it may be possible to select one overarching theoretical framework to guide and inform the findings, using multiple theories can help to, on the one hand, expand the focus of the research and, on the other, provide different (and sometimes competing) perspectives on social phenomena (Silverman, 2010). Furthermore, as Silverman (2010) explains, there are times when no single theoretical framework is able to adequately explain and account for the complexity of the data that has been acquired. This is certainly the case in this research study where, as the literature review has shown, there are multiple theories that can help to explain and make sense of gender stereotyping, school textbooks and the socialization of identities in schools. For this reason, this research study will be underwritten by multiple theories and perspectives in a coherent framework. Four main theories have been included, each of which is discussed in greater detail below.

### **3.3.1 The Hidden Curriculum**

As has been ascertained, the theory of a hidden curriculum represents one of the most widely utilized and well known conceptual frameworks for making sense of the role and function of schools in shaping students' behavior and learning. The hidden curriculum theory is founded upon the assumption that schools perform a dual function. On the one hand, schools perform an overt and explicit function in imparting knowledge and instructing students (Garcia & De

Lissovoy, 2013). The school curriculum, from this perspective, is fundamentally cognitive and developmental: teachers and schools thus aim to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and resources that they require to successfully navigate their way through the curriculum and progress through the school system (Kentli, 2009). Instructional materials such as textbooks are, as we have seen, absolutely essential in facilitating this overt and explicit school function (Vu & Pham, 2022). In the context of Saudi primary education, this explicit function is particularly relevant because first-grade textbooks constitute the core materials through which children first encounter formal learning and structured knowledge.

On the other hand, schools perform an implicit and largely covert function in transmitting hegemonic attitudes and beliefs and in communicating the ideas, values and norms of the ruling classes (Garcia & De Lissovoy, 2013). Most notably, the theory of the hidden curriculum stipulates that, alongside the open and transparent transference of knowledge, teachers and schools communicate an unseen and informal set of rules, routines and regulations within the formal and institutionalized educational process (Rashidi & Meihami, 2016). These informal rules and routines are not codified in the instructional materials that are employed to teach the formal curriculum; rather, they are embedded within instructional materials such as school textbooks and communicated through the dominant social relations, language and pedagogical practices that are used by teachers in the classroom (Garcia & De Lissovoy, 2013; Rashidi & Meihami, 2016). For the purposes of this study, this distinction is central for analyzing how Saudi first-grade textbooks may embed gendered expectations not through direct instruction, but through recurring visual and textual cues that subtly normalize roles assigned to boys and girls. Understood in this way, the theory of the hidden curriculum implies that schools are vehicles for the transmission and

inculcation of hegemonic ideas and norms that reflect the interests of the ruling classes while at the same time silencing the counterhegemonic voices and views, which reveal a different way of viewing and making sense of the world (Jay, 2003; Kentli, 2009).

This is an important issue to note and one that is central to understanding the value of the hidden curriculum concept when undertaking research into school textbooks. In particular, it is prudent to note that the theory of the hidden curriculum suggests that school textbooks perform a crucial role both as cognitive and developmental tools that are able to teach students core knowledge, and as *social* and *cultural* instruments. They subtly and unconsciously encourage students to think and behave in ways that are deemed to be desirable by the actors and institutions that are responsible for making educational policy while discouraging or silencing identities and norms that are considered undesirable or subversive (Garcia & De Lissovoy, 2013; Kentli, 2009; Rashidi & Meihami, 2016).

The theory of the hidden curriculum is strongly correlated with the assumption of student passivity. Much of the literature that has been published on the hidden curriculum is based upon an assumption that, before they enter primary schools, children are primed to accept the authority and the legitimacy of the school system, and, furthermore, to accept without question the facts and the knowledge that is imparted by responsible adults (Garcia & De Lissovoy, 2013; Hernandez et al., 2013). As a consequence, the hidden and unseen ‘rules of the game’ are communicated and embedded both through the language, symbols and rituals of instructional materials *in addition to* the prevailing social hierarchy within schools, which presumes a high degree of subordination and compliance (Kentli, 2009). This dimension is especially pertinent in the Saudi first-grade context,

where children's minimal prior exposure to schooling means that representational patterns in textbooks may exert an even stronger influence on how gender roles are initially understood and internalized. The hidden curriculum thrives precisely because, in order to succeed in schools, students must learn to 'play the game', and to reproduce and comply with the preferred behaviors, identities and norms of educational institutions (Gair & Mullins, 2001). Viewed from this perspective, the theory of a hidden curriculum invites the educational researcher to consider how gender identities and stereotypes are transmitted through the *experiential dimensions* of education, where norms are both explicitly taught and implicitly learned at many different and intersecting levels of authority (Hernandez et al., 2013).

### **3.3.2 Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy is inextricably linked to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was first published in 1970. The central theoretical premise presented by Freire (2018) is that traditional approaches to teaching are flawed because they are only concerned with imparting instructional/didactic material and academic knowledge to students for instrumental purposes (i.e., in order to pass examinations and summative assessments). This, according to Freire (2018), represents a structural weakness affecting all pedagogies that are commonly applied in public school settings. In particular, Freire (2018) argues that, to meaningfully affect educational and social outcomes over time, children need to be equipped with the key skills and resources that they need in order to become active and participatory citizens. According to Freire (2018), the ability to think independently and critically is central to the goal of active citizenship: a student can thus only become a (pro)active member of society if they are able to challenge and deconstruct the

taken-for-granted assumptions, norms and ideas that they are presented with in schools and which they routinely encounter in their families and communities.

Understood in this way, Freire's theory of a critical pedagogy is closely associated with the broader critical turn in the social sciences, which occurred during the closing decades of the twentieth century. The critical turn sought to question many of the assumptions and the methodologies that had influenced the development of positivism in social research. Positivism is founded upon the premise of epistemological objectivism, which assumes that reality exists independently of human thought, emotion or perception (Cronjé, 2006). Conversely, critical theories are inexorably intertwined with the principle of epistemological subjectivism (Bernstein, 2000). In particular, the critical turn posits that: (a) reality is always filtered through subjective human experiences; and (b) there is no objective reality that exists beyond human perception (Cronjé, 2006).

As a consequence, building upon the insights afforded by the critical turn, a critical pedagogy encourages students to actively reflect upon and interpret social reality in order to decipher and make their own meanings (McLaren, 2017). A critical pedagogy thus encourages the researcher to move beyond the blinders of particular disciplines in order to "peer through a conceptual window to a new world of research and knowledge production" (Kincheloe et al., 2017, p. 431). Viewed from this perspective, critical pedagogy facilitates an emancipatory approach to education, which enhances the students' capacity to think for themselves and, as a result, to exercise greater agency and autonomy over their lives (Freire, 2018; Kincheloe et al., 2017; McLaren, 2017). This, as Giroux (2017) attests, does not simply herald a philosophical shift in the

design and delivery of education; it promotes a *cognitive* shift in the design and delivery of education. Where orthodox models of teaching and education establish a causal and linear relationship between teachers, knowledge and students, critical pedagogy aims to disrupt and decenter knowledge so as to encourage students to reposition and rethink their relationships with themselves, other people and the world in which they live (Ball, 2021; Freire, 2018). A critical pedagogy is, considered from this perspective, an approach to teaching which seeks to challenge and undermine the status quo and to encourage positive change based upon critical thinking and reflexivity (Ball, 2021; Freire, 2018; Giroux, 2017).

In addition to encouraging students to make their own meanings and to think independently, the critical turn in the social sciences is closely linked with constructivist philosophies. This, as McLaren et al. (2017) attest, is an immensely important issue to note because constructivism is rooted upon the premise that knowledge is never objective or natural. Rather, from a constructivist standpoint, knowledge is always created and contrived according to historically and culturally contingent factors and conditions (McLaren et al., 2017). Knowledge produced in schools perpetuates what Kincheloe (2008, p. 57) terms ‘mainstream culture’: the preferences, norms and identities that reflect the cultural elite. Much of the literature that has been published on critical pedagogy has noted that mainstream culture is associated with the ideas and identities of patriarchal hegemony, heteronormativity, class elitism, and ethnic and cultural dominion (Giroux, 2017; Kincheloe et al., 2017; Kincheloe, 2008).

The dominant or mainstream culture leaves its imprint across the school system. Mainstream cultural views are, for instance, disseminated in the official rules and language of the

school, the dominant practices and social relations favored by teachers and schools, and, most importantly, in the context of this research study, the selection and presentation of instructional materials designed to communicate school knowledge (Freire, 2018; Giroux, 2017). School textbooks, as we have already seen, are prominent instruments of social and cultural reproduction that are routinely utilized in the public education system as a means of disseminating the norms, values, and ideologies of the hegemonic and mainstream culture (Vu & Pham, 2022).

Understood in this way, critical pedagogy is closely allied to the concept of the hidden curriculum. Consistent with the theory of a hidden curriculum, critical pedagogy explores the unseen views, norms, values, experiences, and ideas that are oppressed and/or marginalized from mainstream academic and educational discourse (Freire, 2018). A critical pedagogy, therefore, acknowledges that domination is not merely social or economic; it is also pedagogical (Giroux, 2017). In addition, consistent with the theory of the hidden curriculum, a critical pedagogy stipulates that the favored practices and ideals of the hegemonic classes are conveyed through instructional materials, such as textbooks, which stifle self-reflexivity and perpetuate the power and the privilege of the hegemonic social and cultural classes (Giroux, 2010). Drawing upon the insights afforded by both the hidden curriculum and critical pedagogy will therefore enable us to:

- (a) identify where school textbooks are disseminating and/or communicating gender stereotypes;
- (b) analyze and make sense of the hegemonic identities, norms, behaviors, and values which underwrite those stereotypes; and
- (c) explore and articulate the likely effects of gender stereotyping upon students who are likely to be unaware and unconscious of the insidious role that school textbooks can perform in facilitating cultural (re)production.

### **3.3.3 Foucauldian Theories of Discipline and Power**

Michel Foucault was an immensely influential and prolific writer whose corpus of work extended across a huge variety of disciplines, including sociology, law, philosophy, and literature. Foucault is widely recognized as having been one of the pioneers of post-structuralist and postmodernist thought. It is precisely because he was such a prolific writer who addressed such a wide range of issues that there is no singular Foucauldian theory which captures all of his ideas or adequately expresses his views. As a consequence, the theoretical framework employed in this research study will draw upon two of Foucault's most enduring sociological theories.

Firstly, the study will utilize Foucault's theory of power. Power, according to Foucault (1998, p. 68), is "everywhere ... because it comes from everywhere." While this may appear to represent a rather vague and abstract statement, Foucault is here challenging the idea that power is a one-dimensional force that can be wielded by individuals or groups episodically in order to exercise dominion over other individuals and groups. According to this orthodox view, power is transparent and instrumental (Lukes, 2005). Foucault undermines this instrumental view of power by claiming that power is a much more complex and multidimensional concept. For Foucault (1998), power is an entirely more nebulous and fluid concept that can be manifest and wielded in myriad ways. Power is thus diffused rather than concentrated; opaque rather than transparent (Foucault, 1980, 1998).

In particular, and of specific relevance to education, Foucault (1998) argues that power is inextricably linked to knowledge. Powerful groups in society maintain their position of hegemony through exercising control over knowledge (Foucault, 1998). Language is central to the exercise

of power and is a fulcrum of the power/knowledge nexus. Through the dominant language that is used by experts, for instance, universal truths are established (Foucault, 1980). Yet, as Foucault (1980) explains, these truths are not objective because neither knowledge nor language is neutral. Consequently, in place of a universal truth, Foucault (1977, p. 13) refers to what he terms 'regime of truth'. According to Foucault (1977, p. 13); regimes are: (a) types of discourse that a society harbors and sanctions and "causes to function as true"; (b) "the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements"; and (c) "the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth". Regimes of truth are held in place by the status of those who determine whether and what are held to be true (Foucault, 1980). Thus, for Foucault, truth is shaped entirely by the invisible nature of the relationship between power and knowledge. This leads Gaventa (2003) to deduce that Foucault's work constitutes a:

Radical departure from previous modes of conceiving power and cannot be easily integrated with previous ideas, as power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them. (p.1)

Foucauldian theories of power represent an immensely important component within the theoretical framework used in this study because, in drawing attention to the diffused and ubiquitous nature of power and the regimes of truth that this necessarily entails, Foucault reveals how power works at a subconscious level through the language that we speak, the rituals and routines that we engage in and, most importantly, the statements and propositions that we accept to be true (Gaventa, 2003). Gender is one of the most important and taken-for-granted truths that there is in any given society – one that is seldom questioned either by those who disseminate the truth (in this case, teachers) or those who accept the truth (students). Viewing school textbooks'

production and dissemination of gender from the perspective of Foucauldian theory will therefore help to explain how stereotypes are maintained by discourse and knowledge that function as objective truths.

Secondly, Foucault produced an extensive body of work on the techniques and institutions of discipline. Closely allied to his concept of power, Foucault's (1995) concept of discipline is founded upon the premise that those groups who exercise power do so in diffuse and opaque ways. Adopting a historical/chronological approach, Foucault (1995) demonstrates how the state has moved away from public and often violent displays of power to more subtle and psychosocial forms of exercising control over subjects. Foucault's (1995) work on the birth and the evolution of the prison underlines the crucial role that state institutions perform in regulating the performance of subjects, and enforcing structures and rules that facilitate compliance with the ideas and the norms of the social and cultural elite.

Schools can be understood as what Foucault (1995, p. 299) describes as 'carceral mechanisms': institutions that are intended to cure, educate and provide comfort but which "all tend, like the prison, to exercise a power of normalization." Schools, like prisons, are undergirded by an authoritarian structure, loss of autonomy and self-determination, imposed rules and regulations such as dress codes, meal times and assembly places, and an implicit emphasis that is placed on order, silence and consent (Foucault, 1995). Schools are thus an integral part of the development of the disciplinary society: a network of institutions and social relations that create a condition of subservience and surveillance (Foucault, 1995; 1998). This is an immensely important issue to acknowledge and one that informs the theoretical framework employed in this research

study. In particular, it is crucial to note that, in analyzing the representation of gender stereotypes in Saudi school textbooks, the study will draw upon Foucauldian theory to explain how power operates through both textual and visual discourses within textbooks to shape and regulate students' understanding of social norms and identities.

### **3.3.4 Social Learning Theory**

As we have ascertained previously, social learning theory is inextricably linked to the pioneering research of Bandura (1977), who found that young children will typically mimic the behavior that they observe from their role models. Role models are adults who have a degree of authority over the child (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Bussey, 2004). As stated earlier, social learning theory stipulates that it is through the observation of role models that the process of vicarious learning occurs: learning that is at once insidious and cognitive-behavioral. When children perceive role models to be rewarded for engaging in particular behaviors, they are much more likely to reproduce these actions in order to accrue similar rewards and accolades (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Bussey, 2004). This is an important issue to note because it suggests that vicarious learning is not simply a process of observing and mimicking the behavior of role models but, rather, an affective and emotional response to the observation of the behavior of others (Gray & MacBlain, 2015). For instance, when the learner witnesses a role model being punished for acting out a particular behavior, this is likely to create a sense of fear and panic which, in turn, reduces the prospect of the same behavior being reproduced and/or re-enacted. Similarly, when a learner witnesses a role model attain a reward for behaving in a particular way, there is likely to be an emotional payoff that is experienced in terms of joy and/or expectation (Gray & MacBlain, 2015).

Social learning theory is a key conceptual tool for understanding how gender stereotypes in textbooks may influence or shape values, attitudes or practices among children and young people. There are two main reasons why this is the case. Firstly, in drawing attention to the way in which vicarious learning occurs and is experienced, social learning theory allows us to hypothesize the ways in which gender stereotypes affect the response and the behavior of students in Saudi schools. In particular, exploring the affective dimensions of vicarious learning can help us to better understand how phenomena such as hegemonic masculinity and internalized misogyny are produced through the images and texts that are included in school textbooks. Coupled with Foucauldian disciplinary theories, the hidden curriculum and critical pedagogy, social learning theory can, therefore, provide a unique and profound insight into the explicit and implicit processes that shape the transmission and inculcation of gender norms, identities, and stereotypes.

Secondly, social learning theory's emphasis upon role models is particularly relevant for any research study which seeks to explore the function of school textbooks in facilitating gender stereotypes. On the one hand, it is important to note that school textbooks typically use the representation of role models in order to teach children about academic subjects. Role models typically appear in the form of responsible adults (i.e., as representations of teachers in schools, of parents in the home, or as adults in the workplace or in public), although they can also appear as peers (idealized versions of school pupils who conform precisely to societal expectations of childhood). Role models are much more common in primary school textbooks compared to secondary school textbooks because: (a) there is substantially more pictorial content in primary

school textbooks; and (b) primary school education is much more concerned with the human and moral development of students (Osman, 2019; Osman, 2021).

Role models in school textbooks act primarily as visual aids, which exhibit positive and desirable behaviors (Gebregeorgis, 2016). The role models used in school textbooks can thus be interpreted as a virtue-led approach to education where children are habituated into accepting socially desirable norms, identities and values (Osman, 2019). Understood in this way, there can be little doubt that social learning theory represents an indispensable theoretical prism through which to view school textbooks' representation of gender stereotyping.

On the other hand, it is prudent to note that, as we have seen, teachers who are responsible for delivering educational content are themselves essential role models who children will look up to and seek to emulate (Osman, 2021). The role modeling function of teachers is enhanced by the disciplinary mechanisms at work in schools where, as Foucault (1995) has shown, success is facilitated through compliance and consensus. By drawing upon the insights afforded by social learning theory, then, we can attempt to make sense of the way in which gender stereotypes are reinforced by the scaffolding and role modeling provided by teachers who communicate the desired norms, attributes, identities, and interests of the genders both through the use of textbooks and through their position of authority within a hierarchical school system.

### **3.4 Review of Research Aim and Questions**

The overarching aim of this study is to critically examine the ways in which gender stereotypes are represented in first-grade textbooks used in Saudi public schools. In line with this aim, the study seeks to answer the following specific research questions:

1. What is the ratio of male and female characters in texts and illustrations in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks? Is there a variation in proportion between the texts and the illustrations?
2. What are the gender differences in occupational representation in first-grade textbooks?
3. What traits are assigned to male and female characters in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks?
4. To what extent does the portrayal of gender in first-grade textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia reinforce gender stereotypes?

### **3.5 Research Design**

This study is exploratory as it investigates the representation of gender and the ways in which such portrayals may reinforce stereotypes within first-grade textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a subject that remains underexplored in the extant literature. According to Gratton (2014), exploratory research is commonly conducted when the researcher has limited knowledge of the subject under investigation, and it is particularly relevant when the phenomenon is new and has received limited scholarly attention. While international studies have examined similar issues, the Saudi context remains largely absent from scholarly discussion. Therefore, quantitative and qualitative content analysis was employed to examine how male and female characters are depicted in both textual and visual content. This method enables a systematic and interpretive exploration

of explicit and implicit messages regarding gender roles and stereotypes, with the purpose of revealing potential biases and, in this respect, assessing the extent to which these representations may perpetuate gender stereotypes.

## **3.6 Overview of Content Analysis Method**

### **3.6.1 Definitions and Types**

Scholars have conceptualized content analysis in both positivist and constructivist terms, reflecting different epistemological orientations. Given the constructivist epistemological stance adopted in this study, the method is not viewed as a purely objective technique, but rather as a flexible tool that can be shaped by interpretive insights. On the one hand, Berelson (1952, as cited in Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008, p. 596) defined quantitative content analysis as an “objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication,” a conceptualization that resonates with a positivist orientation and that has, as Cohen et al. (2018) attest, exerted considerable influence on traditional research approaches. On the other hand, Krippendorff (2018, p. 24) defined content analysis as a “research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.” In this definition, the emphasis on contextual meaning aligns more closely with interpretivist and constructivist perspectives.

As has been ascertained, both definitions feature essential components of content analysis: the analysis is objective, systematic, and quantitative. However, from a constructivist standpoint, these characteristics should not be interpreted as implying absolute neutrality or value-free interpretation. Objectivity implies that the analysis is guided by well-defined procedures that are

designed to produce consistent results across different researchers. This means that if other researchers were to conduct the same analysis, they would draw similar inferences. On the other hand, a systematic approach means that the data are examined in a systematic, step-by-step method, and that all of the data are analyzed using the same approach. Moreover, the process of quantification is highly important in many contexts because it enables researchers to achieve the objective of generating precise representations of a given dataset or body of content. Yet, a purely quantitative approach may miss deeper, latent meanings, particularly those related to ideologies and social constructs such as gender, which this study aims to uncover.

Hence, many researchers have raised concerns in regard to the traditional definitions of content analysis and its application in research. For instance, Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Mkuchu, 2004) challenged the traditional approach of solely analyzing manifest content, where they argue that content analysis should focus not only on the apparent characteristics of the content but also on the hidden messages that are transmitted through it. Furthermore, they emphasize that this method should not be limited to only quantitative techniques; instead, it should incorporate qualitative methods as well. They argue that the frequency of the occurrence of certain characters does not necessarily reflect the importance of the assertion being made. In some cases, more meaningful inferences can be drawn from qualitative methods than quantitative ones. Additionally, the emphasis on quantifying symbols and achieving precision often comes at the cost of overlooking significant problems. Thus, in the current study, I employed quantitative analysis alongside qualitative interpretations to illuminate how gender roles and expectations are implicitly constructed and communicated via texts and images, which may not be fully captured through frequency counts alone.

Understood in this way, content analysis can be conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative analysis involves examining the frequency of specific words or themes. The outcomes of using this method can be objective and generalizable, which, in turn, provides insight into the prevalence of certain ideas or patterns. On the other hand, qualitative analysis is more subjective, requiring researchers to interpret the given content to gain a deeper understanding of its meaning and significance (Craeynest, 2015). However, researchers can integrate quantitative and qualitative content analysis into one research study. Qualitative content analysis serves as an expansion of quantitative analysis, where the former aims to delve deeper into understanding concepts beyond mere presence. Thus, qualitative analysis can offer a more comprehensive insight into the content's social, cultural, and historical context by interpreting the meaning and exploring the semantic relationships between different words and concepts (Oleinik, 2011). In regard to analyzing gender representation in school textbooks, Brugeilles and Cromer (2009a) argue that a quantitative approach is the most appropriate method when conducting gender analysis in textbooks. However, they do not discount the value of incorporating qualitative analysis in addition to quantitative analysis to support their findings. Similarly, Pingel (2010) emphasizes that when researchers combine both approaches, they can achieve deeper insights.

Consistent with the foregoing discussions, content analysis is a valuable tool for analyzing and interpreting both the explicit and implicit messages within school textbooks. Thus, in the current study, I employed a mixed content analysis approach, combining quantitative and qualitative dimensions in order to explore gender stereotypes in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. Specifically, the quantitative analysis focused on measurable elements such as the frequency of

representation of male and female characters and the distribution of activities, roles, and professions by gender across both text and illustrations in these textbooks. These elements were systematically coded and counted to reveal overt patterns of gender representation. In contrast, the qualitative content analysis entailed a thematic examination of the texts and illustrations to uncover implicit gender messages, analyzing recurring themes, and interpreting contextual meanings embedded within narratives and visual elements that are not always directly observable but reflect deeper cultural patterns. This dual approach allowed for a better understanding of gender representation by quantifying overt indicators while also interpreting latent meanings in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks.

### **3.6.2 Applications of Content Analysis in Social Studies**

The content analysis method is widely utilized in social studies and seeks to analyze and interpret the content of communication. Content analysis is a technique that can be applied to examine the content of various types of texts, including written documents, images, videos, and audio recordings (Krippendorff, 2018). This method enables researchers to obtain deeper insights into the underlying messages that can be transmitted through these mediums.

According to Kondracki et al. (2002), content analysis involves the systematic coding of raw messages, which can take various forms, such as textual material, visual images, or illustrations. This coding is based on a pre-determined classification scheme that facilitates systematic examination and analysis of large amounts of data. Content analysis can be used in different types of data, including books, newspapers, magazines, films, pictures, interviews, speeches, and more.

Thus, in this method, researchers can identify trends and patterns that may not be apparent through other means of analysis.

Content analysis is a versatile research method that researchers have applied in many fields, including marketing, media studies, psychology, political science, and many social science disciplines (Krippendorff, 2018). For instance, content analysis can be used for marketing purposes, where researchers analyze social media data to identify consumer preferences and trends. It can also be used in social science to examine television advertisements and identify patterns in the way that minorities are portrayed. In this respect, many researchers have employed content analysis as an effective research method to examine gender stereotypes in school textbooks (Abiky, 2019; Cobano-Delgado & Llorent-Bedmar, 2019; Hashim et al., 2018; Islam & Asadullah, 2018; Mante-Estacio et al., 2018; Paynter, 2011; Shahnaz et al., 2020; Sovic & Hus, 2015; Yasin et al., 2012). Therefore, in the context of the current study, employing content analysis was appropriate to examine how gender is represented in Saudi Arabian first-grade school textbooks. Examining both the text and illustrations used in these textbooks can provide insight into how gender is portrayed, and in which way these books might perpetuate gender stereotypes.

### **3.6.3 Advantages and Limitations Associated with Content Analysis**

When considering the justification for employing content analysis in a study, it is essential to approach it from the perspective of the problem being investigated. In the current study, the issue at hand is understanding how gender roles are portrayed in first-grade school textbooks in Saudi Arabia. The objective is to determine the extent to which these depictions reinforce gender stereotypes in these textbooks. Therefore, applying content analysis becomes relevant to this study

based on the advantages that this method can provide. It is prudent to note that, while this method offers researchers extensive advantages, it is also accompanied by certain limitations. Many scholars have addressed both the advantages and limitations of this method (Krippendorff, 2018; Mkuchu, 2004; Neuendorf, 2017; Weber, 1990). In the following section, both the advantages and limitations are discussed.

### **3.6.3.1 Advantages of Content Analysis**

As has been ascertained, content analysis affords researchers several systematic and interpretive advantages, particularly when the objective is to uncover gendered representations in school textbooks. First, it enables the systematic examination of extensive amounts of data (Neuendorf, 2017), a feature that was indispensable in the present study, which analyzed the entire corpus of Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. In this respect, content analysis is not restricted to textual data alone, but can also accommodate visual material, allowing for the categorization of specific elements and the identification of relationships between them (Krippendorff, 2018). Thus, in the current study, both texts and images were analyzed in order to explore the transmission of gendered discourses. Moreover, content analysis can be employed quantitatively, qualitatively, or through a mixed-methods design (Mkuchu, 2004). This flexibility was crucial in this investigation. On the one hand, the mixed approach drew upon the systematic rigor of quantitative analysis; on the other hand, it engaged with the interpretive depth of qualitative inquiry.

It is prudent to note that content analysis also facilitates a critical understanding of how gender roles and stereotypes evolve over time within specific cultural contexts (Mkuchu, 2004). In the Saudi context, where sociopolitical reforms are ongoing, this method provides an

indispensable lens through which to trace ideological shifts in the representation of gender within first-grade school textbooks. In broader contexts, content analysis has been applied in order to examine political debates, campaigns, and media discourse (Bryman, 2016), underscoring its versatility as an analytical tool. Finally, this method can offer a cost-effective solution in terms of time and resources (Mkuchu, 2004), an advantage of particular relevance to this study, as this study relied on publicly accessible materials. When combined with the descriptive statistical analysis of coded data, content analysis not only highlights overt patterns but also reveals trends that either perpetuate or challenge entrenched stereotypes (Mkuchu, 2004).

### **3.6.3.2 Limitations of Content Analysis**

As established, in addition to its advantages, content analysis is not without limitations. The following outlines some of the key challenges associated with this method, together with strategies adopted in the present study to mitigate their impact. First, quantitative content analysis primarily operates at the surface level of data, which may risk overlooking the contextual factors that shape the creation of texts (White & Marsh, 2006). To address this limitation, the current study combined quantitative coding with qualitative, in-depth interpretation in order to take into account the Saudi cultural and societal context in which the textbooks were produced. Second, previous studies that employed content analysis have often suffered from weaknesses in sample size, thereby restricting the representativeness of findings and, consequently, limiting their generalizability (Mkuchu, 2004). In contrast, the present study analyzed the complete corpus of Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks, thereby ensuring systematic coverage for the entire first-grade textbooks.

Third, within a constructivist framework, content analysis may be susceptible to researcher bias in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Such subjectivity is shaped by the researcher's positionality, background, and cultural perspective (Krippendorff, 2018). In order to enhance reliability and minimize subjectivity, the methodological manual of Brugeilles and Cromer (2009a) was adopted, as it offers a structured and validated framework for analyzing gender representation in instructional materials. Finally, access to study samples can sometimes be partial or limited (Mkuchu, 2004). However, this was not the case in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where the entire corpus of first-grade textbooks is freely available in public primary schools and can also be accessed online via the official National Education Portal, *iEN* (<https://ien.edu.sa>).

### **3.7 Content Analysis: Application in the Current Study**

#### **3.7.1 Analytical Framework**

In this study, the methodological manual of Brugeilles and Cromer (2009a) was adopted (see Appendix B). This manual provides a systematic approach to identifying and analyzing gender stereotypes, biases, and inequalities within instructional materials. Brugeilles and Cromer (2009a) explained step by step which components can be used in content analysis and how these components can be analyzed. According to Brugeilles and Cromer (2009a), gender representations in school textbooks are best captured through the characters, as these characters are given demographic characteristics such as gender and age, and they engage in actions and activities and interact with others. The character is a key element in books for young students because it “allows actions, takes them on, is subjected to them, links them together and gives them meaning” (Reuter, 2000, as cited in Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009, p. 16). Characters embody qualities, rules, status, and behaviors within a social setting, interacting in ways that position them within a fictional

society. Thus, through characters, it can be possible to gain insight into the social representations of “what is a man, what is a woman, a girl or a boy in a given society” (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009a, p. 16). Through an exhaustive analysis of characters in texts intended for children, such as school textbooks, it becomes possible to uncover the subtle and complex social constructions of gender differences, as well as the indicators that shape masculine and feminine identities. Considering this, the investigation of characters forms the foundation of the current analysis.

### 3.7.2 Sample Selection

The study sample included the latest editions of first-grade textbooks, published in 2021, consisting of 15 books for both the first and second semesters in total. Using these textbooks was mandatory for all students in Saudi schools. The Saudi Ministry of Education was responsible for creating and publishing these textbooks, hiring a team of specialists for this task. All first-grade teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were required to teach every module exactly as prescribed in these textbooks, with no additions or omissions permitted.

*Table 1 Distribution of first-grade textbooks across subjects in Saudi public schools*

	<b>Textbook*</b>	<b>Semester taught</b>	<b>Page count</b>
<b>1</b>	Mathematics	1st and 2nd	294
<b>2</b>	Science	1st and 2nd	236
<b>3</b>	Life and Family Skills (Girls only)	1st and 2nd	236
<b>4</b>	My Language 1	1st	85
<b>5</b>	My Language 2	1st and 2nd	384
<b>6</b>	Islamic Studies	1st and 2nd	152
<b>7</b>	Art Education	1st and 2nd	170
<b>8</b>	English	1st and 2nd	182
<b>Total</b>			<b>1739</b>

\*Two other subjects are taught without school textbooks: Physical education and the holy book for Muslims, the *Quran*.

The weekly schedule below shows how frequently each textbook is used in Saudi Arabian first-grade classrooms, which in turn can help to understand the central role these textbooks play in students' daily routines. The regular and repeated use of these materials during the week reinforces the importance of examining the gender representations they convey.

*Table 2 A typical first-grade daily Saudi public-school schedule (Ministry of Education, 2021d)*

<b>Day</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Class 45min</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Class 45min</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Class 45min</b>	<b>4<sup>th</sup> Class 45min</b>	<b>5<sup>th</sup> Class 45min</b>	<b>6<sup>th</sup> Class 45min</b>
<b>Sunday</b>	Mathematics	Quran	Arabic	Quran	English	Islamic Studies
<b>Monday</b>	Arabic	Physical Education/ Life and Family Skills	English	Science	Arabic	Quran
<b>Tuesday</b>	Arabic	Mathematics	Quran	English	Physical Education/ Life and family skills	Islamic Studies
<b>Wednesday</b>	Science	Arabic	Quran	English	Physical Education/ Life and Family Skills	Art Education
<b>Thursday</b>	Arabic	Mathematics	Physical Education/ Life and Family Skills	Quran	English	Quran

In order to conduct this study, I chose purposive convenience sampling when selecting the textbooks to analyze. This type of sampling was particularly suitable because the study intentionally focused on a specific set of officially mandated textbooks that represent the dominant

educational discourse in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, while also taking advantage of their accessibility and availability (Andrade, 2021). The following criteria governed the inclusion of the sample:

- The school textbooks are officially produced and approved by the Saudi Ministry of Education, which is the highest educational authority in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
- The school textbooks are current, meaning they were in use in Saudi primary schools at the time of the study to ensure relevance and to reflect the current educational system.
- The school textbooks selected are a statutory part of the curriculum, which means all first-grade students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia use these textbooks.
- The school textbooks used in this study are the complete set of official course materials for first-grade students in the Saudi educational system to maintain consistency.
- The school textbooks can be easily accessed online when needed for free in full, from the official Saudi educational platform, *iEN* National Education Portal (<https://ien.edu.sa>), which is managed by the Ministry of Education.

The above inclusion criteria were essential for two key reasons. First, they helped to select textbooks for analysis that reflected the views and perspectives of the Saudi authorities because the Saudi Ministry of Education had approved them. Second, these inclusion criteria helped to ensure that the textbooks were currently being used in the Saudi educational system, as it would not have been meaningful to analyze textbooks that were no longer in use.

### **3.7.3 Justification for Selecting Saudi Arabian First-Grade Textbooks**

School textbooks were chosen as the subject of analysis in this study because they are of paramount importance for many reasons. To begin with, school textbooks reflect the prevailing

cultural and social norms of the society in which they are produced (Gellman, 2024). Therefore, Saudi textbooks can offer insight into the Saudi cultural and social context. Second, these books, as noted in the previous section, are used by all first-grade students across the country, and as such, the content of these instructional materials can have a powerful influence on shaping their minds and perceptions (Gellman, 2024). This is especially true when it comes to gender stereotypes, which can be perpetuated or challenged through the content of these textbooks (Craeynest, 2015). Third, it is important to acknowledge that children's development in their early years is deeply affected by what they see and hear (Martin & Ruble, 2004; Scholz-Kuhn et al., 2025). Consequently, when they are repeatedly exposed to such gendered content, they might develop a tendency to categorize people based on gender, which could have negative consequences in the long run (Danju & Besim, 2018). Fourth, the school textbooks used to teach young students how to read and write during their early learning stages are more likely to rely on illustrations to help them understand the texts. This means that gender stereotypes present in the textbook illustrations can leave a particularly profound imprint on developing children's minds (Fard et al., 2015). In this respect, analyzing Saudi Arabian first-grade school textbooks is immensely important to ensure that young students are exposed to fair representations of gender in their learning materials. As Muller (2006) suggests, early intervention through exposing young children to gender-egalitarian stories has the potential to reduce the negative influences of gender stereotyping and increase gender equality.

#### **3.7.4 Overview of Saudi Arabian First-Grade Textbooks**

School textbooks are considered a significant component of the educational process in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia plays a major role in creating

and designing these materials. The Ministry collaborates with curriculum development centers and educational experts to develop age-appropriate and culturally relevant materials. These textbooks aim to provide foundational knowledge and skills whilst aligning with national educational goals and values. The curriculum developers place great emphasis on integrating Islamic values, cultural awareness, and educational objectives into these materials.

In the Saudi public educational system, students study nine different subjects in the first grade. An overview of the educational goals and content covered in each subject is as follows: Students in ‘My Language’ textbooks are introduced to the alphabet, basic vocabulary, and simple sentences to develop their reading and writing skills in Arabic. Islamic Studies textbooks delve into Islamic beliefs and practices as they introduce topics like prayer, fasting, charity, and the life of the Prophet Muhammad. In Mathematics textbooks, students learn about numbers, shapes, and measurements. Science textbooks introduce them to the physical and biological world, covering topics like matter, forces, plants, animals, and the Earth. Life and Family Skills textbooks, which were initially designed exclusively for girls, emphasize personal hygiene, appearance care, home economics, social skills, and family responsibilities. English language textbooks provide students with the basic language skills, including pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and simple conversation in English. Art Education textbooks cover creative subjects such as drawing, painting, design, and art appreciation. Besides that, two subjects are taught without the use of school textbooks: physical education and the Muslims’ holy book, the Quran. The physical education course, initially for boys only, serves to promote physical fitness, teamwork, and a healthy lifestyle. Quran classes, by using the holy book itself, focus on the correct recitation and memorization of Quranic verses (Sly Academy, 2024).

### 3.7.5 Data Collection and Analysis

First, a complete collection of the first-grade textbooks was obtained, facilitated with the support of the principal of a Saudi public primary school. In the next stage, a detailed coding framework was adopted, following Brugeilles and Cromer's (2009a) guidelines (see Appendix B), to identify and categorize gender-related content. The preliminary phase in employing this methodological manual involved determining which components would be included in the analysis (see Appendix A). Therefore, to ensure a comprehensive and precise analysis, all components of the textbooks were examined, including the textbooks' cover pages, dialogues, exercises, reading texts, captions, and illustrations. It was essential to ensure that no content was omitted, as any exclusion could potentially result in an inaccurate representation of gender within these textbooks.

The coding framework systematically included codes for characters, roles, activities, language used, and visual representations. The data were extracted manually and organized using Microsoft Excel, which was an appropriate tool for structuring both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Samples of the data coding tables used in the analysis are provided to show how the analytical framework was applied (see Appendix C). The quantitative analysis focused particularly on counting and categorizing the frequency of male and female characters across different dimensions such as visibility, roles, and settings. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) were then calculated to identify numerical imbalances and patterns of gender portrayal.

Qualitative analysis was employed to uncover the underlying meanings and messages behind gender portrayals across these textbooks. Thus, this method involved thematic coding of

both images and text, examining linguistic features, role assignments, and contextual framing. To this end, a deductive-inductive approach was used in the thematic analysis, where initial themes were drawn from Brugeilles and Cromer's (2009a) manual (deductive). However, during the analysis, new themes and patterns were developed from the data itself, which were incorporated to refine the coding scheme (inductive). Then, the data were interpreted within the Saudi cultural and social context by taking into account factors such as prevailing gender norms, religious influence on educational content, the historical marginalization of women in education, and recent social reforms under Vision 2030. Using this contextual interpretation can help to reveal how gender representations are transmitted and reproduced within Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks, and how these portrayals reflect the broader context of Saudi cultural and social norms.

### **3.7.6 Validity and Reliability**

In order to ensure the validity of this study, the analytical framework developed by Brugeilles and Cromer (2009a) was accurately followed, which provides a well-established and systematic approach to analyzing gender representations in school textbooks. This framework ensured that the data collected was relevant and reflected the research questions. The total inclusion of all textbook components—including its cover, texts, illustrations, dialogues, and exercises—also enhanced content validity by minimizing the risk of omitting important information.

Regarding reliability, a detailed coding framework was adopted based on the categories and guidance outlined by Brugeilles and Cromer (2009a), which was consistently applied throughout the analysis (see Appendix B). This coding was carried out manually and checked

frequently to maintain consistency and minimize subjective bias. Even though the study was conducted as a solo effort, reflective practices and adherence to a clear coding manual helped to ensure dependable and replicable results. Additionally, the use of Microsoft Excel to organize and quantify data supported the systematic handling of information, which contributes to the reliability of the findings.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted in accordance with the University of York's ethical guidelines and regulations, as the Department of Education Ethics Committee at the University of York granted ethical approval for this study in November 2021. Moreover, since the study relied solely on publicly available materials—specifically, Ministry of Education-approved school textbooks—it did not involve any human participants, which consequently posed minimal ethical risk. All procedures were designed to minimize potential risks, including adherence to the University of York's guidelines for data management and protection.

Additionally, this study includes seven images from Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks, which are officially published and publicly accessible through schools as well as the Saudi Ministry of Education's online platform (*iEN*). These images have been incorporated in the results chapter just for academic and illustrative purposes, to support the analysis of gender representation within these textbooks. The way these images have been used complies with the principles of *fair dealing* in accordance with the University of York's ethical guidelines and regulations, as all sources have been properly cited and only the content necessary for critical analysis has been

included. In this respect, the intention was not to reproduce materials in full, but just to include representative samples to support the study's findings.

Furthermore, when conducting research that involves topics like gender, especially in a culturally specific context such as Saudi Arabia, I respect the cultural sensitivity regarding this matter. Discussions about gender roles and representations can be particularly sensitive in conservative societies, such as Saudi Arabia, where cultural, religious, and historical values greatly influence public discourse and educational material (Kandiyoti, 2016). Consequently, this study has been designed to engage with the textbooks in a way that is both analytically rigorous and culturally respectful, by employing analytical tools that acknowledge local cultural values and interpreting the data through established frameworks applied within the Saudi socio-educational context.

The study seeks to provide a critical analysis of the content presented in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks and offer constructive insights that may help contribute to more curriculum reforms. Thus, I follow the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) ethical guidelines for educational research. As emphasized in the BERA guidelines, "Researchers should contribute to the community spirit of critical analysis and constructive criticism that generates improvement in practice and enhancement of knowledge" (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018, p. 29).

Upon deciding to conduct research pertaining to my native country, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, I was aware of the ethical complexities associated with being an 'insider'. As Holmes

(2020) notes, positionality is important because the researcher's social location and experiences shape how knowledge is approached and interpreted. I was raised in Saudi Arabia, and I also studied all the Saudi textbooks throughout my school years; therefore, the Saudi cultural and social norms may have influenced part of my gender cognition. While this positionality may present potential challenges to objectivity, I also regard it as a valuable asset.

In this respect, my perspective as a Saudi woman researcher can contribute to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in Saudi society that may not be readily apparent to an external researcher. Besides that, my professional role as a lecturer in Saudi higher education has also informed my awareness of how cultural and institutional values are embedded and transmitted in educational practices. Furthermore, my overseas academic journey, including my postgraduate studies in the United States and the United Kingdom, has helped me develop a more critical and informed perspective on gender issues, representation, and social justice, enabling me to examine familiar educational materials with greater analytical distance. In this sense, my position was not simply that of an insider, but rather that of an insider-outsider, as such positions are often fluid and negotiated rather than fixed (Merriam et al., 2001).

Nevertheless, I remained aware that this closeness to the research context carried methodological risks. On the one hand, there was a possibility that I might normalize some portrayals because they were culturally familiar to me. On the other hand, there was also a risk that I might interpret certain representations too quickly through a critical lens, particularly as I entered the study already anticipating some degree of gender stereotyping. Reflexivity was therefore essential, as it allowed me to critically examine how my background, experiences and

assumptions might shape interpretation (Berger, 2015). To address this, I did not treat personal experience as evidence in itself; rather, I treated it as a source of situated awareness requiring reflexive examination. This reflexive stance was maintained throughout the study in order to distinguish what was directly evidenced in the textbooks from my prior assumptions.

It is also crucial to acknowledge that the authors of these textbooks, stakeholders, and a large segment of Saudi society may hold views on gender-related matters that differ from my own. Therefore, I strive to approach this study with fairness, transparency, and ethical responsibility. In order to minimize any potential personal bias, I followed a rigorous methodological framework and remained committed to reflective practice throughout the study process.

### **3.9 Limitations**

This study has several methodological limitations. First, as an insider researcher, my positionality as a Saudi woman who was educated in the same education system and socialized in the same cultural context may have influenced how I identify and interpret gendered meanings in Saudi school textbooks. To mitigate this risk, I strictly adhered to a published analytical manual and conducted re-coding procedures at different times in order to check consistency, while at the same time maintaining iterative self-reflexive memos throughout the research process. Nevertheless, it may not be possible to completely detach from my personal experience and cultural background.

Second, the data source is limited to official Saudi first-grade textbooks only; classroom practices or teachers' perspectives are outside the scope of this study. This was due mainly to the

institutional and cultural restrictions related to gender segregation, which prevented direct access to boys' classrooms. Thus, this study is confined to curricular representations rather than pedagogical practice. Moreover, my initial plan of including the views of textbook authors as part of my data was discarded. This was due to the fact that the authors of these textbooks could not be reached, as their names in this version remained anonymous. In more detail, the cover of these textbooks stated only that this material was authored and reviewed by a team of specialists. This matter has changed over time, since the older versions of these textbooks used to include author names. Therefore, their names and contact details could not be obtained even though great effort was put into reaching them by contacting the publisher (Ministry of Education) as well as searching on the Internet.

Third, this study is limited to first-grade textbooks used in public Saudi schools; hence, the generalizability of the findings may be restricted and may not be applicable to other grade levels or to private and international schools in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In addition, this study does not involve examining other factors that may influence inequalities between characters. More specifically, this study does not examine the intersection of gender with other aspects of identity, including class, race, and disability. This can be attributed to the lack of cultural diversity in the representation of characters within first-grade textbooks.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the methodological approach adopted to examine gender stereotypes in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. The study employed a constructivist ontological perspective

and an interpretivist epistemological stance, besides recognizing the socially constructed nature of gender and the importance of context in interpretation. This chapter also presented the theoretical framework, which offered a useful lens for analyzing the portrayal of gender in first-grade school textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Content analysis was selected as the research method, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques. This dual approach made it possible to examine not only the frequency and visibility of gendered representations but also the deeper meanings embedded in texts and images. The study sample consisted of a complete set of 15 first-grade textbooks for both the first and second semesters, approved by the Saudi Ministry of Education. These textbooks were analyzed using an adapted coding framework, which covered elements such as character roles, activities, language, and visual representation. Ethical considerations were also considered throughout the research process. As a Saudi researcher, I reflected critically on my position and the potential influence of my personal experience, while also recognizing the value this perspective brings to the study. The aim was not to pass judgment on textbook authors, but rather to contribute thoughtfully to the way in which gender roles are presented to children through textbooks.

## **4. Chapter Four: Results**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The primary objective of this study is to examine how male and female characters are depicted in first-grade textbooks used in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This is conducted through a comprehensive analysis of the characters, occupational roles, actions, and attributes in both text and illustrations. This study also examines the potential impact of such disparities, if any, on reinforcing gender stereotypes.

This chapter presents the results of this study, which aimed to investigate these research questions:

1. What is the ratio of male and female characters in texts and illustrations in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks? Is there a variation in the proportion between the texts and the illustrations?
2. What are the gender differences in occupational representation in first-grade textbooks?
3. What traits are assigned to male and female characters in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks?
4. To what extent does the portrayal of gender reinforce gender stereotypes within first-grade textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?

Thus, to address these research questions, a content analysis was employed to collect and analyze data from 15 first-grade textbooks used in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (for the first semester and the second semester), published in 2021. The following sections explore the key results, beginning with an examination of the frequency of male and female character depictions

in terms of their occurrences, occupational roles, actions, and attributes, which are presented through the use of tables. This is followed by an analysis of both textual and visual representations to determine the extent of gender representation and the relationship between the modes of representation.

## 4.2 Numbers of Characters

The data presented in Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the distribution of characters identified in both textual and pictorial elements within the 15 textbooks analyzed. Specifically, Table 3 reveals that a total of 315 characters were encountered in the texts. In contrast, Table 4 displays a count of 591 characters found in the pictures. These results indicate that a significant number of characters were presented within the analyzed materials, which, in turn, reflect the critical role of characters in school textbooks, particularly for young students.

*Table 3 Distribution of characters in texts, by subject*

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Total numbers</b>	<b>%</b>
Islamic Studies	101	32%
My Language 1	2	1%
My Language 2	93	30%
Life and Family Skills	17	5%
Art Education	44	14%
Mathematics	0	0%
Science	22	7%
English	36	11%
<b>Total</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>

In observing the distribution of characters in texts across various Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks, Table 3 shows a wide range of variations, as the Islamic Studies and My Language 2 textbooks combined accounted for a significant portion of the characters (62%). This suggests that these textbooks had the highest character density in their texts, which was indeed consistent with the structure and nature of these subjects. To illustrate this, in the Islamic Studies textbook, many verses from the Quran, the holy book of Muslims, have been used, and each of these verses conveyed a story through given characters. As a result, it was natural for this textbook to employ more characters within its texts. Similarly, the My Language 2 textbook aimed to teach language in its written form. Thus, it was necessary to include a greater number of characters in the texts.

In contrast, My Language 1 textbook only had two textual characters, whereas the Mathematics textbook had no textual characters. The reason for this is that the My Language 1 textbook served as a preface to the My Language 2 textbook, laying the groundwork for the topics to come. As for the Mathematics textbook, it relied more on diagrams, tables, and other visual aids to explain mathematical concepts, which necessitated the use of fewer textual characters. The remaining textbooks had a more balanced distribution of textual characters, ranging from 5% to 14%. Therefore, it can be noted that the distribution of characters within texts varied across the examined textbooks, with some including a greater number of characters than others. This can be attributed to the structure and nature of certain subjects.

*Table 4 Distribution of characters in pictures, by subject*

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Total numbers</b>	<b>%</b>
Islamic Studies	41	7%
My Language 1	63	11%

My Language 2	184	31%
Life and Family Skills	42	7%
Art Education	10	2%
Mathematics	13	2%
Science	29	5%
English	216	37%
Total	598	100%

Similar to the results presented in Table 3, Table 4 shows that there was an observable variation in which characters were distributed in the illustrations across the various subjects examined. Specifically, it was noted that English and My Language 2 textbooks collectively constitute a substantial proportion of the characters (68%). This, in turn, suggests that these two textbooks have the highest number of characters in the illustrations. Conversely, the Mathematics and Art Education textbooks included relatively fewer illustrations of characters (2%). It is important to mention that the variation in the number of characters used in the illustrations is not solely dependent on the course volume but also on the nature of the topics covered in these subjects.

Therefore, when comparing the results of Tables 3 and 4, it can be noted that the use of characters in the illustrations was even more frequent than their use in the texts. This is consistent with the fact that first-grade learners in Saudi schools may not be able to read or, at least, may have low reading proficiency; thus, they rely more on images to illustrate the written texts.

### 4.3 Gender of Characters

*Table 5 Gender of characters in texts, by subject*

<b>Subject</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F %</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M %</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Unspecified</b>
Art Education	8	24%	21	64%	4	12%
English	10	31%	17	53%	5	16%
Islamic Studies	10	13%	67	86%	1	1%
Life and Family Skills	2	17%	3	25%	7	58%
Mathematics	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
My Language 1	0	0%	2	100%	0	0%
My Language 2	35	39%	52	58%	2	2%
Science	2	17%	7	58%	3	25%
Total	67	26%	169	66%	22	8%

After conducting an analysis of Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks, it was observed that there was an imbalance in the representation of male and female characters. In particular, the data analysis revealed a significantly higher occurrence of male characters compared to female characters. As shown in Table 5, the analysis identified a total of 169 male characters in the examined texts, while only 67 instances represented female characters.

Table 5 also shows that male characters significantly outnumbered female characters in the texts across all subjects, except for a moderate difference in the Life and Family Skills textbook, which has one additional character in favor of male characters. This can be attributed to the fact that the Life and Family Skills subject was taught only to girls. On the other hand, the Islamic Studies textbook showed the highest gender disparity, as it had the highest percentage, with 86% male characters in texts. In comparison, only 13% of the characters were female, and 1% were unspecified.

Moreover, it is important to note that despite the My Language 1 textbook being used by young girls and boys, there was not any textual representation of girls and women. This lack of women's representation is alarming, as it sends a message to young students that women are not important or relevant in the context of the subject matter. In fact, when considering the overall percentages, male characters (66%) were more than twice as common as female characters (26%). Such gender bias in textbooks can have a significant impact on the way young students perceive and think about gender roles in Saudi society.

*Table 6 Gender of characters in pictures, by subject*

<b>Subject</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F %</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M %</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Unspecified</b>
Art Education	3	30%	7	70%	0	0%
English	52	24%	162	75%	2	1%
Islamic Studies	0	0%	41	100%	0	0%
Life and Family Skills	19	45%	23	55%	0	0%
Mathematics	8	62%	5	38%	0	0%
My Language 1	27	43%	36	57%	0	0%
My Language 2	68	37%	116	63%	0	0%
Science	11	38%	18	62%	0	0%
Total	188	31%	408	68%	2	1%

Similar to Table 5, the data in Table 6 indicated an imbalance in the occurrence of male and female characters in the textbooks examined. Specifically, it was observed that female characters were underrepresented in the illustrations, which young students may interpret as a diminishment of their value. Table 6 revealed that there was a higher frequency of male characters appearing in the illustrations of Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks, with a count of 408 male characters compared to only 188 female characters. This suggests that men and boys were more

likely to be represented and were consistently featured in both written and visual contexts throughout these textbooks. Therefore, it can be argued that the portrayal of characters in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks was gendered, with boys and men being prominently dominant.

According to data presented in Table 5, male characters in texts accounted for 66% of the total characters depicted, while female characters comprised only 26%. The remaining 8% were of unspecified gender. Similarly, Table 6 shows that illustrations in the textbooks also followed the same pattern, with male characters making up 68% of the illustrations and female characters accounting for 31%. The remaining 1% were of unspecified gender. Therefore, it became apparent that the presence of female characters was not as prevalent as that of male characters, as it was uncommon for female characters to outnumber or even be on par with male characters. Moreover, it was rare for characters to have an unspecified gender. This observation suggests that the Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks were designed in a way that focuses predominantly on male characters, potentially perpetuating gender stereotypes and reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Most notably, the Islamic Studies textbook had the highest numerical imbalance between male and female characters in the illustrations, as the pictures showed that 41 male characters were featured in the book. At the same time, there were no images representing female characters. The absence of women's representation in the Islamic Studies textbook was particularly significant, as there were instances where one would expect to see a female character based on the given context.

A prime example of this depiction can be found on page 56 of the Islamic Studies textbook. Figure 4 (below) displays a scene of a mother at home, yet no image of a mother is visible in the

corresponding illustration. This omission may reflect the conservative perspectives of the curriculum designers and publishers, who may have chosen to avoid including images of women in books related to Islamic teaching.



Figure 4. *Islamic Studies, Grade 1, First Semester (Ministry of Education, 2021a, p. 56)*

Translation: My brother made me happy when he entered the house and said: Speech bubble 1: "Peace be upon you and the mercy of Allah and blessings. How are you, my mother?" Speech bubble 2: "How are you, my mother?"

Moreover, the data in Table 6 show that the English textbook also displayed a significant gender disparity in illustrations, with male characters accounting for 162 of the total number of characters compared to 52 female characters. Similarly, the My Language 2 textbook exhibited a similar trend, with 116 male characters and 68 female characters. These results suggest a lack of gender diversity in the representation of characters within these textbooks. However, the Mathematics textbook demonstrated a more balanced approach to representation, featuring a higher number of female characters, as three more female characters were illustrated in the Mathematics textbook than male characters.

Overall, the analysis of the data presented in Tables 5 and 6 shows that Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks may exhibit a clear gender bias. The total number of male characters featured in both text and illustrations exceeds that of female characters. This imbalance could potentially

perpetuate gender stereotypes and hinder the country's development plans for gender equality among young children.

#### 4.4 Age of Characters

*Table 7 Gender and age of characters in texts, by subject*

<b>Age of Characters</b>	<b>Art Education</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Islamic Studies</b>	<b>Life and Family Skills</b>	<b>Mathematics</b>	<b>My Language 1</b>	<b>My Language 2</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Total</b>
Man	9	4	34	1	0	0	11	2	61
Woman	3	1	9	0	0	0	5	0	18
Boy	20	13	28	3	0	2	37	9	112
Girl	6	9	1	2	0	0	30	2	50
Male-Age Unspecified	1	0	10	4	0	0	5	2	22
Female-Age Unspecified	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>263</b>

Table 7 presents statistics on the age and gender of characters featured in texts based on different subjects from the Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. The data reveal that the majority of characters depicted in the texts were children, accounting for 62% of the total characters. On the other hand, only 30% of the characters were adults, while the remaining 8% had unspecified ages. It was evident that the representation of adult characters in the texts was significantly low across all the textbooks examined, with the percentage ranging from 0% to a maximum of 31% of the total characters represented. The high presence of child characters can be attributed to the fact that the textbooks examined were aimed at younger learners. However, it is worth noting that the Islamic Studies textbook stood out in terms of adult representation, with adult characters represented at a rate of 52%.

In terms of the differences in gender representation based on age, it has been observed that Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks tend to portray men characters more than women characters across all subjects. The analysis of the texts reveals that there were 61 men characters compared to only 18 women characters. Moreover, among all the textbooks, the Islamic Studies textbook had the highest proportion of men characters. Specifically, they constituted 41% of the total characters in the texts, while only 11% were women characters.

On the other hand, when analyzing the representation of children's characters in these textbooks' texts, a significant disparity was observed between the mentions of boys' and girls' characters. Specifically, 112 boys' characters were mentioned, while only 50 girls' characters were present. It was further noted that the Islamic Studies textbook had the highest proportion of boys' characters, with 28 mentions, but only one mention of a girl's character. Overall, the data in Table 7 show a dominance of boys and men characters, which may indicate a clear gender bias in the representation of characters in these textbooks.

*Table 8 Gender and age of characters in pictures, by subject*

Age of Characters	Art Education	English	Islamic Studies	Life and	Mathematics	My	My	Science	Total
				Family Skills		Language 1	Language 2		
Man	0	18	5	7	0	11	22	6	69
Woman	0	10	0	0	0	10	19	0	39
Boy	7	139	36	16	5	25	90	12	330
Girl	3	42	0	19	8	17	49	11	149
Male -Age Unspecified	0	5	0	0	0	0	4	0	9

Female -Age Unspecified	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	10	214	41	42	13	63	184	29	596

Table 8 provides an overview of the age and gender of characters featured in illustrations across all Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. The data indicated that 80% of the characters depicted in the illustrations were children. While children comprised the majority of the characters, adults were also represented, albeit in a comparatively small percentage of only 18% of the characters. Additionally, 2% of the characters' ages remained unspecified.

As apparent in Table 8, there was a consistent distribution of child characters in the illustrations across all examined textbooks. The percentages ranged from 67% to 100%, indicating a clear prioritization of the representation of children in their first school years. On the other hand, the representation of adult characters in illustrations was significantly low, ranging from 0% to a maximum of 22% across all these textbooks.

When analyzing the gender of adult characters in the illustrations of these textbooks, it was observed that the proportion of men characters represented as adults was consistently higher than that of female characters. Specifically, 69 illustrations of men were present throughout the textbooks, while only 39 women were depicted. This gender disparity was most pronounced in the Islamic Studies textbook, which notably included no depictions of women at all.

On the other hand, regarding the representation of characters in illustrations as children, the analysis of Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks found a significant disparity in the depiction

of boys' and girls' characters. It was evident that the number of depictions of boy characters in illustrations was much higher than that of girl characters, with 330 depictions of boys as characters, while only 149 depictions of girls as characters were found.

In more detail, the highest gender disparity among children's characters was found in the illustrations of the Islamic Studies textbook, where boys were depicted 36 times, while not a single illustration featuring a girl character was included in this textbook. In contrast, the Life and Family Skills and Mathematics textbooks exhibited the lowest gender disparity, with depictions of girl characters outnumbering boy characters by a mere three characters. However, similar to the previous tables above, the overall count of textbook characters showed that male characters always outnumbered female characters, even among children's characters.

#### 4.5 Role of Characters

*Table 9 Role of characters in texts, by gender in all textbooks*

<b>Role of Characters</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Total</b>
Actor	74%	26%	65%
Extra	71%	29%	34%

Table 9 presents the roles of characters in texts, whether they were shown as actors or extras in all Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks, classified by gender. The actors are the characters who perform actions or possess objects that illustrate the course material. In contrast, the extra characters add more depth to the scene (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009a). In this study, characters were coded as *actors* when they directly contributed to the main event or conveyed a clear message

through actions or speech, whereas *extras* were identified as characters who appeared passively or served to complete the social or visual setting. It can be observed that most of the characters mentioned in the texts were actors, accounting for 65%, while extra characters appeared less frequently, making up only 34%. The dominance of actors' characters can be attributed to the fact that textbooks for first-grade students were brief, which made it difficult to present multiple characters.

In terms of gender representation by characters' roles, Table 9 shows that the role of an actor was more often assigned to male characters (74%) than to female characters (26%). On the other hand, 71% of the extra characters were male characters, while 29% were extra female characters. It is worth noting that the representation of female characters has increased in terms of being portrayed as extras compared to their 26% representation as actor characters. However, male characters were more frequently represented as extras than female characters. This could be a result of the previously stated numerical imbalance between male and female characters in the analyzed textbooks.

In My Language 2 textbook, on page 84 (see figure below), there is an example of an image that clearly shows the distribution of roles based on gender. The scene depicts a son greeting his family, and it can be noted that the characters' body language conveys their roles in this scene. The father is portrayed as the actor character, engaging with his son, while the mother assumes a passive and silent role as an extra character. This image can contribute to reinforcing the gender stereotype that exists in some societies, where men are often expected to perform more active and dominant roles. At the same time, women are relegated to more passive and marginalized roles.



Figure 5. *My Language 2, Grade 1, Second Semester (Ministry of Education, 2021c, p. 84)*

Translation: Fawaz came to his parents and said: Peace be upon you.

Table 10 Pedagogical function of characters in pictures, by gender in all textbooks

Function of Characters	M	F	Total
Ordinary	69%	31%	93%
Substitute	54%	46%	7%

Table 10 shows the distribution of male and female characters based on their pedagogical function, whether they were depicted in pictures as ordinary or substitute characters across all Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. For illustration, the key distinction between substitute characters and ordinary characters lies in their roles and interactions in textbooks. Ordinary characters can appear in both textual and visual content. Their primary function is to support the general learning process or a specific exercise to make them more concrete and attractive to learners. In contrast, substitute characters are found exclusively in pictures. They serve as mirrors for students or as doubles of the teacher in exercises. They interact with learners, guiding them in their learning processes and supporting them in their schoolwork. These interactions are typically depicted through speech bubbles or gestures (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009a).

Similar to Table 9, Table 10 demonstrates the same trend. The majority of characters in the images were ordinary characters, constituting 93%, while substitute characters appeared infrequently, representing only 7%. This high percentage can be attributed to the function of ordinary characters in school textbooks, as they are typically used to illustrate content and render it more concrete and attractive to students. Moreover, Table 10 reveals disparities in the pedagogical function of characters based on gender. It indicates that male characters predominated in the role of ordinary characters, comprising 69% of the total, while female characters accounted for 31%. However, there was a more balanced representation of substitute characters, with male characters comprising 54% and female characters comprising 46%. Overall, this data may suggest the presence of gender bias in the representation of characters in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks, with male characters being more prominent, particularly in the role of ordinary characters.

## 4.6 Actions

*Table 11 Actions of characters by gender in all textbooks' texts*

<b>Actions of Characters</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>
Leisure or Sports Activity	64%	36%
Social Activity	70%	30%
School Activity	80%	20%
Domestic Activity	0%	100%
Routine Personal Activity	50%	50%
Negative Activity	100%	0%
Successful Activity	90%	10%

Occupational Activity Formal or Non-Formal	89%	11%
Caring Activity	0%	100%
Buying Activity	100%	0%
Total Number	167	75
Total	69%	31%

The categorization of actions was adopted from the framework developed by Brugeilles and Cromer (2009b), which classifies activities according to their function. This framework includes categories such as leisure or sports, school, domestic, occupational, buying, caring, social, routine personal, negative, and successful activities. *Negative Activity* refers to actions that convey undesirable or socially disapproved behaviors, such as making mistakes, breaking something, or causing problems, whereas *Successful Activity* encompasses actions that portray achievement, accomplishment, or positive outcomes, such as winning a competition or solving a problem. Accordingly, each action was coded into one of these categories in order to capture the behavioral and social dimensions represented in the textbooks (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009b). Based on this categorization, Table 11 demonstrates the actions assigned to the characters in texts based on their gender. It can be noted that there was a significant discrepancy in the activities assigned to each gender. For instance, the majority of male characters were mentioned as engaging in leisure, sports, social, and occupational activities at rates of 64%, 70%, and 89%, respectively. On the other hand, all domestic and caring activities were assigned to female characters, which can indicate a clear gender bias in the depiction of these characters. More specifically, Table 11 shows that there were no female characters engaging in buying activities, which can reinforce the gender stereotype that men are the ones handling finances. Conversely, all the caring activities were associated with

female characters, which may further emphasize the gendered division of labor in the domestic sphere.

The figure below is presented on page 97 of the *My Language 2* textbook. It clearly illustrates the disparities in the activities assigned to men and women. The picture and text demonstrate a market scene where only men are present, leading financial transactions and purchasing activities. On the other side, a woman is assigned to domestic roles, primarily focused on preparing meals for her family. This contrast in gender roles, as presented in the school textbook analyzed, promotes stereotypes about divisions of labor which position women as responsible for domestic and caring activities and men for financial and public-facing activity (Matsuno, 2002; Islam & Asadullah, 2018).



قَالَ فَوَازٌ: ذَهَبْتُ مَعَ أَبِي إِلَى سُوقِ الْخَضَارِ وَالْفَوَاكِهِ، وَاشْتَرَى  
أَبِي خِيَارًا وَجَزْرًا وَخَوْخًا وَبَطِيخًا، غَسَلَتْ أُمِّي الْخَضَارَ وَالْفَوَاكِهَ،  
وَقَدَّمَتْهَا لَنَا، فَقَالَتْ نُورَةُ: الْخَوْخُ حُلْوٌ وَلَذِيذٌ.

Figure 6. *My Language 2, Grade 1, Second Semester (Ministry of Education, 2021c, p. 97)*

Translation: "Fawaz said: I went with my father to the vegetable and fruit market. My father bought cucumbers, carrots, peaches, and watermelon. My mother washed the vegetables and fruits and served them to us. Noura said: The peaches are sweet and delicious."

It can also be seen in Table 11 that male characters were portrayed as being more involved in school activities than female characters. This might be a concerning trend, as both boys and girls attend school in real life. Additionally, male characters depicted in the texts of these textbooks

tended to engage in more negative activities compared to female characters. In contrast to these trends, there was an equal representation of both genders in ‘routine personal activities’. Overall, the analysis of all Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks showed that the activities and actions assigned to male and female characters in texts could be gendered and stereotypical, which may contribute to limiting children’s perceptions of what is possible for individuals of different genders.

*Table 12 Actions of characters by gender in illustrations of all textbooks*

<b>Actions of Characters</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>
Leisure or Sports Activity	77%	23%
Social Activity	65%	35%
School Activity	74%	26%
Domestic Activity	7%	93%
Routine Personal Activity	78%	22%
Negative Activity	93%	7%
Successful Activity	100%	0%
Occupational Activity Formal or Non-Formal	83%	17%
Caring Activity	0%	100%
Buying Activity	100%	0%
Total Number	347	129

Table 12 shows the actions assigned to the characters in pictures based on their gender. As demonstrated, there was a notable disparity in the depiction of characters’ activities based on gender. Male characters were significantly more likely to be portrayed engaging in a wide range of activities, including leisure, social, school, occupational, and even negative activities, as they

were shown participating in successful, buying, and occupational activities, with 100%, 100%, and 83%, respectively. In contrast, almost all domestic and caring activities were assigned to female characters, at 93% and 100%, respectively. In more detail, in ‘Leisure or sports activity’, men were featured in 103 illustrations, while women were depicted in only 31. On the other hand, in relation to ‘Domestic activity’, men were represented in only one illustration, while women were portrayed in fourteen. These results suggest a notable gender disparity in the representation of characters’ activities and actions in these textbooks.

In addition, more male characters than female characters were depicted engaging in negative activities, accounting for 93%. This overrepresentation could potentially reinforce harmful stereotypes about masculinity and aggression. According to Craeynest (2015), societies often assign certain characteristics and abilities to individuals based solely on their gender. For example, men are typically expected to display traits such as ambition, responsibility, self-confidence, assertiveness, independence, and aggression. On the other hand, women are generally expected to embody characteristics such as passivity, empathy, affection, loyalty, and tenderness.

In analyzing the relationship, or lack thereof, between the ‘actions in texts’ and ‘actions in illustrations’, it was found that most of the actions depicting the male and female characters yielded similar results. However, there was a significant difference in the gender representation for ‘routine personal activity’. Specifically, in texts, both male and female characters were equally represented, with each accounting for 50% of all actions categorized under this activity type. However, this percentage shifted in illustrations, where 78% of the illustrations featured men. This observation could potentially indicate the prevalence of men’s dominance in Saudi Arabian first-grade

textbooks. Despite the equal representation of text actions for both genders, the illustrations, which arguably have a more significant impact on children's perceptions, are heavily skewed toward men.

The figure below, presented in My Language 2 textbook on page 105, depicts an example of characters represented as participating in sports activities. While the text itself doesn't explicitly exclude girls from participating in sports, the image accompanying it shows only boys engaging in sports activities. These texts and illustrations encourage boys to engage in sports. Still, they may also convey an implicit message that physical fitness and exercise are exclusive to men and boys. The text and image could unintentionally perpetuate gender stereotypes and reinforce the idea that sports and physical activity are not for girls and women, which can lead to a lack of participation in sports and physical activities.



قَالَ الْآبُ: فَوَازٌ يُحِبُّ الرِّيَاضَةَ، فَهُوَ يَذْهَبُ مَعِيَ إِلَى النَّادِي،  
وَيُحَيِّي مُدَرِّبَهُ وَيَتَدَرَّبُ مَعَ رِفَاقِهِ بِحَمَاسَةٍ، يَرْكُضُ وَيَقْفِزُ  
بِنَشَاطٍ؛ فَالرِّيَاضَةُ تُقَوِّي الْجِسْمَ، وَتُنَشِّطُ الْعَقْلَ.

Figure 7. My Language 2, Grade 1, Second Semester (Ministry of Education, 2021c, p. 105)

Translation: The father said: Fawaz likes sports. He goes with me to the gym, greets his coach, and trains with his friends enthusiastically. He runs and jumps actively. Sports strengthen the body and stimulate the mind.

## 4.7 Attributes

*Table 13 Item-Based Attributes of characters by gender in texts of all textbooks*

<b>Item-Based Attributes of Characters</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>
Leisure or Sports Item	69%	31%
Domestic Item	0%	100%
School Materials	74%	26%
Occupational Items	86%	14%
Food	80%	20%
Money	100%	0%
Total Number	98	49

*Table 14 Item-Based Attributes of characters by gender in illustrations of all textbooks*

<b>Item-Based Attributes of Characters</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>
Leisure or Sports Item	71%	29%
Domestic Item	15%	85%
School Materials	67%	33%
Occupational Items	88%	12%
Food	79%	21%
Money	100%	0%
Total Number	199	102

Tables 13 and 14 present the items associated with characters in texts and pictures based on gender. Both tables reveal a consistent pattern of notable differences in how the items associated with female and male characters are represented in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. Female characters were overwhelmingly associated with domestic items, accounting for 100% of characters in texts and 85% of characters in pictures. On the other hand, male characters were significantly more likely to be associated with occupational items, comprising 86% of texts and 88% of illustrations. This suggests that men are more likely to be portrayed as workers or

professionals. In both texts and pictures, male characters were also exclusively associated with money, potentially reinforcing stereotypes about financial decision-making and control. Conversely, domestic items were consistently linked to female characters throughout all of these textbooks.

An example of domestic items that are associated with women and girls is shown in the figure below, which is presented in My Language 2 textbook, page 48. The accompanying text implicitly suggests that cleaning is the responsibility of only the mother, and the vacuum and other cleaning tools depicted in the illustration are shown as being used exclusively by the mother and daughter. This may reinforce gender stereotypes and promote the notion that women and girls should be responsible for household chores while men are exempt from such duties. The subtle yet powerful impact of such depictions in textbooks cannot be overlooked, as they shape the way children perceive gender roles and responsibilities from an early age. These observations suggest that gender stereotypes continue to be perpetuated in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks and may influence young readers' perceptions of gender roles and expectations.



Figure 8. My Language 2, Grade 1, First Semester (Ministry of Education, 2021b, p. 48)

Translation: Nourah said: We help our mother with cleaning the house, and we all like cooperation and order: I clean the window of the room, my mother vacuums, and Fawaz arranges the flowers.

## 4.8 Places and Locations Where Characters Appear

*Table 15 Places and locations where characters appear in illustrations in all textbooks*

<b>Place of Character</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F %</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M %</b>
Home	25	31%	55	69%
School	24	26%	69	74%
Playground	6	19%	26	81%
Market	0	0%	1	100%
Park	5	45%	6	55%
Zoo	4	100%	0	0%
Street	0	0%	4	100%
Swimming Pool	0	0%	2	100%
Beach	1	50%	1	50%
Farm	0	0%	3	100%
Sea	0	0%	2	100%
Worship	0	0%	8	100%
Kitchen	2	100%	0	0%
Workplace	0	0%	1	100%
Factory	0	0%	1	100%
Ship	0	0%	1	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>73%</b>

Table 15 shows the distribution of locations where male and female characters are depicted in the illustrations of all Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. It can be noted that most of the characters appeared in home and school settings across Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. This high frequency is likely to reflect some cultural factors and educational goals. In greater detail, Saudi culture strongly emphasizes family and home life; thus, textbooks may reflect this by frequently depicting characters in the home. Additionally, early education often focuses on

developing basic literacy and numeracy skills. Therefore, these settings provide familiar contexts for young students to practice these skills.

Regarding gender representation, both boys' and men's characters were significantly more likely to be depicted in public spaces such as playgrounds, markets, streets, swimming pools, farms, seas, places of worship, workplaces, and factories, with percentages ranging from 81% to 100%. This suggests that boys' and men's characters were more often associated with places outside the home. On the other hand, girls' and women's characters were frequently depicted in domestic spheres. The only character who appeared in the kitchen was a woman. However, as shown in Table 15, there was also some diversity; both girls' and boys' characters were portrayed in zoos, beaches, and parks, indicating a more balanced representation in those locations.

An example on page 56 of the My Language 2 textbook sheds light on the distinction between the places where characters are depicted according to gender. The figure below contains a picture and text that features several characters: the grandfather, father, mother, and their children. The grandfather and father are shown coming from outside the home, while the mother stands passively on the doorstep. As shown, the mother is the only character who appears in the kitchen, performing a domestic task and making coffee, while the father is more involved in social interactions. This illustration and the accompanying text can unintentionally promote the gender stereotype that a woman's place is in the home and kitchen.



Figure 9. My Language 2, Grade 1, First Semester (Ministry of Education, 2021b, p. 56)

Translation: Noura said: My grandfather visited us, and we went out to welcome him. Fawaz welcomed him and kissed his head, and Yasser offered him dates, and my mother made him coffee. I am happy for my grandfather's arrival.

## 4.9 Occupational Roles

Table 16 Occupational roles of characters by gender in all textbooks

Occupations of Characters	M	F	Unspecified
Seller	4		
Doctor		1	2
Soldier	1		
Teacher	53	6	
Astronaut	1		
Fisher	2		
Hunter	2		
Farmer	1		
Referee	1		
Carpenter	1		
Loggers	1		
Artist	3	1	
Carpet Maker	1		
Engineer	2		
Sailor	3		
Total	76	8	2

Table 16 provides the characters' occupations portrayed across all Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks, classified by gender. The analysis of gender representation in occupations revealed that men were depicted in occupational roles significantly more frequently than women, accounting for 88%. They were also assigned a much broader range of professions compared to women. Notably, men were more prevalent in stereotypically masculine occupations, such as soldiers, fishers, hunters, farmers, referees, carpenters, loggers, engineers, and sailors. However, they were also more present, even in occupations that were not stereotypically associated with men, such as teaching. As shown in Table 16, the majority of men were depicted as teachers, with a total of 53 instances.

On the other hand, women were rarely identified by their occupations. They were also underrepresented in leading professions, such as astronauts and engineers, compared to men. Women were primarily associated with teaching professions, with only six teachers and two other professions, one doctor and one artist identified. Depicting a woman as a doctor may indicate a positive step towards more balanced gender representation; however, as this analysis shows, it is a rare instance of female professional visibility in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. This discrepancy in occupational representation between women and men may indicate a larger societal issue regarding gender stereotypes and biases.

An example of the depiction of occupational roles assigned to women and men can be found on page 82 of the My Language 2 textbook (see figure below). The picture and accompanying text show children's characters expressing their career aspirations, which cover a range of fields, including medicine, space exploration, education, and security. Upon careful observation, this

depiction can indicate a gender-based disparity in regard to the characters' occupational roles. Women were portrayed as suited for caring jobs, such as teaching and medicine, while men were depicted as fit for defense and discovery jobs, such as astronauts and police officers. In this figure, women were shown working in indoor environments such as schools and hospitals, whereas men were represented in outdoor settings, including outer space and on the streets. Additionally, the accompanying text of the picture uses the term "policeman" instead of "police officer," which explicitly associates the role of police work with men. Therefore, the subtle bias in both these illustrations and texts could potentially reinforce gender stereotypes and limit the career aspirations of young students, especially girls, who may feel discouraged from pursuing careers outside those assigned to their gender.



Figure 10. *My Language 2, Grade 1, First Semester (Ministry of Education, 2021b, p. 82)*

*Translation: "I want to become a doctor." "I want to become an astronaut." "I want to become a teacher." "I want to become a policeman."*

#### 4.10 Inductively Developed Patterns and Themes

Building upon the results presented in the previous sections, the analysis revealed recurring patterns in the representation of gender across Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks in both texts

and illustrations. Table 17 summarizes the main inductively developed patterns and themes that emerged from the findings.

*Table 17 Inductively developed patterns and themes emerging from the findings*

<b>Patterns Identified in the Data</b>	<b>Inductively Developed Theme</b>
Female characters appeared less frequently than male characters across the textbooks.	Unequal visibility
Gender representation varied across different subjects	Variation in gender representation across subjects
Female characters were associated with a narrower range of occupational roles than male characters.	Restricted horizons for girls
Male characters were more often represented as active and publicly engaged, while female characters were more often positioned in passive, domestic or limited roles.	The active man and the passive woman
Masculinity was repeatedly associated with strength, activity, visibility, independence and socially dominant positioning.	Masculine dominance and gender performance

These themes are discussed in greater depth in Chapter Five.

## **4.11 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the results of the content analysis of 15 first-grade textbooks that were published in 2021 and used in Saudi schools. This study aimed to examine the representation of gender in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks through a comprehensive content analysis of both textual and visual elements. The results of this study were presented in relation to the research

questions posed at the outset. The analysis revealed a significant gender imbalance. The textbooks primarily featured male characters, who were more frequently depicted in various settings and activities.

Moreover, the textbooks often reinforced traditional gender roles. Female characters were mainly associated with domestic activities and caregiving roles, while male characters were portrayed in a wider range of occupations and activities, including professional and public roles. The analysis also highlighted a visual bias, with male characters often occupying central positions in illustrations and being depicted in more dynamic and active poses. On the other hand, female characters were frequently relegated to the background or shown in passive roles. This limited representation of female characters in diverse roles may contribute to perpetuating gender stereotypes.

## **5. Chapter Five: Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The findings of this study highlighted the prevalence of gender stereotypes in the sample of first-grade textbooks of Saudi Arabia. Male characters were more visible than female characters, and, when they did appear, male characters were depicted as much more active and assertive than female characters. The sample of first-grade textbooks in this study consistently portrayed male characters as strong, assertive, and occupying intellectually demanding roles, while female characters were often depicted as weak, submissive, and confined to less intellectually challenging or domestic contexts. Furthermore, traditional gender roles were reinforced through the assignments of domestic tasks, caregiving responsibilities, and limited career options for female characters. The perpetuation of stereotypes in school textbooks hinders the development and empowerment of women, contributing to gender inequality in Saudi Arabian society and the internalization and reproduction of harmful and self-defeating gender stereotypes for both Saudi boys and girls.

This chapter presents a thorough discussion of the findings related to gender stereotypes in first-grade textbooks and the extent to which these textbooks reinforce gender stereotypes. The discussion chapter has been organized according to the four main research questions outlined at the beginning of the study. Thus, the discussion chapter explores: (a) the ratio of female and male characters in texts and illustrations in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks; (b) occupational roles

for women and men characters in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks; (c) the traits that are assigned to male and female characters in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks; and (d) the portrayal of gender in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks and reinforcement of existing gender stereotypes.

The chapter will identify some of the most important themes that have emerged from the findings including the symbolic annihilation of female characters through their invisibility, the importance of context and, in particular, different subject matters in the representation of first-grade textbooks, the active male versus the passive female, and hegemonic masculinity. The themes and their implications will be analyzed using the main theoretical perspectives that have been utilized to explain gender stereotyping including Foucauldian theory, feminist theory, critical pedagogy, the hidden curriculum and social learning theory. Drawing upon the literature that has previously been published, the chapter will identify the ways in which the findings from this study reaffirm the existing knowledge base and areas where the results in this study challenge prevailing knowledge about the representation of gender stereotypes in school textbooks.

## **5.2 The Ratio of Male to Female Characters: Quantitative Gender**

### **Inequality**

The analysis of Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks indicated that there was a significant disparity in the representation of male and female characters. As demonstrated in Tables 3 and 4 within the results section, the data have revealed that first-grade textbooks in Saudi Arabia showcased a greater prevalence of male characters. Sixty six percent of the texts and 68% of the illustrations in this study incorporated male characters. Conversely, 26% of the texts and 31% of the illustrations included female characters. A total of 169 characters in the examined texts were male, while only 67 characters were female. A total of 408 male characters appeared in the illustrations of the textbooks compared to a total of 188 illustrated female characters. As a result, the findings reveal that, firstly, male characters featured much more prominently in both written texts and illustrations than female characters and, secondly, that there is a significant variation in the proportion between the texts and the illustrations in Saudi textbooks. At a quantitative level, the findings show that, in both texts and illustrations, the ratio of male to female characters was well in excess of 2:1. However, where, in illustrations of gender, the ratio was slightly in excess of 2:1 in favor of male characters, in textual references, the ratio between male and female characters was greater than 2.5 males for every female character.

The findings in this study reinforced the findings of previous empirical studies, which have explored the unequal representation of male and female characters in school textbooks. For instance, research undertaken by both Barton and Sakwa (2012) and Antiksari (2011) identified a higher proportion of male characters compared to female characters in both the text and accompanying illustrations. Barton and Sakwa (2012), most notably, found that the percentage of

male characters in the text of books employed in secondary schools in Uganda was 64.3% compared to only 35.7% of female characters. Gender discrepancies in this study were also prevalent in the illustrations that accompanied descriptions in textbooks. Female characters comprised only 20.7% of the total illustrations in Barton and Sakwa's study, while male characters account for 79.3% of the illustrations. Indeed, Barton and Sakwa (2012) found that illustration of female characters is entirely absent from specific units in the English curriculum. The findings from this research study showed a greater variation in the proportion of male to female characters in texts rather than illustrations, similar to Barton and Sakwa's study, which uncovered a higher proportion of variation in texts compared to illustrations.

Antiksari's critical discourse analysis of the representation of gender in Indonesian secondary schools, meanwhile, found that male characters represented a significant majority (60.24%) of textual references. Numerous other studies have also found that the ratio of male to female characters is unequal both in textual and illustrative representations of gender. In particular, previous studies have shown that the over-representation of male characters is prevalent in school textbooks in countries such as Slovenia, Australia, and Hong Kong (Lee & Collins, 2009; Sovic & Hus, 2015). Similar findings have been reported in Iran (Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Hall, 2014), the Philippines (Tarrayo, 2014), Japan (Lee, 2018; Mineshima, 2008), and the United Arab Emirates (Al-Qatawneh & Al Rawashdeh, 2019). Casey et al.'s (2021) study also found no instances in any of the analyzed books, overall, that there are more female characters than male. While female characters may be more prevalent than males in specific subjects (for instance, in health care and nursing), these tend to be employed instrumentally to reinforce existing gender stereotypes (Carroll & Rosa, 2016). In particular, studies that feature a higher number of female

characters tend to do so in order to embed stereotypes about the caring yet passive feminine gender role (Carroll & Rosa, 2016). As a result, it is crucial to acknowledge that the findings in the current research study confirm over sixty years of empirical research which shows significant disparities in the textual and illustrative representation of gender in books across the world (Casey et al., 2021).

There are a number of explanations that can be put forward as a means of explaining the persistent gap between the representation of male and female characters in school textbooks. For instance, it is important to recognize that a significant majority of empirical research which assesses gender roles and representations in academic textbooks focuses upon the subject of English language and/or English literature (Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Antiksari, 2011; Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Hall, 2014; Mineshima, 2008). These studies, which explore the representation of gender in English textbooks, have been published both in advanced economies as well as developing societies across the global South, with research producing broadly similar findings. Many English school curricula present an imbalanced portrayal of gender because this subject often draws upon classic texts that, in many cases, were published many years and even decades ago (Elliott, 2017). Classic texts, which are routinely utilized in English language and literature classes, are much more likely to incorporate a significant majority of male characters. This is because authors of classic texts are much more likely to be men. For instance, Elliott (2017) argues that male characters are overrepresented in standard texts taught in English lessons in the United Kingdom. She refers to the continued canonical status of *Of Mice and Men* as an example of how the English literature curriculum remains dominated by male-authored works that foreground male experiences. Viewed from this perspective, the overrepresentation of male characters in school

texts (and, therefore, the underrepresentation of female characters) can be understood as linked to the gender identity of the authors of the texts that are used in schools (Elliott, 2017).

Even where schools utilize classic literature texts that were written by female authors, gender disparities remain in the quantitative representation of characters. For instance, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which remains a key source of learning in schools both in the global North and the global South, features an overwhelming majority of male characters (Elliott, 2017; Pathania, 2025; Vega-Abarzúa, 2025). This is also the case for *Wuthering Heights* (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000). In these cases, the overrepresentation of male characters can be explained via recourse to the historical and cultural context in which the books were published. In particular, as Colebrook (2004) and Gilbert and Gubar (2000) argue, when Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë were writing, gender inequalities were institutionalized in a variety of ways. The vast majority of women in nineteenth century Britain were, most notably, economically dependent upon men (Colebrook, 2004; Gilbert & Gubar, 2000). Additionally, women had no political voice and were sparsely represented in any professional occupations prior to the second half of the twentieth century (McRobbie, 2008).

Viewed from this perspective, there is little surprise that classic novels written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries feature an overrepresentation of male characters. The underrepresentation of female characters was merely an accurate (fictional) representation of the deeply gendered and hierarchical societies in which these authors lived (Colebrook, 2004; de Beauvoir, 2011). As a result, it can be argued that imbalances in the ratio of male to female characters in English textbooks are best understood in terms of what Casey et al. (2021, p. 14)

refer to as a ‘historical artefact’, which reflects and reaffirms the cultural norms and expectations of the period during which they were written and published.

However, while the use of older books can explain discrepancies in gender representations in studies that have focused upon English literature and language textbooks used in secondary schools, they are of little utility in explaining unequal ratios of male and female characters in more contemporary textbooks used in primary schools or kindergartens that are targeted towards younger children. In these cases, it is prudent to consider more mundane explanations for the underrepresentation of female characters. For instance, it may be the case, as Barton and Sakwa (2012) hypothesize, that the high ratio of male characters in children’s textbooks is indicative of the function of the text. In particular, Barton and Sakwa (2012) suggest that some narrative structures are best served by the use of male rather than female characters. For instance, children’s stories that are action-oriented are often best served by male characters (Barton & Sakwa, 2012). As feminist theory has shown us, this is not because men are more physically able than women or because men are more action-oriented but, rather, because of the historical and cultural construction of gender roles that has reinforced the association between action and masculinity (de Beauvoir, 2011; Evans & Davies, 2000; Greer, 2009).

A similar explanation for gender discrepancies in school textbooks is also advanced by Bailey et al. (2020), who argue that the representation of male characters is generally seen as presenting a more acceptable prototype of humanity than female characters. Where female characters are gendered and complex, male characters are more intrinsically ‘human’ (Bailey et al., 2020, p. 16). This is evidence of what Bailey et al. (2020, p. 2) term ‘implicit androcentrism’:

taken-for-granted assumptions about the universality and genericism of the male form that is offset against the gender-specific dimensions of female characterization.

Implicit androcentrism represents a novel and valid explanation for the prevalence of gender discrepancies in children's textbooks where authors and teachers alike are much more likely to privilege simplicity over complexity, and thus to default towards the representation of a male (rather than a female) character (Bailey et al., 2020; Islam & Asadullah, 2018). In the Saudi context, this tendency is further reinforced by socio-cultural and institutional conditions that have historically positioned men at the center of public and educational life. As Hamdan (2005) notes, women were largely excluded from public decision-making and from the institutions responsible for curriculum development, which were dominated by male religious and governmental authorities. Recent analyses of Saudi textbooks similarly show a systematic overrepresentation of male characters and roles, while females are frequently marginalized or confined to domestic and nurturing positions (Aljuaythin, 2018).

This can also help to explain why so many studies that have explored the gendered interpretation of characters in school textbooks have found that ambiguous characters, animal characters, inanimate objects or characters that are not officially assigned a gender tend to be automatically assumed to be male (Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Casey et al., 2021; Mineshima, 2008). For instance, research has shown that mothers often refer to ambiguous or gender-neutral characters in children's books with male pronouns (Casey et al., 2021). Therefore, in addition to appearing more prototypical of humans, it can be argued that ambiguous and/or gender-neutral characters in children's textbooks are more likely to be assigned masculine traits because, when

characters are anthropomorphized, they are assigned stereotypical gender roles and gender identities (Berry & Wilkins, 2017). This is an important observation to note in this study, which found a number of characters that could not formally be assigned a binary gender identity. Viewed from this perspective, inequalities in the ratio of male to female representation in this study may be even greater than initially thought.

Furthermore, as Casey et al. (2021) suggest, it may be the case that the overrepresentation of male characters reflects overarching economic and commercial imperatives. In particular, Casey et al. (2021) argue that, in many countries, children's books with male characters are more likely to sell than books with female characters. This aligns with the findings of previous studies that suggested parents prefer media with male characters and also believe that their sons prefer books that are oriented toward males (Wagner, 2017). It is possible that parents' preference for books with male characters is a result of their own exposure to older, classic books (Anderson et al., 2001). Additionally, assumptions about their sons' preferences may stem from the fact that boys often respond more favorably to books with male characters, and adults may also be hesitant to expose boys to male characters performing activities that are stereotypically associated with females (Kane, 2006). Consequently, it can be argued that gender equality and gender diversity are simply not profitable while gender stereotyping remains not only profitable but also culturally popular (Clark et al., 2013). Understood in this way, the uneven ratio of male to female characters in school textbooks is best explained as a product of existing gender hierarchies and implicit biases which favor male characterizations while marginalizing the voice and the image of women. Even in Western liberal democracies, which have witnessed the greatest advances in the

institutionalization of gender equality, there remains a clear and identifiable preference in school textbooks for male characters (Clark et al., 2013).

It is little surprise, then, that countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which have only recently witnessed a gradual relaxation of deeply restrictive and discriminatory gender laws and whose society remains segregated along gendered lines, retain overt discrepancies in the representation of male and female characters in school textbooks (Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023). In countries such as Saudi Arabia, substantial differentiations in the ratio of male to female characters cannot be explained as a historical artifact because gender inequality is a pervasive and recurrent feature of social and cultural life in the twenty first century (Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023). For this reason, discrepancies between the number of female and male characters in Saudi Arabia should be interpreted as a reflection of, on the one hand, the social, economic, political and cultural hegemony of masculinity and, on the other hand, continued preferences and biases in favor of male representations over female representations. Stereotyping, in this sense, is manifest in a form of quantitative inequality where female subjugation is represented in fewer textual and illustrative representations in school textbooks.

### **5.2.1 Implications of Imbalances in the Ratio of Male to Female Characters in School**

#### **Textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Symbolic Annihilation**

The high male ratio in first-grade textbooks yields has important implications for the way in which gender may be internalized and understood in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Firstly, the significant discrepancy between the number of representations of male and female characters reinforces the idea that men are the dominant figures in society while women, in contrast, are

relegated to secondary roles. By consistently portraying male characters in texts and illustrations in particular settings, roles, and professions while marginalizing women, school textbooks can reinforce the myths that sustain hegemonic masculinity, which is best understood as the legitimization of unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and the subordination of women (Messerschmidt, 2018). According to Yang and Zhou (2022, p. 14) “this resonates with the theory of gender hierarchy that hegemonic masculinity renders women subordinate in relation to men.”

Viewed from this perspective, a high representation of male characters in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks can have a significant impact on gender equality and limit opportunities for girls and women. When female characters are underrepresented or portrayed in stereotypical roles, it can send a message that certain careers, aspirations, or activities are more suitable for men, thereby limiting the horizons of young girls (Messerschmidt, 2018). This stereotyping of gender roles may discourage girls from pursuing their interests, dreams, or ambitions, leading to fewer opportunities and potential career paths. Certainly, there is a wealth of empirical evidence which demonstrates that even well-educated Saudi women are grossly underrepresented in the workforce and the knowledge economy (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023).

By employing the lens of critical theory, a powerful tool for dissecting power dynamics and social inequalities within institutions and structures, the relationship between women’s underrepresentation in textbooks and the underrepresentation of women in the economy can be explained. The underrepresentation of women in textbooks can be seen as a manifestation of power imbalances within the educational system, where those in positions of authority determine the

content and narratives presented to students. By marginalizing women's contributions and perspectives, textbooks reinforce existing power structures that prioritize men's voices and experiences. This perpetuates a cycle of exclusion, where women are systematically disadvantaged in educational and economic settings, hindering their ability to fully participate and succeed in the economy (Mayo, 2007). Therefore, it can be argued that the underrepresentation of women in the Saudi economy is a by-product of the underrepresentation of women and girls in the textbooks that are utilized in Saudi schools, creating a vicious cycle of gender inequality and dependence for women in contemporary Saudi Arabian society (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023).

Secondly, the absence or marginalization of female characters in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks can contribute to a sense of invisibility and erasure for girls and women. This, in turn, can lead to undermining girls' sense of self-worth, value, and societal contribution outside of stereotypical binaries. Additionally, the impact of this lack of representation can also extend to boys, as they are deprived of diverse perspectives and narratives, perpetuating a limited understanding of gender dynamics, and hindering the development of empathy and respect for girls and women and the development of alternative masculine identities. It is important, therefore, to consider the implications of the differences uncovered in this study between the ratio of male to female characters in Saudi texts compared to differences in the ratio of male to female characters in illustrations. In this study, there was a higher discrepancy in the ratio of male to female characters in the texts compared to illustrations. As a result, women's invisibility was less pronounced pictorially than it was textually. Previous research has indicated that, for younger children, the invisibility of female characters is likely to have a more profound effect than the absence of female characters in texts because, on the one hand, pictures and illustrations perform

a more integral instructional role for younger children and, on the other hand, a lack of a visual representation of femininity contributes to the assumption that women and girls are ontologically redundant (Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2008; Parashar & Singh, 2020; Shah, 2012).

However, it is also important to acknowledge that the results in this study showed that, even for illustrations, male characters outnumbered female characters by more than two to one. This is higher than the majority of empirical research studies that have explored biases in the textual and illustrative representation of gender in school textbooks (Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Berry & Wilkins, 2017; Hall, 2014; Mineshima, 2008) although lower than previous research into Saudi Arabian schools conducted by Abiky (2019) who found textual and illustrative discrepancies in excess of seven to one in favor of male characters.

Therefore, it is immensely difficult to argue that the relatively lower misrepresentation of female characters in illustrations in Saudi textbooks is in some way indicative of an inclusive curriculum. Rather, the findings from the current study, coupled with those garnered by Abiky (2019), reaffirm the idea that Saudi Arabian textbooks are, measured in terms of the visibility and occurrence of male and female characters, amongst the most unequal in the Arab world, and that the unequal ratio of male to female characters in school textbooks is inextricably linked to institutionalized and embedded gender inequalities in the country. As a result, it is prudent to note that while historical, economic and linguistic factors may affect the unequal representation of gender in school textbooks, cultural awareness of gender bias and, crucially, the political will to address those biases, are the most important structural determinants of the underrepresentation of women in school texts (Berry & Wilkins, 2017; Casey et al., 2021).

Thirdly, a higher male ratio in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks can reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations among young students through embedding the assumption that men are more important than women. Male and female characters do not need to be imbued with stereotypical traits in order to perpetuate existing gender stereotypes and hierarchies; the numerical inequality in the representation of characters is itself an *implicit* form of stereotyping that reinforces men's superiority over women. A higher male ratio in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks can have a lasting impact on children's perceptions of social norms and expectations. When male characters are the dominant representation, children may perceive this as the norm and view female characters as deviating from socially contrived ideals (Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2008; Parashar & Singh, 2020; Shah, 2012). This, in turn, can influence children's attitudes toward gender equality and their willingness to challenge or question traditional gender roles. Girls may internalize beliefs that they should conform to societal expectations, limiting their aspirations and potential. Meanwhile, boys may develop a sense of entitlement and privilege based on their gender.

Poststructuralist feminist theory offers a critical lens through which to examine the process by which gender norms are learned, internalized, and embedded, particularly through mediums like textbooks. According to poststructuralist feminists, gender is not an inherent trait but rather a social construct that is continuously constructed and reconstructed through discourse and power dynamics (Butler, 2011b; Frost & Elichaooff, 2014). The theory can be applied to understand the process of internalizing gender norms from stereotypes in textbooks. Poststructuralist feminists highlight the role of discourse, or language and communication, in shaping our understanding of gender. They argue that discourse reflects and reinforces existing power dynamics in society (Frost

& Elichaoﬀ, 2014). Textbooks, as a form of discourse, play a significant role in perpetuating certain gender norms.

Poststructuralist feminists critique how gender is represented in literature, particularly through stereotypes. Stereotypes are simplified, often exaggerated representations of certain groups that play a powerful role in shaping perceptions and expectations. For instance, books may portray women as nurturing and emotional while depicting men as strong and rational, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Individuals are socialized into adopting and internalizing these gender norms from a young age. Children’s books often present gendered characters and roles in ways that are easily comprehensible to young readers. Through repeated exposure to these representations, children learn to associate certain traits and behaviors with specific genders. Moreover, poststructuralist feminists argue that gender norms become embedded in society through processes of normalization and reproduction. When gender stereotypes are repeatedly depicted in literature, they become normalized and accepted as natural or inevitable. As a result, individuals may unconsciously reproduce these norms in their own beliefs and behaviors, perpetuating the cycle (Butler, 2011b; Frost & Elichaoﬀ, 2014).

Despite the pervasive influence of gender norms in literature and society, poststructuralist feminists also emphasize the potential for resistance and subversion. By critically analyzing and deconstructing gender representations in literature, individuals can challenge and disrupt dominant norms. This might involve reinterpreting characters, questioning stereotypes, or creating alternative narratives that defy traditional gender expectations (Frost & Elichaoﬀ, 2014).

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the impacts of gender disparities in education extend far beyond the individual level and can have significant implications for societal attitudes and structures. In Saudi Arabian society, where traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained, the unequal representation of gender in school textbooks can contribute to a more widespread acceptance of the views, assumptions and biases that underpin structural gender inequality (Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023). Specifically, the prevalence of male-centric content in first-grade textbooks may serve to normalize gender disparities and reinforce patriarchal power structures, ultimately limiting progress toward true gender equality.

In order to understand why this is the case, it is prudent to consider the findings from this study and others that have uncovered substantial disparities in the representation of gender in school textbooks from the perspective of Bourdieu's theory of habitus and symbolic power. Bourdieu (1984) argues that the social and cultural world is characterized by an ongoing struggle to attain symbolic power (i.e., non-material power). Symbolic power is, according to Bourdieu (1984, p. 251), manifest not only in terms of knowledge and beliefs but also in terms of identity, "credit and discredit, perception and appreciation." The exclusion, invisibility, or marginalization of a social or cultural group is thus tantamount to what Merskin (1998, p. 335) calls 'symbolic annihilation': the cultural reproduction of inequality based upon a group's perceived value, importance, and cultural capital. Symbolic annihilation is manifest in myriad ways. In addition to schools, social or cultural groups can be erased, silenced, or marginalized through the media, the family and in political representation (Ohye & Daniel, 1999). Understood in this way, the significant discrepancy in the ratio of male to female characters in Saudi textbooks demonstrates that women and girls are not valued in the same way as men and boys.

As Bourdieu (1990) explains, symbolic annihilation is a hugely significant issue to acknowledge because of the way in which the assumptions, biases and norms implied through symbolic annihilation are internalized and absorbed by the individual. In particular, Bourdieu (1990) argues that inequalities in the cultural modes of production yield acceptance of those inequalities even by individuals and groups that are the most oppressed. In the context of gender, then, it is taken for granted that women are invisible because they matter less than men even by those women and girls whose views and preferences are de-legitimized through their absence from illustrations and texts. Consequently, there can be little doubt that social reality, as it is conceived in a patriarchal society, is defined by the ubiquitous presence and symbolic power of men and, conversely, the ostracization and suppression of women's corporeality (Gurrieri, 2020, p. 364). Viewed from this perspective, the findings in this study have shown that Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks are situated within a broader patriarchal system of symbolic power, which disenfranchises women and girls while normalizing male domination and hegemony (Colebrook, 2004; de Beauvoir, 2011; Gurrieri, 2020).

### **5.2.2 Subject Matters? Exploring Differences in the Ratio of Male to Female Characters in Different Subjects in Saudi Arabian First Grade Textbooks**

Although it is important to acknowledge discrepancies in the ratio of male to female characters across Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks, it is also crucial to note that, in this study, the results yielded some anomalous findings and cases where there was a much greater overrepresentation of male characters or men than the average. In particular, it is crucial to note that Islamic Studies yielded a much greater disparity between the representation of male and

female characters than other subjects in the curriculum. As previously noted, 86% of the characters in Islamic Studies textbooks were male compared to only 13% of textual references to female characters. This is an important statistic to acknowledge given that Islamic Studies comprised 32% of the total textual references to gender uncovered in this study. The huge discrepancy in the representation of male and female characters in Islamic Studies found in this study is much closer to the ratio uncovered by Abiky (2019) than it is most other empirical studies that have explored the representation of genders in school textbooks, which identify ratios with under two male characters for every female character (Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Berry & Wilkins, 2017; Hall, 2014; Mineshima, 2008).

The discrepancy between male and female characters in Islamic Studies is even more pronounced in the illustrations of gender in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks. This study found that there was a total of 41 illustrations of male characters in Islamic Studies textbooks employed in first grade schools in Saudi Arabia. In contrast, no illustrations of female characters were uncovered. As a result, female invisibility in Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks is total. The discrepancies in the representation of gender in Islamic Studies far exceeds discrepancies in other subjects. For instance, in *My Language 2* textbooks, the difference between male and female characters' textual references was 58% compared to 39% respectively while, in terms of illustrations, male characters comprised 63% of the total of *My Language 2* pictures compared to 37% of female characters.

Perhaps the greatest anomaly uncovered in this study concerned the representation of characters in mathematics. Measured in terms of pictures, there were more illustrations of women

or girls than of men or boys (62% and 38% respectively). This was the only subject where, both in texts and illustrations, female visibility was greater than the visibility of males. However, in terms of textual references, this study found that there were no representations of either gender in mathematics textbooks. Life and Family Skills was likewise a subject where the substantial differences in the ratio of male to female characters was mitigated. In this study, the results showed that 45% of illustrations depicted female characters compared to 55% illustrations of male characters. In textual references, 17% of Life and Family Skills textbooks depicted female characters compared to 25% where male characters were represented; over half (58%) of characters had no explicit gender identity. Therefore, it should be noted that there are considerable variations in the ratio of male to female characters in Saudi textbooks and that, in order to understand the prevalence of the underrepresentation and symbolic annihilation of female characters (Bourdieu, 1990), it is crucial to consider the individual school subject being taught.

### **Islamic Studies Textbook**

Turning attention first towards, Islamic Studies, there has been a rich body of theoretical and empirical literature which has outlined the importance of this subject in the curriculum in Muslim countries. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as is the case across the Arabian Gulf, Islamic Studies is a mandatory subject that must be taught in schools. The subject of Islamic Studies serves myriad functions. In addition to teaching students about the history of Islam and its cultural and religious significance, Islamic Studies has, as Buskens (2016) explains, always focused upon wider social issues. In particular, Islamic Studies has historically performed an immensely influential role in exploring and making sense of some of the most important issues facing Muslim countries

such as the juxtaposition between the traditionalism of Islam and the modernization of the West, and the regulation of moral norms (Buskens, 2016).

As Katz (2016) attests, since the 1990s, gender has become an increasingly prominent social issue explored in Islamic Studies based following the publication of works such as Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam*, *The Veil and the Male Elite* by Fatima Mernissi's and *Woman's Body, Woman's Word* by Fedwa Malti-Douglas. However, Islamic Studies does not, according to Katz (2016), provide a platform for a rigorous critique of the role of gender in Muslim countries or an analysis of the historical subjugation of women in deeply patriarchal societies. Rather, Katz (2016) argues that Islamic Studies has served to reinforce gender inequalities and hierarchies through, for instance, drawing upon often misleading interpretations of Sharia law, which codifies and legitimizes gender bias and gender discrimination. Moreover, as Buskens (2016) explains, Islamic Studies presents a monolithic gender discourse which reinforces the presumption of universality in terms of gender roles and responsibilities, legal and social status, religious practices and rituals, authority and leadership. There is, therefore, little space for questioning what are taught to be universal gender norms or challenging the ontological basis of gender biases in the Islamic Studies curriculum precisely because the course and its texts have been designed to preserve the existing gendered status quo (Katz, 2016).

Viewed from this perspective, the huge discrepancy between the textual references to gender uncovered in this study, coupled with the complete marginalization of women in illustrations, confirm the findings of previous studies that have shown how Islamic Studies performs an instrumental role in the school curricula in Muslim countries in embedding gender

stratifications and inequalities (Anwar, 2006; Katz, 2016). In particular, it is essential to note that the almost total invisibility of female characters in the texts and illustrations of first-grade textbooks in this study shows how Islamic Studies reinforces the assumption that religious frameworks—and the governance of social norms and moral codes that this inevitably entails—are an inherently male sphere in which women’s experiences are not important.

Poststructuralist feminist theory emphasizes the role of power relations in the construction of gender norms through texts. Texts are not neutral but are imbued with power dynamics that reflect and reproduce existing hierarchies of gender. Those who have the power to produce and disseminate texts, such as authors, publishers, and educators, can shape representations of gender in ways that reinforce dominant ideologies and marginalize alternative perspectives (Butler, 2011b). Where the hegemonic position of men is confirmed by the association between religiosity and masculinity in Islamic Studies textbooks, women’s subjugation is internalized through the almost total marginalization of women from Islamic Studies course materials (Anwar, 2006; Arnez, 2010). As a result, there can be little doubt that, when attempting to assess the way in which school textbooks contribute to the perpetuation of gender stereotyping in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, subjects do matter.

### **Life and Family Skills Textbook**

This is certainly the case with regards to the Life and Family Skills textbook of the first-grade curriculum in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is taught exclusively to girls. Previous empirical research has shown that, in addition to claiming to provide students with problem-solving and critical thinking skills, the actual content of the Life and Family Skills curriculum

performs a crucial function in teaching children about social and cultural expectations in Saudi society (Al-Jar, 2021; Al-Shamlti & Al-Zahrani, 2022; Almalki & Ganong, 2018). According to Al-Shamlti and Al-Zahrani (2022), the Life and Family Skills textbook achieves this by setting priorities for young students to accomplish in the private sphere of the home and in the family. These priorities are deeply gendered. The priority for boys is, for instance, to provide for their families through education and work. The priority for girls, conversely, is to take care of and nurture their families through adopting the traditional feminine roles of mother, caregiver and homemaker (Al-Jar, 2021; Al-Shamlti & Al-Zahrani, 2022; Almalki, 2020; Almalki & Ganong, 2018).

As a result, the relevant parity of textual references to male and female characters in Life and Family Skills textbooks should in no way be interpreted as evidence of a more gender neutral or gender equal curriculum. Rather, this is testimony to the continued gendered division of labor in the home in Saudi society, where women's essential caring functions need to be emphasized every bit as much as the breadwinning role of men (Al-Jar, 2021; Al-Shamlti & Al-Zahrani, 2022; Almalki, 2020; Almalki & Ganong, 2018). This further underlines how the findings from the current study support the idea that textbooks perform an instrumental function in perpetuating deep-seated gender stereotypes in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

### **Mathematics Textbook**

With regards to the findings in the mathematics textbook, it is important to acknowledge that the absence of references to either male or female characters is indicative of a subject whose primary currency is numbers rather than words. Yet, as noted, there were more illustrations of

female characters than male characters in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks. This could be construed as evidence of greater gender equality in the representation of mathematics and thus a mitigation of the damaging characteristics and traits that underpin gender stereotypes in the country. However, as Gjovik et al. (2023) attest, representing mathematics teachers as women does little to address the sources or consequences of gender stereotyping. On the contrary, representing women as teachers of mathematics in first grade textbooks could be argued to contribute to gender stereotypes by depicting women as only capable of teaching simple arithmetic. Textbooks aimed at older students, in contrast, are much more likely to depict male teachers engaging in more complex mathematical and arithmetic problems such as algebra (Gjovik et al., 2023). Viewed from this vantage point, the greater proportion of female illustrations in this study constitutes further evidence of the symbolic power of school textbooks, and the negative effect that these sources can have upon boys' and girls' internalization of gender norms and gender expectations.

However, it is imperative to note that, in the current study, there were no representations of adult characters – either men or women – in the mathematics textbook. There were five representations of boy characters compared to eight representations of girl characters. This is an important anomaly in the results and one that may help to redress the much greater imbalances in the representation of male and female characters observed in the remainder of the results. Certainly, it can be argued that the greater number of girls in Saudi textbooks can serve to dismantle the socially and culturally constructed gender stereotypes that reinforce inequality and hierarchies in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by illustrating young girls' competency in mathematics. As social learning theorists such as Bandura (1977) have underlined, children vicariously observe and internalize the behavior of role models. Consequently, it can be argued

that, in showing young girls undertaking and completing mathematics tasks, Saudi textbooks reverse stereotypical representations and contribute to the empowerment of women and girls.

Nevertheless, it is prudent to explore the representation of child characters in the Saudi mathematics textbook in greater detail. In particular, it is crucial to consider the precise tasks that male and female characters are depicted as undertaking in order to ascertain whether gender stereotypes are being reinforced or challenged. The current study found, consistent with other empirical research studies conducted in Europe and Islamic countries, that girls were often used to employing mathematical skills in a limited capacity as a means of solving trivial problems (Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Hall, 2014; Lindberg et al., 2010; Smetáčková & Rubin, 2015). For instance, girls were represented using mathematical skills to engage in tasks such as: comparing the height of themselves and other female characters and delineating the correct measure of threads to engage in sewing. Male characters, in contrast, were shown using mathematics to count the number of boys playing sports, to calculate the running time and to count their material possessions (for instance, the number of balls that they have and the money that they earn).

These findings show that, far from representing a solution to the gender stereotypes represented elsewhere in Saudi textbooks, the representation of gender in first grade mathematics textbooks often serves to reinforce and reaffirm existing stereotypical representations of men as self-determined and autonomous while showing women as mathematically deficient and domesticated. These stereotypical depictions of gender are prevalent across the world, contributing to substantial discrepancies between the number of men and women who pursue mathematics as a profession and facilitating what Hottinger (2010, p. 54) terms young women's 'alienation' from

mathematics. The findings in this study, therefore, reveal how textbooks can implicitly convey messages that men are more closely associated with rationality (and thus capable of engaging in mathematics for personal and social gains) and women are less closely associated with rationality (and thus capable only of using mathematics for limited purposes that have less social or economic value). This further underlines the extent to which subjects are hugely relevant in determining how and in what ways school textbooks affect and shape gender stereotypes in Saudi Arabian society.

### **5.3 Occupational Roles: Religion, the State and the Representation of Women in Saudi Arabian First Grade Textbooks**

The study of occupational roles represents one of the most prominent markers of gender bias in the literature that has been published on textbooks and gender construction in schools (Alqahtani, 2016; Hasan, 2015; Jumiah, 2016). The assignment of occupations according to deeply ingrained gender stereotypes does not only affect the way that children make sense of and perform gender in schools, but it also affects future aspirations (Simpkins et al., 2006). For this reason, any study that hopes to analyze how gender stereotypes are manifest in school textbooks in Saudi Arabia must consider how and in what ways occupational roles are represented.

The results from this study revealed that a significant proportion of illustrated characters were depicted as children, who accounted for 80% of the total characters. On the other hand, the number of adult characters depicted was relatively low, accounting for only 18% of the total characters. With regards to illustrated characters, the textbooks included 69 men, compared to only 39 women. The gender discrepancy was more pronounced in the written content with the findings showing a total of 61 men compared to only 18 women. These findings are consistent with previous

studies, which likewise showed how school textbooks can perform an important role in perpetuating gender stereotypes by portraying men as more mature, responsible, and competent than women (Fitzpatrick & McPherson, 2010; Parham, 2013; Tang et al., 2010). Understood in this way, the significant discrepancy in the gendered representation of adulthood is itself indicative of gender stereotyping based upon culturally contrived assumptions about masculine maturity compared to female immaturity and male guardianship compared to female subjugation. These findings may suggest, as de Beauvoir (2011) argued, that women have been subjected to a persistent process of cultural Othering in patriarchal societies with femininity represented as the mirror inverse of masculinity and maleness.

The relatively high proportion of child characters compared to adult characters uncovered in this study has important implications for thinking about the ways in which occupational roles are represented in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks. In particular, there can be little doubt that the higher prevalence of child characters indicates a relative paucity of adults represented as engaging in specific occupational roles. This is to be expected given the demographic to whom the textbooks are aimed and the purpose of first grade textbooks.

However, even though adults were sparsely represented in the sample of textbooks included in this study, there remained significant differences in the way that men and women were represented occupationally. In total, 89 men were represented as engaging in formal and informal occupational roles, with only 11 women depicted in formal or informal occupations across all of the first-grade textbooks. This represents a huge quantitative discrepancy, which is larger than gendered discrepancies in many other empirical studies that have explored gender biases in school

textbooks specifically in relation to occupations (Arfiandhani, 2019; Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Casey et al., 2021; Hall, 2014; Keles et al., 2021; Medrano, 2012).

The discrepancy between men and women engaged in formal and informal occupations in this study is, however, broadly similar to other research studies that have explored gender biases in school textbooks in Muslim-majority countries. Foroutan (2012), for instance, found that, measured in terms of occupational roles, Arabic and Persian language textbooks were more likely to show men working than women, compared to English language textbooks. Likewise, after exploring the representation of gender in Indonesian textbooks, Kuraedah et al. (2023) found that men were represented in occupational roles with a frequency and ratio similar to that which has been uncovered in this study, with men between eight and nine times more likely to be assigned an occupation than women. As a result, the findings from this study and others show that gender bias in school textbooks is more pronounced in Muslim-majority countries than it is in non-Muslim-majority countries (Abiky, 2019; Foroutan, 2012; Kuraedah et al., 2023; Shah, 2012).

There are a number of reasons that can be advanced to explain why Muslim-majority countries are significantly more likely to represent men in occupational roles than they are women. Most notably, gender biases are codified and institutionalized in many Muslim-majority countries. Michel Foucault's concept of power and knowledge helps to explain how educational institutions perpetuate societal norms. According to Foucault, the discourse within textbooks is a form of power that shapes students' perceptions of gender roles, reinforcing existing social hierarchies. The content of these textbooks reflects and perpetuates the gender biases entrenched in the legal and social frameworks of these countries (Foucault, 1980).

As the literature review has shown, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has introduced reforms to labor legislation in a bid to outlaw discrimination based upon gender. Driven by the Vision 2030 document, the government in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has sought to dismantle the institutional and legal barriers that have historically prevented a vast majority of women from entering the workforce (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021). The governmental vision for enhancing the participation of women in the Saudi labor market is based on a desire to modernize and diversify the economy, thereby facilitating a shift away from the production and sale of natural resources towards the generation of a knowledge economy (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021).

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that while the government has been keen to expand the number of women entering the workforce, there remains a considerable discrepancy between the number of women who go to university compared to the number of women entering the workforce. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as is the case in other Middle Eastern countries, has witnessed a significant increase in the number of girls and women going to university, with females outnumbering male students in many universities in the Middle East and North Africa region (Assaad et al., 2020). However, when attention is turned to the workforce, research continues to show that the Middle East and North Africa region ranks the lowest globally in terms of women's participation in the domestic labor market, with less than 20% of women active in the workforce in Middle Eastern and North African countries (Assaad et al., 2020). This is testimony to what Assaad et al. (2020, p. 817) refer to as the 'MENA paradox' where women's access to and participation in higher education is not matched by women's participation in labor markets.

The MENA paradox is sustained by formal and informal factors. In particular, it is essential to note that while documents such as Saudi Vision 2030 accent the importance of developing and harnessing the human capital of the female population, certain cultural traditions and interpretations of Islamic law may continue to influence gender roles in various ways. As Mtango (2004) states, the Basic Law (established in 1992) performs a constitutional function in the Saudi Arabian legal system. The Basic Law embeds the principles and practices of Islamic (Sharia) law. As a consequence, the Basic Law did not explicitly address gender discrimination and, more specifically, did not directly reference women's rights either within or outside of the workplace (Mtango, 2004). Rather, the Basic Law provisions were interpreted within a cultural context that had reflected many of the informal patriarchal customs and mores that have historically facilitated gender hierarchies in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For instance, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, previously, women had to obtain permission from a male relative before seeking employment (Alrasheed, 2013). Men (including fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons) who wish for their wives, daughters, mothers, or sisters to stay at home were thus afforded the power to determine whether and where a woman may work (Alrasheed, 2013). However, these legal provisions, which have been removed in recent years, have traditionally given male relatives a significant role in decisions about women's participation in the workforce — a role that, in many cases, continues to persist (Riyadh Behavioral Insights Center, 2023).

The codification of the system of male guardianship is, therefore, a crucial and enduring reason why few women have historically been active in the workforce in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Viewed from this perspective, there is no surprise that so few women are represented as actively engaging in Saudi Arabian textbooks; rather, the marked underrepresentation of women

in the workforce is an accurate reflection of social and economic life in a patriarchal society that was characterized by significant gender inequalities, where laws enforcing male guardianship limited women's legal autonomy (Alrasheed, 2013; Quamar, 2013). However, in recent years, reforms have been introduced to gradually dismantle these restrictions, with the aim of enhancing women's participation in the workforce.

Michel Foucault's theory of power and knowledge provides a useful lens through which to understand how institutional discourses shape societal norms. Foucault (1980) posits that power is exercised through the creation and dissemination of knowledge by institutions, such as schools, which shape societal practices and norms by privileging certain discourses over others. According to Foucault, the knowledge disseminated through textbooks is not neutral but serves to perpetuate existing power structures. The underrepresentation of women in textbooks aligns with the broader societal norms dictated by the male guardianship system, which relegates women to subordinate roles both legally and socially.

In addition, it should be noted that, even where the Saudi government has enabled women to break free from the shackles of male guardianship and enter the workforce, there remain a number of prominent social, cultural and institutional barriers that may prevent them from remaining active in the workforce. Most notably, women are likely to face significant pressure to become mothers. Unlike in some Western societies, women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are also much more likely to face considerable pressure to stay at home to raise children rather than return to the workforce (Assaad et al., 2020). Given the influence of male guardianship over

women's agency, this clearly represents an immensely important social and cultural barrier preventing greater female participation in the labor market in Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the public sector continues to account for a significant proportion of the domestic labor market in Saudi Arabia (Alotaibi, 2017). Public sector organizations are not subject to the same laws as private sector corporations. Research has shown that public sector organizations in Middle Eastern and North African countries often represent an immensely important site for the reproduction of traditional gender roles, with monolithic management structures broadly mirroring social and cultural hierarchies in the country (Assaad et al., 2020). While the advent of Saudization, which mandates corporations to employ a specific ratio of Saudi nationals, has been shown to improve the employment prospects of women in the private sector, in the public sector work continues, in many cases, to be influenced according to embedded gender roles and stereotypes (Assaad et al., 2020). Consequently, as Alrasheed (2015) attests, women in Saudi Arabia continue to be trapped between cultural interpretations of religious principles that may justify and institutionalize gender discrimination and the state, which increasingly emphasizes its commitment to empowering women. These cultural influences continue to reduce women's capacity to exercise autonomy over their lives and are important explanations for the relative invisibility of women as careerists in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks.

Viewed from this vantage point, the findings uncovered in this study can be explored from the perspective of liberal feminist theory which, as has been shown in the literature review, first outlined the extent to which women's choice, agency and self-determination is shaped by structural

and systemic factors in patriarchal societies (Carastathis, 2019; Colebrook, 2004; de Beauvoir, 2011; McRobbie, 2008; Squires, 2013). In particular, the results from this study and others that have analyzed the relationship between gender and occupations in Middle Eastern and North African countries show that many Arabic societies are still in the process of advancing gender equality and non-discrimination legislation relative to some other global contexts (Abiky, 2019; Foroutan, 2012; Kuraedah et al., 2023; Shah, 2012). Ultimately, there can be little doubt that, for as long as these structural and systemic barriers shape and constrain the lived reality of girls and women, gender bias and gender stereotyping will continue to be interpreted as a social, moral and cultural norm. Women and girls who transgress those norms are thus much more likely to be subjected to sanctions (most notably, the form of social ostracization and discrimination), which, in turn, can contribute to limiting their full participation in public and professional life in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Quamar, 2013).

### **5.3.1 Gender and Occupational Diversity: School Textbooks and the Narrowing of the Horizons of Female Students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

In addition to demonstrating the extent to which working women are rendered almost invisible in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks, the findings in this research study have demonstrated that male characters are afforded a much greater degree of diversity in their occupational roles compared to female characters. Male characters were depicted in a total of 14 different occupational roles ranging from hunters, fishers and farmers to artists, vendors, and astronauts. Women, in contrast, were confined to three roles: teacher, doctor and artist. These findings align with empirical studies conducted by Rohmawati and Putra (2022) and Elmiana (2019), which also revealed that school textbooks tend to exhibit a bias towards portraying men in

a more extensive variety of occupational roles while women are often assigned to a narrower range of professions. Indeed, a lack of diversification of women in occupational roles is a hallmark of the literature that has explored the association between school textbooks and gender stereotyping in schools (Berry & Wilkins, 2017; Casey et al., 2021).

A lack of diversity in occupational roles can be interpreted as representing women with a very limited skill set that can only be applied to a relatively narrow range of real-world scenarios. Specifically, occupations that involve service provision, including teaching and healthcare, were assigned to female characters in this study. This type of allocation perpetuates the notion that women are only suited for certain traditional roles, which involve providing a public service to society. As Mkuchu (2004) suggests, this demonstrates how stereotypical gender representations of occupation reinforce the myth that women's primary function is to perform caregiving and nurturing duties in society.

Conversely, the heterogeneous and varied roles that are assigned to male characters in school textbooks affirm the assumption that men are able to adopt and successfully perform a range of occupations, ranging from typical 'masculine' roles such as a soldier to what are often considered to be more 'feminine' occupations such as teaching. In this study, 53 of the 89 occupational roles assigned to men in first grade textbooks focused upon the occupation of teaching. Previous scholars have argued that this gendered depiction of occupations is indicative of men being able to successfully enter and colonize occupations that are traditionally associated with women (Gjovik et al., 2023; Karama, 2020).

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the representation of the teaching profession. The results from this study showed that male representations of teachers outnumbered females by a factor of over five to one, with 53 characters portraying the role of the male teacher compared to only six characters depicting the role of the female teacher. Presenting teaching as a male profession overturns the stereotypical representation of teaching in most Western countries, where empirical research has shown that teaching, particularly teaching in primary schools and kindergartens, is increasingly associated with femininity (Meland & Kaltvedt, 2019). Furthermore, representing teaching as a male-centric profession overlooks the reality of teaching in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For instance, the latest statistics show that over half of teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are women, and that the figure is higher in kindergartens and schools with younger children, with women making up 100% of kindergarten teachers. This pattern is also observed in many Western countries, where women constitute the vast majority of teachers at this level (OECD, 2024). As a consequence, in contrast to many other representations of gender observed in this study, which reflect social reality, the overrepresentation of male teachers is not grounded in reality; rather, it constitutes a complete flight from social reality in the country.

In order to understand why this is the case, it is prudent to turn attention towards social learning theory which, as has been shown, draws extensively upon the assumption that children learn through observing and reproducing the behavior of role models that they witness (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Bussey, 2004). It is especially important to recall that, when he was conducting his famous Bobo doll experiment, Bandura (1977) found that gender was a crucial determinant of social learning. When young boys witnessed a man act aggressively towards the doll, they were much more likely to copy this behavior than when they witnessed a woman act in the same way.

As a consequence, it can be argued that the high proportion of male teachers represented in textbooks could be an attempt to provide as many positive role models for young boys to emulate as possible in the hope that they will observe and reproduce the behaviors of the role models that they witness in these textbooks (Kuraedah et al., 2023).

Moreover, in light of the work of Martin and Ruble (2004) and Bussey and Bandura (1999), it can be argued that when young boys look at adult role models, they can envision their future selves as grown-up men. However, for young girls, the situation is different. If girls see predominantly female children represented in school textbooks (as opposed to female adults), they may infer that they are expected to remain childlike and enfeebled without a clear understanding of what their future self might look like. This can limit girls' perceptions of themselves and constrain their potential future roles as adults (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). By reinforcing traditional gender roles and perpetuating gender inequality, such gender stereotyping in textbooks can have a profound impact on students' beliefs and attitudes toward gender. Therefore, it is essential to provide young girls with a diverse range of role models to help them develop a more comprehensive understanding of their future possibilities. In addition, textbooks should be carefully reviewed and revised to promote gender equality and combat harmful stereotypes.

While the findings in this study show that men are over-represented in textbooks in occupations that they are under-represented in reality, Saudi women are underrepresented in depictions of occupations that have traditionally been associated with maleness and masculinity. In this study, the occupational exclusion of women in Saudi textbooks was extensive. For instance, women are not represented in professions that are traditionally associated with the economy in the

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. No women were represented selling any product or commodity in this study. In a society with a rich tradition of merchants and trading, this is a significant oversight and one that may have contributed to the lack of women entrepreneurs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Alrasheed, 2013). This under-representation of women in particular roles in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks can have further potential implications. In particular, the lack of women engaged in any formal economic role in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks disregards the legitimacy of women as economic agents, thus reinforcing women's dependence upon male guardians (Alrasheed, 2013, 2015). The findings in this study are, therefore, consistent with the results of Kuraedah et al.'s (2023) study, where the researchers deduce that female characters in Arabic language textbooks used in Indonesia are often portrayed in secondary roles, reducing their representation as independent agents.

In addition to being excluded from staple economic practices, there were no female representations of roles that are associated with social, economic, or cultural advancement. Only male characters, for instance, were represented as engineers and astronauts in this study. This is consistent with the findings of research undertaken by Arfiandhani (2019), which found that men were predominantly depicted in occupations that showed more specialized skills, such as fisher, sailor, and postal worker. Jobs associated with security, such as police officers and soldiers, were depicted exclusively as male roles in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks. Furthermore, occupations that require physical strength such as logging, hunting and farming were represented as existing solely within the male domain in this study. This confirms de Beauvoir's (2011) observation that the Othering of the feminine has historically been based upon physical differences between the sexes which, in turn, has created fertile grounds for male domination of women.

Certainly, the findings in this study show that, considered solely in terms of occupation, women are indeed positioned as occupying a subordinate status relative to men, capable of performing a very limited number of roles that are inextricably linked with deeply embedded gender stereotypes. For instance, a female doctor was represented in the sample of textbooks included in this research study. While a doctor is a high-paid and highly valued profession, the role is inexorably associated with the traits of caring and empathy which, as we have seen in the literature review, have historically been linked with femininity (Fealy, 2004; Friedan, 2010). Perhaps it is worth noting that the female character depicted as a doctor in this study was not represented as a nurse or in some other caregiving function that resides in the lower rungs of the health care hierarchy.

In addition to the doctor, the findings in this study showed that one female character was represented as an artist. The ideal of the woman artist is also one that is deeply ingrained in prevailing gender stereotypes. For instance, in a review of the cultural myths that have undergirded the representation of woman artists in Western European countries, Kauffman (2019, p. 95) notes that the stereotype of the ‘woman artist’ emerged in the late nineteenth century from Victorian assumptions that “well-brought-up women should be generalists, proficient in a number of useful, refined, but not too intellectually demanding activities, rather than excelling in one.” This stereotype of the woman artist draws upon presumptions about the innate creativity of women although, as Kauffman (2019) attests, this sense of creativity is assumed to be untamed and unfocused, thus embedding the stereotype of the woman artist as a lone creator engaged in projects that have little practical utility.

Viewed from this perspective, the findings generated from this study can be explained via recourse to Foucauldian theory which, as has been ascertained, outlines the intrinsic association between language, knowledge, and power (Foucault, 1980). Most notably, Foucault (1980) argues that power is exercised through discourses and knowledge disseminated through institutions such as schools. The types of discourse and knowledge promoted in schools, particularly through textbooks, in turn, shape societal norms and practices by embedding an ontological hierarchy in which certain discourses are favored over others and, similarly, certain types of knowledge are afforded greater social and cultural capital than others. Textbooks are primary instruments through which schools disseminate knowledge. They reflect and reinforce the discourses that educational institutions deem important. In this way, textbooks become a crucial medium for the exercise of power, as described by Foucault. They are not neutral but are imbued with the values, ideologies, and discourses that the educational system aims to perpetuate (Foucault, 1991).

This study shows how school textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are complicit in disseminating knowledge which clearly favors men while discriminating against and marginalizing women. Analysis of the diversity of occupational roles assigned to male characters, most notably, serves to embed the knowledge that men are not only highly capable but that they are essential for carrying out all of the most important functions in society. Conversely, textbooks promote the knowledge that women can only perform service- oriented functions or operate in a limited creative capacity that yields little by way of any social or economic value. This knowledge, as Foucault (1980; 1991) demonstrated, is not founded upon reality; rather, it is inextricably linked to power. In this case, there can be little doubt that the deeply unequal and stereotypical representations of gender in first grade textbooks is a product of the power afforded to men in

Saudi Arabian society, which is underwritten by religious ideas, norms and practices that constrain women's agency while legitimizing and institutionalizing male guardianship (Alrasheed, 2015). This is a finding that has been reported in several previous empirical studies that have explored the stereotypical representation of gender in textbooks in Muslim-majority countries. For instance, in their analysis of the stereotypical representations of masculinity and femininity in Indonesian textbooks, Kuraedah et al. (2023, p.11) deduce "Arabic textbook authors seem unable to separate the identity of the domination of religious ideology from that of the profession."

The ontological hierarchy promoted in Saudi school textbooks is also underwritten by language. As Kauffman (2019) attests, the social and cultural meaning of the word 'artist' has been distorted when it is applied to women. Where the male artist is productive and proficient, the female artist is creative yet isolated (Kauffman, 2019). The male artist is thus assigned greater value than the female artist due to the hegemonic power of discursive labels. The hegemonic power of knowledge is further reinforced in the way that Saudi school textbooks describe the role and function of the police. As noted previously, rather than referring to a police officer – a term that incorporates no presumptions about the gender identity or gendered characteristics of the individual – textbooks referred to the *policeman*. This clearly underlines the power that textbooks have to: (a) disseminate knowledge founded upon a patriarchal ideology; and (b) discursively frame certain occupations in a bid to exclude women's participation. The findings from this study have therefore shown how first grade textbooks significantly narrow the horizons and opportunities afforded to young girls while tacitly disseminating the message that young boys can perform any role that they wish.

### **5.3.2 The Active Man versus the Passive Woman: Occupational Representations and the Hidden Curriculum in Saudi Arabian First Grade Textbooks**

The results showed that male characters in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks were consistently depicted in active jobs such as sellers, soldiers, referees, and sailors, while female characters were portrayed in more passive and domestic roles. As noted previously, the disparity in occupational roles and functions is most clearly illustrated in the *My Language* textbook, which shows a marketplace where only men and boys are engaged in the process of buying and selling goods. When the illustration turns towards the home, the wife/mother is seen preparing a meal for her family. This reinforces the observation made above that women's roles in Islamic societies are shaped by the influence of traditional religious ideas and are primarily represented as being complementary (and subordinate to) men (Kuraedah et al., 2023).

These discrepancies in representation reinforce gender-based subordination in the educational system, with men's occupational roles receiving more explicit attention than those of women. These findings align with previous studies that have highlighted the prevalence of gender stereotypes in school textbooks where male characters tend to occupy more active and dominant roles in comparison to female characters (Arfiandhani, 2019; Lee, 2014b; Tajeddin & Janebi, 2010; Trimble et al., 2022). Male characters in these studies were shown in various occupational roles in vital employment. Conversely, women were often stereotyped as being calm and nurturing, characteristics that were perceived as unsuitable for positions that demanded courage and power (Setyono, 2018).

Understood in this way, the representation of occupational roles is inextricably linked with the dissemination of gendered traits and tropes which underpin hegemonic gender stereotypes. In particular, the representation of occupational roles uncovered in this study conveys the idea that men are more socially and economically active than women, who, as we have seen, are relegated either to domestic roles or the provision of services. This has significant implications for thinking about how and in what ways male domination and female subjugation are manifest in Saudi society. In particular, promoting the myth of the activity of masculinity, which is offset by the passivity of femininity, implies that only men are natural leaders. Trimble et al. (2022), for example, argued that leaders are perceived as individuals who hold significant power. Therefore, leaders are expected to possess certain agentic traits that enable them to exert their authority effectively. These traits include qualities such as toughness, assertiveness, decisiveness, competitiveness, confidence, courage, and independence: traits that are clearly and identifiably assigned to male occupations in this study such as sailor, soldier, astronaut, hunter, logger, and carpenter (Eagly et al., 2020; Prentice & Carranza, 2002).

These same leadership qualities are notably absent from the occupational roles assigned to women. The artist, for instance, works alone. While this may suggest creative autonomy, the role carries little social or cultural capital, particularly when it is gendered (Kauffman, 2019). The teacher possesses some leadership qualities, although these are confined to the school setting and limited to leading children. This can help to explain why there is a disproportionate number of male teachers depicted in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks: to reinforce male superiority and leadership within the school system. Viewed from this perspective, the discursive and illustrative

constructs of occupations in textbooks are bound in a toxic and self-perpetuating culture of oppression in which power, as Foucault (1980) attested, is ubiquitous.

This leaves the doctor role that was assigned to a woman in one of the textbooks analyzed in this study. However, while the doctor is a leader, the role is commonly associated with traits such as empathy and caregiving, qualities that have historically been linked with femininity (Fealy, 2004). Although these traits are valuable, they may serve to constrain the scope of women's authority within socially accepted boundaries. Moreover, the role of the doctor is typically portrayed as responding to the needs of their patients rather than influencing healthcare policies or making broader decisions, which reflects a more limited form of leadership. Consequently, the results from this study reveal how the discourses presented in school textbooks tend to mirror prevailing societal norms related to gender, thereby reinforcing existing power structures, hierarchies, and inequalities between men and women (Friedan, 2010). This trend, which is based upon the social and cultural Othering of femininity, is likely to perpetuate disparities and biases, both during childhood and over the life course (de Beauvoir, 2011; Gray, 2013; Sunderland, 2000).

Furthermore, the findings show that the stereotypical representations of gender encourage readers to identify men by their occupations and women by their relationships with others. This is especially pertinent for the female roles of the doctor and the teacher: social roles where the successful performance of the profession is inherently bound to the quality of the relationships that develop with patients and pupils, respectively. These restrictive representations can, in turn, create a distorted perception of gender that facilitates the constructed belief that women are socially

dependent upon other people in their working lives, while men, in contrast, are able to exercise agency and autonomy over their occupational choices.

Based on the findings presented in this study, boys are taught through textbooks that society expects them to occupy a more dominant position outside the home, working and earning money. In contrast, girls are primarily taught that their role is confined to the domestic sphere, where they engage in nurturing and caregiving activities. The gender stereotypes revealed through the analysis of occupational roles, therefore, underscore the extent to which the depiction of masculinity and femininity in first grade textbooks is grounded upon an essentialist conception of gender (Colebrook, 2004; McNay, 2000; McRobbie, 2008).

This serves as compelling evidence of the prevalence of the hidden curriculum in Saudi schools, where gender-based norms and values are subtly transmitted through textbook images and narratives. Previous studies have shown that the hidden curriculum can contribute to and reinforce gender stereotypes by disempowering girls and affirming the myth of male physical and intellectual superiority (Kabeer, 2005). As Taylor-Mendes (2009) has noted, students are particularly susceptible to the influence of visual representations in textbooks, which serve to internalize gender norms based upon socially constructed beliefs about the relationship between gender and work.

This is an especially significant issue to acknowledge in this study where, as the representation of gender occupations on page 48 of the *My Language* textbook demonstrates, domestic chores are visually represented as being exclusively the domain of women and girls. Consequently,

textbooks serve as vehicles for embedding the hidden curriculum not only because they disseminate entrenched gender stereotypes pertaining to male activity and female passivity but also because they fail to represent the complexity of women's occupational roles both within and outside of the home. As a result, stereotypical representations of gender in school textbooks leave little room for critical reflection on the social and cultural construction of gender roles and identities, effectively marginalizing the idea of women's agency and activism (Kosir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023).

## **5.4 Representations of Gender Traits in Sports and Leisure: Hegemonic**

### **Masculinity and Gender Performance**

Considering the findings more closely, it can be seen that Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks not only underline the characteristics and traits of the submissive woman and girls, but also represent young boys engaging in physical activities. This is particularly evident in terms of the distribution of sports and leisure activities among male and female characters. The analysis revealed that male characters were depicted as engaging in a much greater number of leisurely activities, including swimming, playing football, and playing with their male friends in playgrounds. Specifically, 77% of the illustrated characters and 64% of the characters mentioned in the texts who engaged in leisure or sports activities were male characters. These findings align with previous research studies which have indicated that the representation of sports and leisure activities in school textbooks is closely tied to constructs of masculinity and male identity (Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Keles et al., 2021; Mkuchu, 2004; Tajeddin & Janebi, 2010).

Embedding the association between gender, sports, and leisure reinforces the assumption that masculinity is inherently tied to strength, agility, and physical prowess. Young boys are depicted as capable of engaging in a wide variety of physical tasks, ranging from playing football and basketball to swimming and hunting. In contrast, the textbooks analyzed portray girls as limited to a narrow set of physical activities—most of which are linked to the domestic sphere and traditionally feminine roles. Activities such as cooking, cleaning and vacuuming are, for instance, strongly linked to female characters in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks. Consistent with the findings reported by Mkuchu (2004), this marginalization of women and girls from leisure or sporting activities implies that they are denied the right to rest or recreation. Instead of engaging in play or relaxation, women are portrayed as perpetually occupied with caring for their families, cleaning and preparing their homes, and tending to the needs and preferences of others (Islam, 2014). Thus, these gendered representations of leisure and sport activity serve to reinforce the stereotypes of the passive and dependent girl while at the same time contributing to the perpetuation of the dominant narrative of the active, autonomous, and athletic man.

These findings were not unexpected since the question of women's participation in sports has been a contentious issue for many decades in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Mansour, 2014). Due to the prevailing interpretations of the dominant religious doctrine, women and girls have, until very recently, been denied the right to study the Physical Education subject as well as to participate in any other forms of competitive and recreational sports (Mansour, 2014). In 2017, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia authorized the inclusion of physical education in public schools for girls. However, this was only allowed as long as it complied with Sharia laws. Additionally, in the same year, female-only fitness clubs were granted licensing rights. The

following year, the Saudi Arabian government permitted women to attend football matches in stadiums as spectators for the first time, marking a significant step towards eliminating some of the most extreme forms of gender discrimination in the country (Lysa & Leber, 2018). Nevertheless, in spite of these reforms and the promotion of the Saudi Vision 2030 agenda, progress towards the elimination of gender discrimination in sports and leisure activities remains slow (Albaldi & Alsayegh, 2021). Consequently, it is little surprise that the traits associated with sports are confined to men in first grade textbooks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Nevertheless, it is worth exploring how the stereotypical depictions of gender traits transmitted through illustrations and texts in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks present a one-dimensional and essentialist conception not only of femininity but also of masculinity. Any notion of complexity or ambiguity in the representation and/or manifestation of gender traits is overlooked. As a result, the findings show how stereotypical representations of boys as athletic, and girls as confined to domestic roles do not capture the diverse experiences of gender (Skipper & Fox, 2022). This is an important point in understanding how the promotion and acceptance of stereotypical gender traits in educational materials can contribute to gender hierarchies, gender biases, and gender discrimination. There are two reasons why this is the case.

Firstly, it is important to consider the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which was explored in the literature review. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the hyper-masculine traits and characteristics that have been imposed upon men in patriarchal societies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018). Hyper masculinity is associated with the traits of strength, independence, assertiveness, superiority and heterosexuality (Connell, 1995; Connell &

Messerschmidt, 2005). Each of these traits is embedded in the representation of male characters engaging in sports and leisure activities in this study. For instance, when young boys are pictured engaging in sporting activities such as swimming, they are represented undertaking these activities alone, thus implying not only physical strength and prowess but also independence, agency and assertiveness.

Furthermore, as Moore and Stuart (2004, p. 133) explain, hegemonic masculinity is founded upon the premise that ‘real’ men do not exhibit emotions, certainly not in public. A hegemonic male is thus one who is not only strong and independent but also one who is fundamentally emotionless. This, again, is clearly manifest in the stereotypical representations of gender uncovered in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks. In particular, it is prudent to note that men and boys are represented without exhibiting any emotion. Even when they are winning sports events or successfully undertaking complex tasks, they do not demonstrate their emotions. This, it should be noted, is not the case when textbooks represent women and girls. This study, and others that have previously been published, represent women and girls as characters that are driven by their emotions – for instance, through expressing joy during their cleaning activities or distress when visiting the hospital or health care center (Casey et al., 2021). Consequently, as Messerschmidt (2018) asserts, one of the principal functions of hegemonic masculinity is to reinforce the dichotomy between men and women by showing how masculine traits render men natural born leaders and women natural subordinates. Hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy are thus inseparable concepts (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2018).

However, it is also important to note that, in addition to subjugating femininity, hegemonic masculinity – and the essentialist traits with which it is associated – performs an immensely significant role in suppressing and controlling other types and forms of masculinity. For instance, the literature that has been published on men and masculinities highlights four main types of masculinity including: (a) hegemonic masculinity; (b) complicit masculinity; (c) marginalized masculinity; and (d) subordinate masculinity (Evans et al., 2011; Hearn, 2014; Messerschmidt, 2018). Complicit masculinity refers to men who embody many yet not all of the hegemonic masculine traits. For instance, a complicit man may be heterosexual and suppress their emotions yet be relatively weak and poor at sports. As Messerschmidt (2018, p. 29) observes, although complicit masculinities do not actually embody hegemonic masculinity they, through practice, realize some of the benefits of unequal gender relations and, consequently, “help sustain hegemonic masculinity.”

Marginalized masculinities refer to representations of masculinity that are understood as different or not socially or culturally desirable. Marginalized masculinities belong to, a subculture of hegemonic masculinity, which incorporates many of the traits and characteristics that are associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Marginalized masculinities are thus primarily differentiated according to their ethnic, cultural and racial identities (Wojnicka, 2021). Subordinate masculinity, meanwhile, refers to men whose traits deviate markedly from hegemonic masculinity. For instance, a man with subordinate traits is one who is emotional, uninterested in sports, unassertive and compliant (Wojnicka, 2021). It is also important to note that these four types of masculinity proposed by Connell and others have been subject to various critiques, primarily concentrating on their oversimplification as well as the lack

of intersectionality (Kimmel et al., 2005). This critique is particularly relevant in non-Western contexts where intersections of gender, culture, religion, and class may shape masculinities in more complex ways (Kimmel et al., 2005).

Research that has been published on masculinities has consistently shown that hegemonic masculinity does not solely suppress and subordinate femininity, it also suppresses other types of masculinity. Subordinate masculinities are, for instance, characterized as lesser masculinities, while marginalized and complicit masculinities are pressured to conform to the idealized traits of hegemonic masculinity in order to be accepted (Connell, 1995; Evans et al., 2011; Moore & Stuart, 2004; Wojnicka, 2021). Understood in this way, masculinity is a power relation both between masculinity and femininity, and between subordinate and suppressed facets of masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2018).

This is an important point to acknowledge. In particular, it is essential to note that the representation of stereotypical gender traits can have a constraining and alienating effect both upon girls and boys. While girls are more likely to experience internalized misogyny as a result of their intrinsic association with the traits of caregiving and domesticity, boys can themselves experience emotional, social and psychological distress when they fail to live up to and embody the traits associated with hegemonic masculinity (Wojnicka, 2021). Recognizing that they are not capable of reproducing all of the traits associated with hegemonic masculinity, boys may reject and exhibit contempt for their own self-image as is the case with internalized misogyny (Barnes, 2012). Conversely, as noted in the literature review, it may be the case that, in an effort to embody the characteristics and traits of hegemonic masculinity, boys act in violent or aggressive ways towards

girls and women (Alvi, 2014; Connell, 1995). This is particularly pertinent for complicit and marginalized masculinities which, as Connell (1995, p. 79) attests, acquire a ‘patriarchal dividend’ from the subordination of women.

Viewed from this perspective, the essentialist and reductionist representation of gender traits represents a cornerstone of gender hierarchies and gender biases. As noted previously in this section, gender traits and characteristics represented in first grade textbooks must be examined within the specific historical and cultural context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In particular, it is critical to consider the ways in which rigid portrayals of masculinity and femininity may be shaped by Wahhabi ideology—an interpretation of Islam that normalizes strict gender segregation and discourages pluralism (Rohmaniyah & Woodward, 2012). Social structures, along with religious and political ideologies are always important factors in shaping the pattern and the prevalence of hegemonic masculinities. These factors also influence power dynamics that make it seem normal for men to take control over women (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Therefore, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is closely related to Foucauldian theories. Both accentuate the extent to which human beings are fundamentally social beings whose perception of reality is shaped by the intersection between power and knowledge, which is projected through cultural and political institutions at the meta-level (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Foucault, 1991).

Secondly, it is prudent to note that the stereotypical representation of gender traits uncovered in this study and others leaves little space for critically reflecting upon the myriad ways in which gender is performed. As noted during the literature review, performativity theory has become one

of the most influential approaches to exploring how and in what ways gender is socially and culturally constructed (Butler, 2011b). Drawing upon Butler's groundbreaking theory, performativity is founded upon the assumption that gender is an abstract and inherently meaningless concept that is made to appear real (and reified) through the repetitive and ritual enactments of gender constructs, gender appearance and gendered speech-acts (Butler, 2006, 2011b). Both men and women undertake these discursive and corporeal performances consciously and subconsciously over the course of our lives. Consequently, gender performances appear natural and inherent not because they reflect ontological reality but, rather, because they are reproduced to such an extent that they become habitual (Butler, 2011b).

Performativity offers a powerful conceptual framework for analyzing the representation of stereotypical gender traits and gender attributes in sports and leisure activities. This, as McBride and Neary (2021) attest, is because performative processes produce and reproduce specific gendered traits and practices that align with prevailing norms and cultural expectations. As explored in the literature review, these norms assume that women should act, dress and talk in typically 'feminine' ways and that men should, likewise, act and speak in ways that conform to normative conceptions of masculinity (Colebrook, 2004; Friedan, 2010). These normative traits and practices are, according to Butler (2006), deemed to be the *legitimate* representation of gender, which signifies both to ourselves and to other people that we are embodying a legitimate gender role. Conversely, traits, practices and performances that do not conform to these stereotypical ideals and socially and culturally contrived standards will be deemed *illegitimate* representations of gender which signify the transgression and/or the perversion of gender norms (McBride & Neary, 2021).

Consequently, performativity theory outlines the extent to which dominant/hegemonic gender traits are learned and reproduced over time, creating fertile grounds for the proliferation of taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes normal or abnormal gendered attributes. The Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks perpetuate the assumption that a ‘normal’ boy or man is one who embodies the attributes of physical achievement, strength, independence and assertiveness in their daily practices. These traits, as the findings have shown, are not only manifested in terms of sporting achievements and leisure activities, but also in terms of performing religious roles (for instance, the pious son who is represented in the *My Language* textbook) and participating in economic activities (such as the buying and selling of goods at the marketplace).

A ‘normal’ girl or woman, on the other hand, is portrayed as one who embodies the attributes of caregiving, compassion and empathy in their daily practices. These traits cultivate dependence and domesticity, which are represented as being the legitimate and natural consequences of female inferiority. When women and girls perform these roles, they embed the (mis)assumption that gender traits are *a priori* conditions that are universal and stable over time rather than phenomenological performances that can be enacted and re-enacted in different ways (Butler, 2011b).

Performativity theory is also a highly valuable analytical framework for examining the representation of gender traits and attributes in this study because it highlights and problematizes what is missing from stereotypical depictions of masculinity and femininity in first grade textbooks. As has been noted throughout the discussion chapter, representations of gender in Saudi

Arabian first grade textbooks lack any critical reflection upon the diverse ways in which gender is experienced. There is little by way of any heterogeneity in the depiction of gender; rather, both male and female character traits are represented as unyielding and uniform. For this reason, male characters are consistently represented as being accomplished in sports, economically capable, devout, and religious. They are also depicted as studious, despite limited empirical evidence to support this portrayal in actual educational performance (Elsayed et al., 2022).

Female characters, similarly, are represented as being domesticated, caring and compassionate. None are represented as being physically strong or good at sports. None are shown to be adept at conducting economic activities. All women, regardless of age, are confined to the private sphere of the home. These stereotypical representations of gender traits fail to consider how family environments influence the internalization and performance of gender norms. For instance, research has shown that girls who come from traditional families with strong religious values are more likely to accommodate and perform patriarchal norms while, conversely, girls who come from non-traditional families are more likely to reject and/or negotiate with the stereotypical traits and norms produced in schools (Moghadam, 2020).

Perhaps more significantly, none of the representations of gender traits depicted in this study explored the question of intersectionalities which, as was discussed during the literature review, have become a staple feature of post-feminist research into gender (Carastathis, 2019; Squires, 2013). There are, for instance, no representations of any characters who have physical or mental disabilities in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks. Additionally, poverty is excluded entirely from view as are the ethnic and cultural differences that exist in Saudi society. As a

consequence, the performance of gender traits is inherently exclusive, presenting only a very narrow and specific representation of gender that conforms to social, religious and political ideals.

## **5.5 The Representation of Gender in Saudi Arabian First Grade and the Reinforcement of Stereotypes**

This research study has clearly and identifiably demonstrated that the representation of gender in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks reinforces some of the most deeply embedded and anachronistic stereotypes that have historically been associated with masculinity and femininity. The study has confirmed the findings of previous studies including Lee and Chin (2019), and Tajeddin and Janebi (2010) by showing that there is a clear difference in how male and female characters are represented in school textbooks. Specifically, male characters were more frequently associated with material processes, while female characters tended to be linked with relational processes. Additionally, according to the current study's findings, it was observed that women were frequently portrayed in domestic roles, particularly in gender-stereotypical roles such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of children, and performing household duties. In line with Keles et al. (2021) findings, women were represented as responsible for tending to their children and catering to their husbands. In addition, women were generally represented as being expected to take charge of household responsibilities, regardless of whether they were working outside of their homes or not, thereby further entrenching traditional gender roles within the educational narrative.

Moreover, as previous studies have found, men and boys were represented as engaging in important economic activities, enjoying leisure and sports, and successfully performing a wide range of occupational roles (Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Hall, 2014; Lee & Collins, 2009; Sovic &

Hus, 2015). As a result, where women and girls are typically represented in the private sphere of the home, boys and men are depicted in outdoor settings and, more specifically, in the public sphere. Likewise, where female characters are represented as being domesticated and dependent upon men, male characters are represented as being autonomous and self-determined agents who exercise mastery over the social world in which they exist (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Viewed from this perspective, the representation of gender in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks has contributed to the construction and dissemination of three recurrent stereotypes that are assumed to signify and embody femininity. Firstly, female characters— whether represented as children or adults – are depicted as being passive. This trait is most starkly apparent in the representation of actions in the school textbooks. As Table 9 has shown, female characters are disproportionately represented as being inactive in every duty except domestic chores and caregiving functions. Female characters are inactive economically, socially and physically. Occupationally, Saudi women are represented as performing only a limited range of professions: the artist, the teacher, and the doctor. However, two of them are associated with care and nurture, as these occupational roles are fundamentally relational rather than material.

The stereotype of women’s passivity is also manifest in the way in which female characters are represented in textbooks such as the Islamic Studies textbooks and the Life and Family Skills textbooks. In the Islamic Studies textbooks, female characters are rendered completely invisible from the illustrations. This suggests that female characters have no significant role to perform in religious activities. In the Life and Family Skills textbooks, female characters are shown undertaking passive roles in the home including cooking, cleaning and caregiving. On only 22%

of occasions are female characters represented undertaking personal routine activities compared to 78% for men and boys. As noted previously, one interpretation of these findings could be that, due to her extensive caregiving roles and responsibilities, the female character has no time for herself. This is an important point to note and one that is central to understanding the intersection between gender representations and gender stereotyping. In particular, it is imperative to acknowledge that passive representations of femininity perpetuate the assumption that women and girls lack agency and autonomy. This stereotype of the passive and agentless woman is, as feminist theorists have shown, a conceptual bedrock of the patriarchal ideas and institutions that subjugate women while aggrandizing the role and position of men (de Beauvoir, 2011; McNay, 2000; McRobbie, 2008).

Secondly, the female characters in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks are routinely represented through recourse to the stereotypical traits of caregiving, compassion and empathy. These gender stereotypes are central to the historical representation of femininity not only in the Middle East and North Africa region but also in Western societies. As noted in the literature review, key writers that emerged during the second wave of feminist theory outlined how boys and girls are systematically socialized to adopt stereotypical gender roles and gender identities in a bid to preserve the inequalities of patriarchal society (Greer, 2009; Pateman, 1988). Caring, compassion and empathy are, as feminist theorists have identified, key underpinnings of the social and cultural construction of femininity. Moreover, previous research has shown that gender stereotypes that associate femininity with caregiving and compassion still prevail. For example, there is educational research showing that teachers associate femininity in girls with ‘niceness’ and ‘kindness’ (Holland et al., 2010; Reay, 2001; Robinson & Lai, 2006).

As de Beauvoir (2011) argued, assigning women with the stereotypical traits of compassion, empathy and caregiving has created fertile grounds for a binary system of gender identities and gender roles that depicts women as the mirror inverse of men. Women are thus deemed to be naturally inferior, weaker and, crucially, *emotionally and socially* different to men. These stereotypes are, as research has shown, gender neutral (Lockwood, 2016). There is nothing that is inherently compassionate, empathetic or caring about the female sex; rather, these are human qualities that are liable to change according to culture, place and time as much as they are according to gender identities.

Nevertheless, the way that they are represented in school textbooks gives the impression of universality and uniformity. All women are represented as embodying the same stereotypical traits at all places and all times. The relationship between gender representations and gender stereotypes in this study was thus symbiotic: representations of gender in school textbooks served to reinforce stereotypes, which, in turn, provided the basis for rigid and anachronistic representations of gender that, in many cases, had no grounding in reality. This was most starkly apparent in the underrepresentation of women's academic achievement in this study, which completely distorted the reality of the gender attainment gap in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the early twenty first century. As numerous studies have documented, girls in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia consistently outperformed boys across different grades and subjects (ALMamari, 2026; Elsayed et al., 2022; Sideridis & Alamri, 2023).

Thirdly, female characters in Saudi Arabian first-grade school textbooks were predominantly represented in highly domestic roles. Indeed, the only space in which female characters were depicted was the private sphere of the home. Women's domesticity is inextricably linked to the first two stereotypes outlined above. The passivity of women, for instance, effectively may preclude women from successfully influencing activities in the public sphere such as religion, bartering and trading, and politics. Women's assumed weakness and physical inferiority, likewise, may reduce the scope for women engaging in important engineering or construction projects. This pattern of omission can be interpreted as reflecting — and potentially reinforcing — broader societal views that marginalize women from these fields. Similarly, stereotypical representations of women as caring, empathetic and compassionate may reflect or reinforce societal expectations that tend to confine women to the private sphere of the home, where these gendered traits and qualities are traditionally emphasized. Women's domesticity is, therefore, clearly linked to the construction of femininity as a passive, caring and emotional gender.

The representation of women as private, domestically oriented characters appears to support the principal goals of patriarchy. Assigning women domestic traits can reduce their perceived capacity for entering or influencing the public sphere, and it may also contribute to the assumption that a woman's ideal role is often seen as that of a mother, wife and homemaker. As we have seen within the textbooks in this research study, these are the very gender roles that have been assigned to women; and these roles have historically constituted the shackles that have perpetuated deep-seated gender biases, and the discriminatory laws and practices that reduce women to second class citizens (Butler, 2002; McNay, 2000; McRobbie, 2008). Yet where, in Western liberal democracies, the insights afforded by liberal feminists have helped to pave the way for gender

equality, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia the system of male guardianship prevails, leaving women trapped in their traditional domestic roles and identities. Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks appear to contribute to this patriarchal system of oppression by normalizing the idea that women are emblems of domesticity.

There were a number of male stereotypes that were apparent in the way that men and boys were represented in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks. Four main stereotypes could be identified. Firstly, male characters – whether children or adults – are represented as being assertive, powerful, and strong. This is manifest in the representation of male characters in active roles. With the exception of caregiving and domestic responsibilities, men and boys were completely dominant in all other social and economic activities. The stereotypical traits of assertiveness, power and strength appear to serve as key foundations for male autonomy and self-determination. Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks appeared to promote the assumption that men can assert their autonomy in almost any scenario they choose. This was manifest most prominently in the representation of occupation which, as we have seen, was dominated by male characters. Additionally, boys were also represented as being confident and capable in their schoolwork, further reinforcing the stereotype that men possess competence and strength across a wide range of tasks.

Stereotyping men as assertive, strong and powerful is as much a cornerstone of the patriarchal system as the stereotyping of women as weak, passive and domesticated (de Beauvoir, 2011; Messerschmidt, 2018). Stereotypical gender representations of men as assertive, strong and powerful clearly imply that men, and only men, are able to undertake leadership roles. This can

help to explain why, in a deeply patriarchal society such as Saudi Arabia, only men are represented taking part in any formal social or economic enterprise in school textbooks and why men are assumed to adopt the roles of policing, security and, perhaps most significantly, religious and moral guardianship. Understood in this way, there can be little doubt that gendered representations create fertile grounds for persistent stereotypes about male power and privilege which, in turn, underpin and sustain religious patriarchy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia even in the midst of unprecedented economic and social change (Bawazeer, 2015).

Secondly, men in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks were represented as emotionless characters. This was in contrast to women who were represented expressing emotion, particularly joy at undertaking caregiving and domestic duties. The suppression of emotions represents a key stereotype associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As we have seen, the hegemonic male is not only one who is strong and independent, but he is also a character who does not show his emotions in public. This, as Connell (1995) explains, is because emotions are interpreted as a sign of weakness. Two points can be gleaned from this stereotypical representation of male characters as emotionless.

On the one hand, it is prudent to note that the representation of men as acting without emotions is offset against women who are represented as being fundamentally emotional creatures. This dichotomy intersects with other binary gendered stereotypes including the strong man versus the weak woman, the independent and assertive man versus the dependent and passive woman, and the skilled and adept man versus the inferior and talentless woman. Each of these stereotypes reinforces the assumption that femininity can only be understood in opposition to masculinity. As

feminist writers have consistently pointed out, it is this dichotomous and binary view of gender that has historically undercut women's liberty and created fertile grounds for gender bias and gender discrimination (Butler, 2002; de Beauvoir, 2011; Greer, 2009; McRobbie, 2008).

On the other hand, denying men the permission to express their emotions demonstrates how patriarchy has a negative effect not only upon women, but also upon men. Empirical research has shown that placing a constant pressure upon men to conform to stereotypes that deny and/or suppress emotionality can have a hugely detrimental effect upon men's mental health, while at the same time reducing their help-seeking behaviors (Parkinson et al., 2016; Pease, 2012). This is an immensely important point to note and one that is often overlooked in the literature that has been published on gender stereotyping in school textbooks. In particular, it is important to note that much of the literature explores and explains the adverse impact of gender stereotyping on women without contemplating the adverse effects that the same gender constructs have upon men. A more balanced and nuanced understanding of gender stereotyping in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia must take account of the pressures to conform that are placed upon both genders, and the effects that this has upon gender roles and outcomes over the life course.

Thirdly, the representations of male characters reinforce the assumption that boys and men are physically active and sporty. This gender stereotype is strongly associated with the stereotypes of strength and autonomy as they imply that men are able to exercise mastery over their external environments in a way that women cannot. As has been explained, this stereotype makes no allowances for exploring the complex and heterogeneous ways in which gender is experienced and performed at the subjective level, thereby contributing to the myth that: (a) all men act in the same

way; and (b) hegemonic masculinity is the dominant masculine trait (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018).

However, it is important to consider whether many of the traits that are associated with hegemonic masculinity in the West may have been imported into Middle Eastern and Gulf states in recent decades. For instance, research undertaken by Karolak et al. (2014) explores the extent to which representations of masculinities in Bahrain have changed as a result of the rapid and unprecedented process of social and economic transformation that has been witnessed since the 1970s. Karolak et al. (2014) argue that while many of the traits associated with hegemonic masculinity – such as men’s strength and independence – are indigenous to the Arabian Gulf countries, others – such as boys’ and men’s interests in sports – are completely new stereotypes that have been introduced into Arabian cultures as part of the region’s broader integration into the global economy. As a result, the stereotypical representation of gender identities in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks should be considered not solely as a regional or local phenomenon, but also as part of a much broader global construction of masculinity based largely upon Western constructs of the idealized male character (Karolak et al., 2014).

This can help to explain why male characters represented in many illustrations in Saudi texts look very Westernized in their appearance (for instance, with light-colored skin and hair). These stereotypical representations of masculinity are best interpreted as part of a more systemic process of cultural and economic globalization, which, as Gelfer (2014) explains, homogenizes masculinities across the world. This is an immensely important finding and one that should be

explored in greater depth in order to better understand how and in what ways gender stereotypes, identities and roles are constructed in an era of increased interconnectedness.

Fourthly, male characters are represented as being pious in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. Piety is a trait that is only assigned to male characters because women are rendered wholly absent from the illustrations of *Islamic Studies* textbooks. This, of course, is not to state that women are deemed to be impious; the strict veiling practices among Saudi women are testimony to the intrinsic association between religiosity and femininity in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – a relationship in which culturally embedded interpretations of religiosity serve to constrain expression of female autonomy (Alrasheed, 2013). However, it is also the case that masculinity is inextricably linked with religious piety in first grade textbooks: a good, honorable and idealized man is not only one who is strong and independent, but he is also one who conforms to and practices his religion in a way that is consistent with the dominant religious discourse. This discourse, as has been noted, often reflects particularly strict interpretations of Islamic practice (Rohmaniyah & Woodward, 2012).

As a result, it is prudent to acknowledge that the intrinsic association between gender identity and dominant religious discourse not only embeds existing patriarchal stereotypes prevalent in Saudi society, but also contributes to legitimizing male guardianship by presenting men as the primary decision-makers for women and girls (Alrasheed, 2013, 2015). This demonstrates how Saudi constructions of hegemonic masculinity are distinct from those in the West. Where, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, religiosity is a key element of masculinity, in the West, there is no such relationship between masculinity and religion (Messerschmidt, 2018). This further demonstrates

the extent to which gender stereotypes are influenced by local factors, customs and mores that are liable to change according to time, place and context (Gelfer, 2014; Karolak et al., 2014). Thus, while it is important to acknowledge the intersection between the local and the global in the construction of male gender stereotypes in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks, it is also imperative to note that, as is the case in representations of female characters, these male-centric stereotypes are very traditional and are founded upon patriarchal norms, values and ideals.

### **5.6 Cause and Effect: Interrogating the Relationship between Gender Representations and Stereotypes in Saudi Arabian First Grade Textbooks**

As noted during the literature review, there is a wealth of empirical and theoretical evidence that has underlined the extent to which the representation of gender in school textbooks can reinforce and perpetuate deep-seated gender stereotypes. Even though the primary function of textbooks is to impart knowledge related to the school curriculum, this invariably involves representing gender roles and gender identities (Blumberg, 2008; Hasan, 2015). Textbooks can have a particularly harmful effect upon the representation of gender for younger children. There are two reasons why this is the case. Firstly, textbooks aimed at younger children tend to include more illustrations than textbooks aimed at older children (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009a). Illustrations, as we have seen in this study, are able to transmit gender roles in a highly effective and simplistic manner, and thus to reaffirm stereotypes. Representing women and girls in the home, for instance, is a subtle yet immensely powerful means of reinforcing some of the most debilitating stereotypes about femininity promoted by patriarchal cultures (Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Hall, 2014).

Secondly, younger students are more likely to accept, without question, the reality that is represented in school textbooks compared to older children and adolescents (Hasan, 2015). This is an inevitable by-product of children's social, emotional and cognitive development. Piaget (2005), most famously, outlined four stages of cognitive development that children pass through. Young children are, according to Piaget, located in the concrete operational stage of development. Thus, while young children are able to think logically and in an organized manner, there is often a lack of inductive reasoning and a reliance upon using unyielding, concrete concepts to make sense of the world (Piaget, 2005). Younger children are more likely to struggle to integrate abstract and/or hypothetical concepts into their internal cognitive schemas (MacBlain, 2014). Cumulatively, these developmental characteristics mean that younger children are significantly more liable to believe and accept the stereotypical representations of gender that they witness in school textbooks.

As a consequence, this research study confirms the findings of previous research studies which have outlined the hugely influential role that textbooks perform in shaping and perpetuating gender stereotypes. In particular, this study, like others beforehand, has outlined the linear and causal relationship between the representation of gender in school textbooks and the reproduction of gender stereotypes in young children (Casey et al., 2021; Hasan, 2015; Hashim et al., 2018; Lee & Chin, 2019; Narahara, 1998b). This is a relationship that has been recorded both in the Middle East and North African region countries as well as in Western liberal democracies (Casey et al., 2021; Hasan, 2015; Hashim et al., 2018; Lee & Chin, 2019; Narahara, 1998b). These findings affirm the central tenets of hidden curriculum theory, which stipulates that schools impart more not only academic knowledge but also key values, beliefs, and social norms (Lee, 2014b). The

study's findings revealed that this is certainly the case in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks, where the hidden curriculum reinforces traditional gender roles through stereotypical and anachronistic representations of gender.

However, although it is important to acknowledge the immensely influential role that textbooks perform in instilling and perpetuating gender stereotypes, it is also prudent to interrogate the relationship between cause and effect. Three issues should be emphasized. Firstly, it is crucial to analyze the type and role of the character that is portrayed, either illustratively or textually, in school textbooks. There is, most notably, a significant difference between protagonists – who are central to the narrative of any story – and fringe characters who are peripheral to narratives and plots. Previous studies have shown that the reproduction of gender stereotypes has a much more significant effect upon the reader when these stereotypes are embodied in protagonists (Casey et al., 2021).

Yet qualitative analysis of the characters employed in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks reveals that there is little to be gained from segregating characters into protagonists and fringe roles because, in these textbooks, all representations, whether male or female characters, appear primarily as a fictional adjunct to support formal curricula materials. Consequently, it can be assumed that the stereotypical representation of all characters in first grade textbooks has the same pernicious effect upon the reader, serving to embed the assumptions outlined above which, in turn, create fertile grounds for a binary and dichotomized view of gender that is always to the disadvantage of females (Abiky, 2019).

Secondly, it is imperative to consider the age of the character represented in school textbooks. As noted previously, adult characters comprise a significant minority of characters represented in the sample of textbooks included in this study. This is to be expected given that the textbooks are aimed at children in the first grade. Different ages of characters can have different effects upon the reader's interpretation of the gender roles, identities and stereotypes that are represented either in text or in illustrations. In order to understand the effects of older characters upon child readers, it is prudent to turn attention towards social learning theory. As has been noted, Bandura (1977) argues that children learn by observing and reproducing the behavior that they witness. Role models are crucial for facilitating social learning: when children watch an adult role model act in a specific way, they are more likely to copy this behavior (Bandura, 1977; MacBlain, 2014). Drawing upon the insights afforded by Skinner's theory of operant conditioning, Bandura argued that children were more likely to adopt and reproduce the behavior of role models when role models attained rewards for their behavior. When children witness their role models attaining explicit rewards for their behavior, it increases intrinsic motivation to follow suit (Kwak & Huettel, 2016). This is what Bandura (1977) refers to as vicarious learning.

This is an immensely important point to note and one that is central to understanding the nature and function of the relationship between gender representations and gender stereotyping in this study. In particular, it is crucial to note that the majority of the representations of masculinity show male characters being rewarded for their behavior. For instance, competing in sports enables male characters to win medals and trophies, while bartering in markets enables male characters to attain essential goods. It can therefore be assumed that the representation of male role models

exhibiting what are perceived to be stereotypical 'masculine' traits will encourage young male readers to unconsciously and automatically reproduce these behaviors (Kwak & Huettel, 2016).

Female characters are also represented as being rewarded for their exhibition of stereotypically feminine traits. For instance, women and girls express satisfaction when they have successfully undertaken domestic and/or caregiving duties in first grade textbooks. These external rewards further emphasize the dichotomy between representations of masculinity and femininity: where men attain a material reward for their representation of masculine traits, women attain a relational reward for their exhibition of femininity, which is manifest most typically in terms of emotional rewards. The results from this study therefore show that the representation of role models engaged in stereotypical gendered activities stimulates learning by observation (MacBlain, 2014).

The representation of younger characters can also be understood via recourse to social learning theory. Role models do not always have to be adults; they can also be peers who behave in ways that are deemed to reach idealized standards (Hoppitt & Lala, 2013). Vicarious learning can, as a consequence, be employed as a means of explaining how the representation of gender in school textbooks reinforces gender stereotyping: through the same process of observation and behavioral reproduction outlined above. However, it is also important to note that the representation of gender in younger characters can also serve to set expectations and standards which children feel that they must conform to (Casey et al., 2021).

As has been noted, there is a body of empirical research which suggests that young girls can internalize the sexist and misogynistic ways in which female characters are represented, leading to the proliferation and acceptance of biases against the female gender (Dehlin & Galliher, 2019; Einhorn, 2021). This demonstrates that the learning of gender stereotypes through observation is not a simple causal process but, rather, a complex phenomenon that is manifest both socially (in terms of the observation of others) and emotionally (in terms of the internalization of stereotypes). In order to understand how gender representations in school textbooks contribute to and reinforce stereotypes, it is essential to consider the intersection between stereotypes and stigma. This is an issue that remains underexplored in the extant literature, and which should be used to guide and inform future research.

Furthermore, as we have seen, in order to understand the relationship between the representation of gender and the perpetuation of stereotypes, it is essential to consider the theory of performativity. Gender is not something that can be simply transmitted from the textbook to the students in a linear manner; rather, according to performativity theory, gender is something which is discursively and corporeally enacted and re-enacted over time (Butler, 2002, 2011a). Performativity theory adds another conceptual layer to our understanding of the relationship between representations and stereotypes of gender. In particular, when we consider the repertoires and rituals through which gender is routinely performed (for instance, through the different styles of dress that are expected of men and women in Saudi society), it is apparent that gender is not only observed and internalized, it is also performed and imitated (Butler, 2002, 2011a).

Viewed from this perspective, there is a subtle yet immensely important distinction between the learning by observing that is outlined in social learning theory and the learning by doing that is identified by performativity. Gender stereotypes are a combination of both observing and doing; internalization and performance (Butler, 2002, 2004). This, in turn, underlines the limitations of assuming that gender representations in textbooks seamlessly lead to the adoption of stereotypical traits and behaviors by students. Rather than considering the relationship between representation and stereotypes to be causal, then, it is perhaps more prudent to think about representations of gender in school textbooks as part of a much wider and more systematic process of socialization that is underwritten by patriarchal institutions, practices and norms that leave little room for gender ambiguity or complexity (Alharbi, 2017).

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, it is crucial to consider the immensely influential role that the teacher performs in disseminating knowledge in the classroom. Teachers can help to reduce the constraining effects of gender representations by adopting a critical pedagogy. A teacher who is wedded to a critical pedagogy will encourage students to critically analyze the representations of gender that they encounter in textbooks rather than to passively accept the representations of reality that they see and/or hear (Freire, 2018). For instance, rather than teaching children that women's place is in the home or that men excel at sports, teachers could use these stereotypical representations of gender to show how gender roles are socially and culturally manufactured to meet instrumental ends.

In this way, the intrinsic association between power, knowledge and language which, as we have seen, is integral in sustaining gender hierarchies, can be challenged and eventually

dismantled through teachers adopting a more critical, progressive and reflexive analysis of what gender is and what means it serves. As Sunderland (2004, 2010) states, the problem is not necessarily the stereotypical representation of gender in school textbooks; it is the lack of vigor with which teachers analyze these representations and challenge the discourses and agendas that they promote. Sunderland (2000, 2004, 2010) consequently argues that the teacher is more important than the text in transmitting and reinforcing gender stereotypes in representations of gender printed in school textbooks.

Similarly, teachers who adopt a constructivist pedagogy can also challenge the normative assumptions that underpin gender stereotypes. Constructivist pedagogies consider the student to be an active and dynamic part of the learning process (Fisher, 2002). As a result, teachers who are influenced by constructivist pedagogies encourage pupils to learn by *experience* rather than to learn solely via recourse to didactic instruction (Fisher, 2002; Mooney, 2013). This is an immensely significant issue to note given, as we have seen, that gender stereotypes are reinforced not only through observation but also through performances. Viewed from this perspective, teachers can have a profoundly important effect upon either reinforcing or interrupting the association between the representation of gender in textbooks and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in everyday life by the way that they engage (or disengage) the students in the classroom (Ball, 2021).

However, research has shown that, in Saudi Arabian schools, critical or constructivist pedagogies are notably limited. Al-Abdulkareem and Hentschke (2014), for instance, conducted research with a sample of 231 intermediate teachers in Riyadh in order to explore how these

teachers utilized textbooks as a pedagogical instrument in their teaching. Al-Abdulkareem and Hentschke (2014) found that: (a) Saudi textbooks only provide very minimal support for constructivist pedagogical practices according to teachers; and (b) Saudi textbooks are highly uniform, thereby reducing the scope for constructivist or critical pedagogies. These findings should be interpreted within the much broader cultural and political context in which education takes place in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia which, as has been shown repeatedly, is intertwined with the conservative and patriarchal interpretations of the dominant religious doctrine (Rohmaniyah & Woodward, 2012).

Consequently, unlike in many Western liberal democracies, where teachers are actively encouraged to challenge gender norms and gender hierarchies, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, teachers face little pressure to challenge the representations of gender that are disseminated in textbooks. For this reason, behaviorism, rather than critical or constructivist pedagogies, remains the predominant approach to disseminating knowledge from textbooks in Saudi schools (Al-Abdulkareem & Hentschke, 2014). This, in turn, suggests that while teachers can perform a hugely influential role in mitigating the adverse effects of gender stereotyping, in practice this does not occur at a widespread level. For this reason, it is prudent to deduce that the relationship between gender representations in school textbooks and gender stereotypes at the social level may be more causal than it at first appears.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

The discussion chapter has identified the main themes and issues that have arisen from the content analysis of the first-grade textbooks in Saudi Arabia. There can be little doubt that the

stereotypical representation of gender perpetuates harmful myths about the desired norms, traits, roles, attributes and interests of the two genders, creating fertile grounds for the germination of internalized misogyny and hegemonic masculinity. The symbolic annihilation of women and girls through the underrepresentation of female characters also represents a subtle yet immensely important means of reinforcing one of the most important assumptions of patriarchy: that men are more visible and thus more important than women in undertaking all of the activities in society. The one domain where women are more prominent is the domestic sphere of the home. Understood in this way, the representations of gender in first-grade textbooks perpetuate gender stereotypes, which normalize the disempowerment of women and girls, and embed the strict binary distinction between men and women.

## **6. Chapter Six: Conclusion**

### **6.1 Conclusion of This Study**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has embarked upon a series of social and economic reforms as part of a wider policy of diversification. Social and economic reforms are captured in the Saudi Vision 2030 document, which prioritizes women's empowerment and gender equality. Saudi Vision 2030 aims to boost the representation of women in the national labor force of the country, improve the educational attainment of girls in Saudi schools, and reduce some of the most pervasive barriers to women's social and cultural emancipation, including male guardianship. However, in order to meet these goals and to meaningfully change the lives of women and girls living in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it is essential in the first instance to begin addressing and dismantling the stereotypes that contribute to gender inequality, bias, and discrimination.

With this in mind, this research study conducted a content analysis of gender representations in a sample of 15 first-grade textbooks to explore how and in what ways gender stereotypes are manifest in instructional materials used by teachers in primary schools in Saudi Arabia. Content analysis has incorporated a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Quantitative analysis has been utilized to explore the total number of representations of gender across the sample of Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks and the ratio of male-to-female characters. This is a common approach to exploring the representation of gender stereotyping that has been widely employed in the extant literature. Qualitative analysis has been

utilized to explore the different ways in which the genders are represented. In particular, the research study has explored the representation of occupational roles for male and female characters, and the actions and attributes of male and female characters. Consequently, in addition to analyzing the visibility of male and female characters in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks, the study has also explored the principal sources of gender stereotyping manifest in terms of characters' interests, appearances, roles, characteristics, and traits.

Overall, the study has found that there is a clear gender imbalance in the representation of male and female characters, with male characters appearing substantially more frequently than female characters in both textual references and illustrations. The findings show that 66% of the textual references and 68% of the illustrations of the sample incorporated male characters (169 male characters versus 67 female characters in texts, and 408 male characters and 188 female characters in illustrations). At a quantitative level, then, the findings show that, measured in terms of illustrations, the ratio of male to female characters was in excess of 2 male characters for every 1 female character. For textual references, the ratio between male and female characters exceeded 2.5 males for every female character. These findings corroborate a wealth of empirical literature, which has previously explored the representation of gender in primary school textbooks. Consistent with previous studies, this study has found that male characters appear far more frequently than female characters across the sample group. This, in turn, indicates that male characters are significantly more visible than female characters, contributing to the symbolic annihilation of women and girls in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. The substantial discrepancy in the ratio of male to female characters reaffirms the assumption that men are more important than women, and that men belong in public spaces. Likewise, the relative invisibility of

women implicitly suggests that women do not belong in public spaces and that women's contribution to society is less important than that of men. The visible erasure of female characters in Saudi textbooks is thus symptomatic of a broader marginalization of women and girls from public life.

The findings have also shown that the ratio of male to female characters is determined to a significant extent by subject matter. Most notably, the findings in this study have shown that 86% of textual references to characters in Islamic Studies textbooks are male compared to only 13% of textual references to female characters. With regards to illustrations, the discrepancy is even greater, with 100% of illustrations incorporating male characters and no illustrations of any female characters in Islamic Studies textbooks. Women's invisibility in Islamic Studies is thus total. The invisibility of women in Islamic Studies is immensely important to note in a country such as Saudi Arabia, where religion is deeply integrated into every aspect of social, political, cultural, and economic life. In erasing women from Islamic Studies, first-grade textbooks thus contribute to the assumption that men are more pious than women. In addition, erasing women from religious studies clearly and unequivocally reinforces the view that it is men, and not women, who are the true custodians of Islam: the spiritual and cultural identity of the state. In practical terms, this means that children are implicitly taught that religious authority is a male domain. Viewed from this perspective, it is difficult to overstate the significance of the findings that have been produced in this study.

It should, however, be noted that some subjects included a significantly higher proportion of female characters than male characters. This was particularly discernible in mathematics, where there were more illustrations of female characters than male characters (62% versus 38%). It can

be argued that this is testimony to the wider process of gender equality reflected in Saudi Vision 2030. However, a close examination of the content revealed that female characters were represented using mathematical skills to engage in domestic tasks such as comparing the height of themselves and other female characters and delineating the correct measure of threads to engage in sewing. Male characters, in contrast, were shown using mathematics to count their material possessions, to calculate the running time and to count the number of boys playing sports.

Thus, even where it appears that the representation of gender may be contributing to a dismantling of the norms and biases upon which stereotypes are based, a closer examination of the way in which gender is depicted in Saudi Arabian first grade textbooks outlines the considerable distance that remains to be traveled between the rhetoric and the reality of gender equality in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the early twenty first century. This underscores the importance of employing a mixed methods approach to researching the representation of gender stereotypes in first grade textbooks. In particular, it is crucial to note that a quantitative approach to analyzing gender stereotyping in school textbooks would indicate, through greater visibility, women are attaining greater parity with men in Saudi society. Only through employing qualitative interpretive techniques can the researcher look beyond the veneer of statistical representations in order to explore and make sense of the *context* in which genders are represented. As this study has shown, it is this context which is crucial for making sense of the insidious ways in which gender norms, identities, and characteristics are reproduced and accepted over time.

Focusing in more detail upon context, this study has shown that the principal markers of gender stereotyping are all highly prevalent in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. For instance,

with regards to occupational roles, this study has revealed that a total of 89 male characters were represented as engaging in both formal and informal occupational roles compared to only 11 female characters. This ratio of almost 9:1 represents a larger discrepancy in the representation of gendered occupational roles than has been reported in much of the existing literature, thus signaling that, far from narrowing gender divides, Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks continue to promote a deeply unequal and hierarchical representation of the genders that aggrandizes the role and function of men in society while marginalizing women. Furthermore, male characters were given a much more diverse range of occupations than female characters. A total of 14 different male occupational roles were reported, ranging from farmers to astronauts. Interestingly, this study has shown that male characters were also represented performing stereotypically ‘feminine’ occupations such as teaching, thus revealing how male characters have colonized occupations that are traditionally associated with women. The representation of genders in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks does not, then, accurately depict social or economic reality; rather, gender representations contribute to a wholly unrealistic view of Saudi society. It can therefore be argued that this disjunction between what children encounter in textbooks and the realities of contemporary Saudi society may create confusion for young learners as they begin to make sense of gender roles.

Women, conversely, were represented as performing only three occupational roles: teacher, doctor, and artist. As I have discussed in earlier chapters, each of these roles serves to reinforce some of the potent myths and assumptions that underpin patriarchal gender stereotypes. The roles of the teacher and the doctor, for instance, reaffirm the assumption that women and girls are only suited to performing roles that are consistent with the stereotypically ‘feminine’ attributes of caring and empathy, while the artist role embeds the assumption that women’s skills are elusive and of

little practical use to society. This study found that, in addition to being excluded from economic practices, female characters were not associated in any way with social, economic, or cultural advancement. While the representation of women in occupational roles reinforces gender stereotyping, the absence of occupational diversity for females significantly reduces the employment horizons for women. This, in turn, is likely to contribute to the phenomenon of internalized misogyny, where, as we have seen, women and girls accept and internalize negative patriarchal stereotypes about themselves and other women, thereby placing an imaginary yet immensely robust barrier preventing women from realizing their potential.

With regards to traits, characteristics, and gender identities, the study has uncovered a considerable distinction between the active and participatory representation of men and the passive and static representation of women. Male traits and characteristics include toughness, assertiveness, decisiveness, competitiveness, confidence, courage, and independence: the hallmarks of hegemonic masculinity. Female characters, on the other hand, were involved in activities and interests that predominantly revolved around children and family, for example, cooking, caregiving, and cleaning the house. Consequently, this study has clearly shown that Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks contribute to reinforcing social and cultural expectations that position women and girls within domestic roles. Women are seen as being a complement to men rather than active and autonomous agents with their own unique attributes and interests.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the skewed representation of leisure and recreation, which, in this study, was represented as being the exclusive domain of male characters. Male characters dominated the representation of leisure and recreation, appearing in 77% of the illustrations. Women, conversely, were not represented taking part in sports or in relaxing; instead,

they were almost always shown tending to the needs of their families in the private sphere of the home. This stereotypical representation of activities and interests further affirms the view that men dominate public spaces and that women ‘belong’ in the domestic space of the home. As a consequence, the study has shown that the representation of gender in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks contributes to stereotyping by reinforcing entrenched patriarchal myths and assumptions.

The theoretical framework employed in this study can help to make sense of these findings and to hypothesize about their implications for teaching in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The hidden curriculum, for instance, outlines the extent to which the instructional materials that are used in schools serve to communicate the interests, values, and identities of the ruling classes while marginalizing counterhegemonic ideas and values. Viewed from this perspective, the deeply stereotypical representation of gender in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks reflects the narrow and traditional interests of the most influential groups in Saudi society, which favor a perpetuation of the existing gendered status quo. This can help to explain why there is such a mismatch between the representation of gender in school textbooks and the reality of social and economic life in Saudi Arabia, where women perform an increasingly influential role across a wide range of occupational sectors. The hidden curriculum can also explain why male characters are so overrepresented in Islamic studies, with religion being integral to the legitimacy of the Saudi state.

Exploring the findings from the vantage point of critical pedagogy, meanwhile, reveals how Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks are replete with the imprints of mainstream cultural views, which are encoded in the instructional materials used by teachers and schools. As critical pedagogy maintains, mainstream culture is inextricably linked with the ideas and identities of

patriarchal hegemony, heteronormativity, and ethnic and cultural dominion: each of these is clearly evident in the stereotypical representation of gender in textbooks. Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks are thus characterized by the absence of critical thinking, self-reflection, and autonomy: the chief indicators of critical pedagogy. In practical terms, such features in textbooks usually appear through prompts that ask pupils to compare ideas, consider alternatives, or relate the content to their own experiences. This, in turn, implies that, in order to challenge the views, myths and ideas that sustain gender inequalities in Saudi Arabia, it is imperative in the first instance to engender a broader shift towards critical pedagogy in order to: (a) encourage children to question the representations of gender that they encounter in school textbooks; and (b) recognize how they can perform an active and integral role in positively changing societal expectations of gender roles and gender identities.

Foucauldian theory is immensely useful for making sense of the disciplinary function that textbooks perform in regulating children's perceptions of gender and setting the rules for gender norms and identities. As the results in this study have shown, textbooks cannot be interpreted as neutral; rather, they are vehicles for the systematic organization of social life within schools. Children are expected to conform to the gendered norms, attributes, and traits that they witness in school textbooks. This, in turn, emphasizes the extent to which the representation of gender stereotypes in first-grade textbooks is underwritten by an intrinsic association between power and knowledge. Stereotypical representations of gender are depicted as absolute ontological facts. The representation of gender stereotypes is reinforced by hegemonic discourse and language that reinforces the assumption of gender differences. Viewed through Foucauldian theory, then, we can see how the marginalization of women in illustrations is subtly affirmed by the lack of textual

references to female characters, thus creating a regime of truth where men are powerful and autonomous agents and women are invisible and passive actors.

Social learning theory can help to explain how the deeply stereotypical portrayal of genders in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks may be experienced by students. The study has referred to concepts such as internalized misogyny and hegemonic masculinity throughout. Social learning theory can help us to understand how these phenomena can be facilitated by vicarious learning of role models in Saudi Arabian first-grade textbooks. Specifically, social learning theory stipulates that young children will mimic the stereotypical traits, attributes, appearances, and behavior of the role models that they see in textbooks. Role models can be manifested both as responsible adults or as idealized versions of child characters – both of which are prevalent in the sample textbooks included in this study. Consequently, viewed through the prism of social learning theory, it can be hypothesized that children will accept, internalize, and reproduce the stereotypical representation of gender that they encounter in school textbooks. Patriarchy is thus maintained through a combination of ideas, values and identities that children not only observe but also come to feel as normal and emotionally familiar, because repeated exposure leads them to associate certain emotions—such as admiration, approval, or belonging—with conforming to gendered expectations.

Moreover, social learning theory draws attention to the crucial role that teachers perform as role models in primary schools. While this study did not include primary research with the teachers responsible for delivering the instructional content examined, the way that teachers impart the knowledge encoded in school textbooks performs an immensely important role in determining how children internalize and make sense of the gender norms and identities that they witness

(Gajda et al., 2022). This further reinforces the need for a more nuanced and critical pedagogy that decolonizes the patriarchal representation of genders in first-grade textbooks.

## **6.2 Limitations of This Study**

This study is not without its limitations. It focused only on the first-grade textbooks, meaning that the patterns of gender stereotyping identified here may not reflect how representations appear in later grade levels. This narrow scope was intentional, as the study aimed to examine the earliest stage of formal schooling in depth—a stage at which children are particularly receptive to the gender cues and normative messages embedded in instructional materials. Expanding the scope to additional grade levels would have reduced the level of analytical detail. In addition, although the study drew on both quantitative and qualitative approaches, it relied solely on curricular materials. This means that it does not capture how teachers interpret, negotiate, or challenge these representations in classroom settings, nor does it reflect how young students understand or internalize the gendered messages embedded in their textbooks. Finally, as with all content analysis, the study identifies patterns of representation but cannot determine their direct influence on children’s attitudes or behaviors.

## **6.3 Directions for Future Research**

Future research could build upon the findings of this study in several important directions. Subsequent investigations should expand the scope beyond first-grade textbooks in order to examine how gender stereotypes are reproduced, reinforced, or challenged across other Saudi grade levels. Comparative analyses of textbooks used in public and international schools in Saudi Arabia would also provide important insights into the extent to which gender representation varies

according to the types of schools. In addition, future research should seek to complement textbook analysis with classroom observations, teacher practices, and student perspectives to uncover how gendered representations are enacted, interpreted, and negotiated in real educational settings. This would enable researchers to move beyond instructional materials and examine the pedagogical processes through which students internalize gender norms and stereotypes. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile for future research to incorporate the perspectives of curriculum developers and textbook authors, where such access is possible, in order to better understand the intentions and editorial choices that shape Saudi textbook content. Future studies should also examine the intersection of gender with other aspects of identity, such as class, race, and disability, particularly if more cultural and social diversity is introduced into future versions of Saudi school textbooks.

#### **6.4 Concluding Remarks**

In light of the findings presented in this thesis, it becomes evident that the ways in which gender is constructed and communicated through first-grade Saudi textbooks continue to shape children's early understandings of themselves and others. The patterns identified across texts and illustrations demonstrate how particular expectations, norms, and hierarchies are maintained through everyday curricular materials. These insights underline the importance of ensuring that educational content evolves in line with the broader social and educational reforms taking place in the Kingdom. A more balanced and inclusive representation of women and men is therefore essential, not only to reflect national aspirations for greater equity, but also to support young learners in imagining wider and less restrictive possibilities for their futures.

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## 8. Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Tool for Collecting Data on Gender Representations

The following description reproduces “the formal structure of the tool for collecting data on gender representations” presented by Brugeilles and Cromer (2009a, pp. 47–48).

Brugeilles and Cromer (2009a) set out the formal structure of the tool for collecting data on gender representations, which consisted of five sections:

##### **Section 1: Identity Card**

The first section, entitled “Textbook identity card”, captures information from the publisher about the design, publication and organization of the book. As publishers’ notes are often inadequate, publishing houses should be consulted in order to obtain reliable information.

##### **Section 2: Cover**

The second section focuses on the cover and any characters that appear on it. As the first page the pupil sees every time s/he uses the textbook, the cover has a great deal of impact. This section consists of two parts: title and cover illustration. The objective is to record any characters that may appear, looking first at the title and then at the illustration.

##### **Section 3: Typology of Characters Who Appear in the Textbook**

The third section defines characters according to three specific pedagogical functions: learning icon characters, pilot characters, and real, famous characters. Learning icon characters “appear only in illustrations. These characters help pupils to get their bearings in the different pedagogical parts of the book: I’m learning this, I’m remembering that, I’m doing an exercise, etc.”. While pilot characters are “recurring characters: they accompany the pupil in his or her learning throughout the textbook. They appear in both text and

pictures. They aim to guide and reassure the pupil, especially in books for very young children”. (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009a, p. 30).

#### **Section 4: Text**

The “Text” section is devoted to studying all the characters who appear in the text, with the exception of learning icon characters and famous characters, who are listed in Section 3, “Typology of characters who appear in the textbook”. The “Text” section consists of a single module, which is applicable to both individual and collective characters and allows all the information relating to each person to be recorded. Each line of the table is allocated to one character, whether individual or collective.

#### **Section 5: Illustrations**

The fifth and final section enables the study of characters who appear in the pictures, whether these are ordinary, substitute, or pilot characters. It consists of three modules: one module for individual characters, another for groups of characters, and a third for recording occupations explicitly represented in the illustrations. (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009a, pp. 47–48)

## Appendix B

### Coding Framework for Gender Representation Analysis

This appendix reproduces the original coding framework developed by Brugeilles and Cromer (2009a) in *Analyzing Gender Representations in School Textbooks: A Practical Handbook* (pp. 113–120)

#### SECTION I: IDENTITY CARD

Identification number:
Title:
Publisher:
Collection:
Educational level:
Year first published:
Year of edition studied:
Country of publication:
Target country:
Author(s):
Cover illustrations by:
Textbook illustrations by:
Number of pages:
Number of sections:
Is there the same number of lessons in each section? : <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No if <i>yes</i> , number of lessons per section: if <i>no</i> , give exact number in each case:
Are there appendices that are not included in these sections: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
If <i>yes</i> : What is the nature of these appendices?

#### SECTION II: COVER

*Module: Title*

Does **the title of the book** mention a **human character**?  Yes  No

If **yes**, include this character in **the following table**:

Characters	Male			Female			Sex unspecified		
	adult	child	age unspecified	adult	child	age unspecified	adult	child	age unspecified
Number									

Module: Cover illustration

Does a **human character** appear in **the cover illustration**?  Yes  No

If **yes**, complete the **following table**:

Total number of pictures on the cover	
Total number of pictures <b>with human characters</b>	
Number of pictures <b>that include 1 to 4 human characters</b>	-> <i>Complete ind. Char.</i>
Number of pictures <b>that include more than 4 human characters</b>	-> <i>Complete group of Char.</i>

Module: Cover illustration, individual character

For pictures that include **1 to 4 characters**, complete the **following table**, recording the number of characters and specifying the topic of the illustration:

Illustration 1	Characters	Male			Female			Sex unspecified		
	Topic: _____	adult	child	age unspecified	adult	child	age unspecified	adult	child	age unspecified
	Number									
Illustration 2	Characters	Male			Female			Sex unspecified		
	Topic: _____	adult	child	age unspecified	adult	child	age unspecified	adult	child	age unspecified
	Number									
Illustration 3	Characters	Male			Female			Sex unspecified		
	Topic: _____	adult	child	age unspecified	adult	child	age unspecified	adult	child	age unspecified
	Number									

Module: Cover illustration, group of characters

For pictures that include **more than 4 characters**, complete the **following table**:

Illustration, "Scene" 1	Topic	<input type="checkbox"/> Male characters only <input type="checkbox"/> Female characters only <input type="checkbox"/> Males dominate <input type="checkbox"/> Females dominate <input type="checkbox"/> Neither dominant <input type="checkbox"/> Most characters ungendered	<input type="checkbox"/> Child characters only <input type="checkbox"/> Adult characters only <input type="checkbox"/> Child characters dominate <input type="checkbox"/> Adult characters dominate <input type="checkbox"/> Neither dominant <input type="checkbox"/> Impossible to determine dominance
Illustration, "Scene" 2	Topic	<input type="checkbox"/> Male characters only <input type="checkbox"/> Female characters only <input type="checkbox"/> Males dominate <input type="checkbox"/> Females dominate <input type="checkbox"/> Neither dominant <input type="checkbox"/> Most characters ungendered	<input type="checkbox"/> Child characters only <input type="checkbox"/> Adult characters only <input type="checkbox"/> Child characters dominate <input type="checkbox"/> Adult characters dominate <input type="checkbox"/> Neither dominant <input type="checkbox"/> Impossible to determine dominance
Illustration, "Scene" 3	Topic	<input type="checkbox"/> Male characters only <input type="checkbox"/> Female characters only <input type="checkbox"/> Males dominate <input type="checkbox"/> Females dominate <input type="checkbox"/> Neither dominant <input type="checkbox"/> Most characters ungendered	<input type="checkbox"/> Child characters only <input type="checkbox"/> Adult characters only <input type="checkbox"/> Child characters dominate <input type="checkbox"/> Adult characters dominate <input type="checkbox"/> Neither dominant <input type="checkbox"/> Impossible to determine dominance

### SECTION III: TYPOLOGY OF CHARACTERS WHO APPEAR IN THE TEXTBOOK

Module: learning icon characters

Does the textbook use **learning icon characters**?       Yes       No

If **yes**, include them in this table:

Character nº.	Sex	Age	How used
1	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise <input type="checkbox"/> Other <i>Specify</i> :
2	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise <input type="checkbox"/> Other <i>Specify</i> :
3	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise <input type="checkbox"/> Other <i>Specify</i> :
4	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise <input type="checkbox"/> Other <i>Specify</i> :
5	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise <input type="checkbox"/> Other <i>Specify</i> :

Module: Pilot characters

Does the textbook use **recurring pilot characters**?       Yes       No

If **yes**, include them in this table:

Character no.	Sex	Age	Identity
1	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	
2	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	
3	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	
4	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	
5	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	
6	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	
7	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	
8	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	

Module: Well-known personalities

Are any **well-known personalities** mentioned?

Yes

No

If *yes*, record them here, giving their names:

	Male	Female
In text		
In illustrations		

SECTION IV: TEXT

For course material and exercises mentioning a human character, whether individual or collective, complete the following table (one character per line):

Ch(s) n°	Sec n°	L n°.	Course material/ Exercise n°	Sex	Age	Identified	If “yes”, identified by*	Character’s role	Actions (max. 2)	Attributes (max. 3)	Character’s relationships	Compared/ Interacting with Character no. ?	Symbolic coefficient	Pilot character?
				<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered <input type="checkbox"/> M collective <input type="checkbox"/> F collective <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered collective <input type="checkbox"/> Grammatical masculine plural <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Forename <input type="checkbox"/> Courtesy title <input type="checkbox"/> Kinship bond <input type="checkbox"/> Other bond <input type="checkbox"/> Status <i>Specify</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Actor <input type="checkbox"/> Extra <input type="checkbox"/> Identifying character	-	-	Character alone? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If no, is the character*:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Co-existing <input type="checkbox"/> Compared. <i>Object:</i>  <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting. Nature:	Relationship 1: - - Relationship 2: - -	<input type="checkbox"/> Positive <input type="checkbox"/> Negative <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> No basis	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <i>Who:</i>  <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered <input type="checkbox"/> M collective <input type="checkbox"/> F collective <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered collective <input type="checkbox"/> Grammatical masculine plural Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Forename <input type="checkbox"/> Courtesy title <input type="checkbox"/> Kinship bond <input type="checkbox"/> Other bond <input type="checkbox"/> Status <i>Specify</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Actor <input type="checkbox"/> Extra <input type="checkbox"/> Identifying character	-	-	Character alone? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If no, is the character*:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Co-existing <input type="checkbox"/> Compared. <i>Object:</i>  <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting. Nature:	Relationship 1: - - Relationship 2: - -	<input type="checkbox"/> Positive <input type="checkbox"/> Negative <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> No basis	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <i>Who:</i>  <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered <input type="checkbox"/> M collective <input type="checkbox"/> F collective <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered collective <input type="checkbox"/> Grammatical masculine plural <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Forename <input type="checkbox"/> Courtesy title <input type="checkbox"/> Kinship bond <input type="checkbox"/> Other bond <input type="checkbox"/> Status <i>Specify</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Actor <input type="checkbox"/> Extra <input type="checkbox"/> Identifying character	-	-	Character alone? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If no, is the character*:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Co-existing <input type="checkbox"/> Compared. <i>Object:</i>  <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting. Nature :	Relationship 1: - - Relationship 2: - -	<input type="checkbox"/> Positive <input type="checkbox"/> Negative <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> No basis	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <i>Who:</i>  <input type="checkbox"/> No

\* More than one possible response

SECTION V: ILLUSTRATIONS

**Individual character.** For each character represented in a picture that includes at least 1 but no more than 4 characters, complete the following table (one character per line):

Ch(s) n°	Sec n°	L n°	Pic n°	Course material/ Exercise	Sex of character	Age of character	Type of character	Character's posture	Place	Actions (max. 2)	Attributes (max. 3)	Character's relationships	Compared/ Interacting with Character n°:	Character identified in text?	Pilot character?
				<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Substitute <input type="checkbox"/> Ordinary	<input type="checkbox"/> Head & shoulders <input type="checkbox"/> Full-length <i>Specify:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Standing <input type="checkbox"/> Lying down <input type="checkbox"/> Sitting <input type="checkbox"/> Kneeling <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	Identifiable: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, state where:</i>	-  -	-  -	Character alone? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If no*:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Co-existing <input type="checkbox"/> Compared <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting	- - -	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes*:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Forename/surname <input type="checkbox"/> Status/bond <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered name <input type="checkbox"/> Generic term that indicates sex/generic noun	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <i>Who:</i>  <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Substitute <input type="checkbox"/> Ordinary	<input type="checkbox"/> Head & shoulders <input type="checkbox"/> Full-length <i>Specify:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Standing <input type="checkbox"/> Lying down <input type="checkbox"/> Sitting <input type="checkbox"/> Kneeling <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	Identifiable: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, state where:</i>	-  -	-  -	Character alone? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If no*:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Co-existing <input type="checkbox"/> Compared <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting	- - -	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes*:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Forename/surname <input type="checkbox"/> Status/bond <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered name <input type="checkbox"/> Generic term that indicates sex/generic noun	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <i>Who:</i>  <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Substitute <input type="checkbox"/> Ordinary	<input type="checkbox"/> Head & shoulders <input type="checkbox"/> Full-length <i>Specify:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Standing <input type="checkbox"/> Lying down <input type="checkbox"/> Sitting <input type="checkbox"/> Kneeling <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	Identifiable: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, state where:</i>	-  -	-  -	Character alone? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If no*:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Co-existing <input type="checkbox"/> Compared <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting	- - -	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If ye*:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Forename/surname <input type="checkbox"/> Status/bond <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered name <input type="checkbox"/> Generic term that indicates sex/generic noun	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <i>Who:</i>  <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Substitute <input type="checkbox"/> Ordinary	<input type="checkbox"/> Head & shoulders <input type="checkbox"/> Full-length <i>Specify:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Standing <input type="checkbox"/> Lying down <input type="checkbox"/> Sitting <input type="checkbox"/> Kneeling <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	Identifiable: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, state where:</i>	-  -	-  -	Character alone? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If no*:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Co-existing <input type="checkbox"/> Compared <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting	- - -	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes*:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Forename/surname <input type="checkbox"/> Status/bond <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered name <input type="checkbox"/> Generic term that indicates sex/generic noun	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <i>Who:</i>  <input type="checkbox"/> No

\* More than one possible response

Module: Group of characters

Is a group of characters – *i.e.* more than 4 characters – represented in the same picture?

Yes       No

If **yes**, complete the following table:

Group n°	Section n°	Lesson n°	Course material or Exercise	Topic	Dominance by sex	Dominance by age	Is at least one character identified in the text?
			Y Course material Y Exercise		Y Male characters only Y Female characters only Y Males dominate Y Females dominate Y Neither dominant Y Most characters ungendered	Y Child characters only Y Adult characters only Y Child characters dominate Y Adult characters dominate Y Neither dominant Y Impossible to determine dominance	Y Yes How? Y No
			Y Course material Y Exercise		Y Male characters only Y Female characters only Y Males dominate Y Females dominate Y Neither dominant Y Most characters ungendered	Y Child characters only Y Adult characters only Y Child characters dominate Y Adult characters dominate Y Neither dominant Y Impossible to determine dominance	Y Yes How? Y No
			Y Course material Y Exercise		Y Male characters only Y Female characters only Y Males dominate Y Females dominate Y Neither dominant Y Most characters ungendered	Y Child characters only Y Adult characters only Y Child characters dominate Y Adult characters dominate Y Neither dominant Y Impossible to determine dominance	Y Yes How? Y No
			Y Course material Y Exercise		Y Male characters only Y Female characters only Y Males dominate Y Females dominate Y Neither dominant Y Most characters ungendered	Y Child characters only Y Adult characters only Y Child characters dominate Y Adult characters dominate Y Neither dominant Y Impossible to determine dominance	Y Yes How? Y No
			Y Course material Y Exercise		Y Male characters only Y Female characters only Y Males dominate Y Females dominate Y Neither dominant Y Most characters ungendered	Y Child characters only Y Adult characters only Y Child characters dominate Y Adult characters dominate Y Neither dominant Y Impossible to determine dominance	Y Yes How? Y No
			Y Course material Y Exercise		Y Male characters only Y Female characters only Y Males dominate Y Females dominate Y Neither dominant Y Most characters ungendered	Y Child characters only Y Adult characters only Y Child characters dominate Y Adult characters dominate Y Neither dominant Y Impossible to determine dominance	Y Yes How? Y No
			Y Course material Y Exercise		Y Male characters only Y Female characters only Y Males dominate Y Females dominate Y Neither dominant Y Most characters ungendered	Y Child characters only Y Adult characters only Y Child characters dominate Y Adult characters dominate Y Neither dominant Y Impossible to determine dominance	Y Yes How? Y No



## Appendix C

### Samples of the Data Coding Tables

#### SECTION V: ILLUSTRATIONS

**Individual character.** For each character represented in a picture that includes at least 1 but no more than 4 characters, complete the following table (one character per line):

Ch(s) n°	Sec n°	L n°	Pic n°	Course material/ Exercise	Sex of character	Age of character	Type of character	Character's posture	Place	Actions (max. 2)	Attributes (max. 3)	Character's relationships	Compared/ Interacting with Character n°:	Character identified in text?	Pilot character?
3	1	1	3	<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Substitute <input type="checkbox"/> Ordinary	<input type="checkbox"/> Head & shoulders <input type="checkbox"/> Full-length Specify: <input type="checkbox"/> Standing <input type="checkbox"/> Lying down <input type="checkbox"/> Sitting <input type="checkbox"/> Kneeling <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	Identifiable: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes, state where: construction s	- work -engineer -exited	helmet -map -	Character alone? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If no*: <input type="checkbox"/> Co-existing <input type="checkbox"/> Compared <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting	- - -	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes*: <input type="checkbox"/> Forename/surname <input type="checkbox"/> Status/bond <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered name <input type="checkbox"/> Generic term that indicates sex/generic noun	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes Who:  <input type="checkbox"/> No
4	1	1	4	<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Substitute <input type="checkbox"/> Ordinary	<input type="checkbox"/> Head & shoulders <input type="checkbox"/> Full-length Specify: <input type="checkbox"/> Standing <input type="checkbox"/> Lying down <input type="checkbox"/> Sitting <input type="checkbox"/> Kneeling <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	Identifiable: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes, state where*:	- work -teacher -calm	-hijab -board -	Character alone? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If no*: <input type="checkbox"/> Co-existing <input type="checkbox"/> Compared <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting	- - -	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes*: <input type="checkbox"/> Forename/surname <input type="checkbox"/> Status/bond <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered name <input type="checkbox"/> Generic term that indicates sex/generic noun	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes Who:  <input type="checkbox"/> No
5	1	1	5	<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Substitute <input type="checkbox"/> Ordinary	<input type="checkbox"/> Head & shoulders <input type="checkbox"/> Full-length Specify: <input type="checkbox"/> Standing <input type="checkbox"/> Lying down <input type="checkbox"/> Sitting <input type="checkbox"/> Kneeling <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	Identifiable: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes, state where*: classroom	- educational activity -happy	-desks and chairs -school uniforms -	Character alone? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If no*: <input type="checkbox"/> Co-existing <input type="checkbox"/> Compared <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting	- - -	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes*: <input type="checkbox"/> Forename/surname <input type="checkbox"/> Status/bond <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered name <input type="checkbox"/> Generic term that indicates sex/generic noun	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes Who:  <input type="checkbox"/> No
6	1	1	6	<input type="checkbox"/> Course material <input type="checkbox"/> Exercise	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Child <input type="checkbox"/> Adult <input type="checkbox"/> Unspecified	<input type="checkbox"/> Substitute <input type="checkbox"/> Ordinary	<input type="checkbox"/> Head & shoulders <input type="checkbox"/> Full-length Specify: <input type="checkbox"/> Standing <input type="checkbox"/> Lying down <input type="checkbox"/> Sitting <input type="checkbox"/> Kneeling <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	Identifiable: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes, state where*: playground	- Leisure activities -happy	-ball - -	Character alone? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If no*: <input type="checkbox"/> Co-existing <input type="checkbox"/> Compared <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting	- - -	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes*: <input type="checkbox"/> Forename/surname <input type="checkbox"/> Status/bond <input type="checkbox"/> Ungendered name <input type="checkbox"/> Generic term that indicates sex/generic noun	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes Who:  <input type="checkbox"/> No

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	
Ch(s) no	Sec no	L no	Pic no	Course mi	Sex of cha	Age of cha	Type of ch	Character	Place	Actions	Attributes	Character alone?	If no, is the character	Compared/ Interacting with	Character identified	If yes?	
3	1	1	3	Course mater	M	Adult	Ordinary	Full-length	work place	Occupational	Occupational	Yes				No	
4	1	1	4	Course mater	F	Adult	Ordinary	Full-length		Occupational	Physical chara	Yes				No	
5	1	1	5	Course mater	F	Child	Ordinary	Full-length	classroom	School activiti	School materi	No	Co-existing			No	
6	1	1	6	Course mater	M	Child	Ordinary	Full-length	playground	Leisure or spot	Leisure or spot	Yes				No	
7	1	1	7	Course mater	M	Adult	Ordinary	Full-length	classroom	School activiti	School materi	No	Interacting		8	No	
8	1	1	7	Course mater	M	Child	Ordinary	Full-length	classroom	School activiti	School materi	No	Interacting		7	No	
9	1	1	8	Exercise	M	Child	Ordinary	Full-length				Yes				No	
10	1	1	9	Exercise	M	Adult	Ordinary	Head & shoulders				Yes				No	
11	1	1	10	Exercise	F	Adult	Ordinary	Head & shoulders				Yes				No	
12	1	1	11	Exercise	M	Adult	Ordinary	Head & shoulders				Yes				No	
13	1	1	12	Exercise	F	Adult	Ordinary	Head & shoulders				Yes				No	
14	1	1	13	Exercise	F	Child	Ordinary	Head & shoulders				Yes				No	
15	1	1	14	Exercise	M	Child	Ordinary	Head & shoulders				No				No	
16	1	1	15	Exercise	M	Child	Ordinary	Full-length	playground	Leisure or spot	Leisure or spot	No	Interacting			No	
17	1	1	16	Exercise	F	Adult	Ordinary	Full-length	home	Domestic activi	Domestic item	No	Co-existing			No	
18	1	1	17	Exercise	F	Child	Ordinary	Full-length	home	Domestic activi	Domestic item	No	Co-existing			No	
19	1	1	17	Exercise	M	Child	Ordinary	Full-length	home	Leisure or spot	Leisure or spot	No	Co-existing			No	
20	1	1	17	Exercise	M	Child	Ordinary	Full-length	home	Leisure or spot	Leisure or spot	Yes				No	
21	1	1	18	Exercise	M	Child	Ordinary	Full-length	playground	Leisure or spot	Leisure or spot	No	Interacting			No	
22	1	1	19	Exercise	M	Child	Ordinary	Full-length				No	Co-existing			23	No
23	1	1	19	Exercise	M	Child	Ordinary	Head & shoulders				No	Co-existing			22	No
24	1	1	20	Exercise	F	Child	Ordinary	Full-length				No	Co-existing			25	No
25	1	1	20	Exercise	F	Child	Ordinary	Head & shoulders				No	Co-existing			24	No
26	1	1	21	Exercise	M	Adult	Ordinary	Head & shoulders				Yes					No
27	1	1	22	Exercise	F	Adult	Ordinary	Head & shoulders				Yes					No
28	1	2	23	Course mater	M	Child	Ordinary	Full-length	street	Buying activity	Money	Yes					No
29	1	2	24	Course mater	F	Child	Ordinary	Full-length	home	Domestic activi	Domestic item	Yes					No
30	1	2	25	Course mater	M	Child	Ordinary	Full-length	home	Leisure or spot	Leisure or spot	Yes					No
31	1	2	26	Exercise	M	Child	Ordinary	Full-length				Yes					No
32	1	2	27	Exercise	M	Unspecified	Ordinary	Full-length				Yes					No
33	1	2	28	Exercise	F	Adult	Ordinary	Full-length				Yes					No
34	1	2	29	Exercise	F	Child	Ordinary	Full-length				Yes					No
35	1	2	30	Course mater	M	Unspecified	Ordinary	Full-length	home	Routine personal activity		Yes					No
36	1	2	31	Course mater	M	Unspecified	Ordinary	Head & shoul	home	Social activity	Food	No	Interacting				No
37	1	2	31	Course mater	M	Adult	Ordinary	Head & shoul	home	Social activity	Food	No	Interacting				No
38	1	2	31	Course mater	F	Adult	Ordinary	Head & shoul	home	Social activity	Food	No	Interacting				No