



Gender Representation in Instructional Materials: A Study of Iranian English Language Textbooks and Teachers' Voices

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine how gender is represented in the “English for School Series, Prospect”, newly published by the Iranian Ministry of Education. We investigated whether the gender bias found in previous textbook studies in order to perpetuate Islamic gender ideology was repeated, or whether the authors showed any form of gender awareness in line with global efforts to promote gender equality. The manual and computational analyses in this study revealed some gender consciousness among the textbook authors, including the use of gender-neutral vocabulary and fair distribution of male and female dialogues. However, low female visibility is still prevalent. It seems that the authors tend to embrace the Islamic culture of male predominance, confining females to family and school contexts and associating women with stereotypical jobs. Interviews with school teachers revealed a strong need for textbook changes to seek gender equality in education for the provision of equal learning opportunities to students. The study has implications for teachers and textbook authors across the globe in the pursuit of more equality in education.

Keywords Equality · Gender · Iran · Sexism · Stereotypes · Textbooks

Introduction

Schooling plays an important role in learners' formation of gender-related attitudes (Davis and Willis 2010). Textbooks, which are regarded as trusted resources and used repetitively by students in class and at home, are considered the next most

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important factor after teachers in children's socialisation process (Riazi 2003). Textbooks significantly affect learners' development of knowledge as well as their perceptions of themselves and others through the transmission of covert and overt societal values (Ndura 2004). If textbooks present the two genders from a distorted perspective, there may be detrimental impacts on impressionable young students in materials comprehension and recall, affective development, their choice of academic studies and career pursuits (Bazler and Simonis 1991; Crawford and English 1984; Good et al. 2010; Peterson and Lach 1990).

It has been widely acknowledged that Iran is a society with entrenched gender inequality (Keddie 2000; Nayyeri 2013; Tabatabaei and Mehri 2019; World Economic Forum 2020), where school education is used by the government as a tool for political and religious purposes (Paivandi 2008; Rezaei-Rashti 2015). The present study seeks to investigate how gender is constructed in newly published Iranian English language textbooks and how school teachers perceive the textbooks they use daily in respect of gender depiction. English as a foreign language (EFL) textbooks have been chosen for this investigation because English now features prominently in the school curriculum in Iran, and is considered a marker of educational and social achievement (Sadeghi and Richards 2016). EFL textbooks are also regarded as a tool for learners to build stronger connections with other parts of the world (Whitehead 2015), and as sociocultural artifacts that feature character or moral values and play a key role as a value agent (Setyono and Widodo 2019; Widodo 2018).

Women's Status in Iran

Iran has long been a patriarchal society. Although women's rights reached new heights during the reign of Reza Pahlavi (1941–1979), Iran's legal system changed dramatically after the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime during the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The new constitution established Islam as the basis for a legal system that does not recognise women as individuals, but rather as “family” and as “mothers” and “wives” (Nayyeri 2013). Underlying such gendered formulation is the assumption that men are the family breadwinners and women are the caregivers. Although the Iranian government claims that the Family Protection Law provides men and women with similar opportunities, for women such opportunities are subject to the condition that “it does not interfere with the livelihood of the family” (Article 18 of the Family Protection Law). Population statistics confirm such gender inequality: in 2015–2016, 57.3% of the male economically active population were employed, but the corresponding figure for females was only 10.7% (Statistical Centre of Iran 2015–2016). On the other hand, a far larger percentage of females than males were homemakers (64.3% vs. 0.2%).

Women are not given full rights under Islamic law. A number of legal restrictions have been imposed on women in the process of Islamizing Iranian women, including compulsory veiling (*hijab*), the abolition of the Family Protection Law, re-instituting polygamy for men, and granting of the husband's right to prevent his wife from occupations or technical work (Higgins 1985; Keddie 2000; Rezaei-Rashti 2015). According to the World Bank's “Women, Business, and the Law 2019”,

a database which measures gender inequality in the law and identifies barriers to women's economic participation, Iran was ranked 184th out of 187 countries (World Bank 2019). Twenty-four legal restrictions against Iranian women have been listed, including restrictions on women to apply for a passport and to travel outside their homes and the country. There is no law to mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value for the two genders, or to allow women to obtain a judgment of divorce in the same way as men.

Women's presence in the public sphere is monitored through the introduction of gender segregation regulations (Mouri 2014; Rezai-Rashti 2015). Public theatres and buses are separated into male and female sections. Patients can only be treated by a nurse or a doctor of the same gender. Females are forbidden to participate in some sports and to watch men on sports fields (Mir and Khaki 2015), and they are barred from entering sports stadiums. Many people expressed their outrage at such inequality when Iranian women were not allowed to enter a Tehran stadium to watch the 2018 World Cup qualifying match between Iran and Syria (BBC News 2017). Gender segregation in the workplace also violates the rights of women in Iran. One way for the government to regulate women's presence in the public sphere is the widespread elimination of women from Tehran city administration, which started in 2014 when it was announced that all managers in the organisation should use male employees in their offices, and the Municipality offices should be segregated by gender (Centre for Human Rights in Iran 2014). A government official claimed that management was a "time consuming and lengthy job" and therefore the gender segregation initiative was "for the comfort and well-being of the women" (Mouri 2014).

Gender segregation also exists in the education system. Since the Islamic Revolution, all schools have become single-sex. Teachers can only teach students of the same sex. The once co-educational classes in higher education are now separated. Female students are barred from certain disciplines and professions such as engineering, agriculture and the judiciary. One result of gender segregation in schools has been a significant increase in Iranian women's access to all levels of education, as many Islamic parents would not send their daughters to co-educational schools in the past. Now over 60% of university undergraduates are women (Rezai-Rashti 2015). While many governments would see this dramatic rise as a blessing and a sign of social and economic development, this is not the case in Iran. In a report to the then President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, Iran's Research Centre of the Majlis (parliament) called the trend towards more girls enrolling in universities and higher education institutions "alarming" and "worrisome", and urged the government to stop it (Gorgin 2008). The Research Centre warned that a rise in female students could lead to social disparity and economic and cultural imbalances between the two genders, and could have detrimental impacts on families. The low ranking that Iran attained in the Global Gender Gap Index 2020 (148th out of 153 countries) confirms that Iran is still notoriously oppressive to women (World Economic Forum 2020).

Previous Textbook Studies

It has been widely acknowledged that school textbooks play an important role in learners' gender role development. The authors' content and linguistic choices can significantly affect learners' attitudes and disposition towards themselves and others. In conjunction with this, textbooks are heavily used by learners in school and at home. They are often viewed as authoritative by teachers, students and parents alike, and what the authors state is often accepted without any challenge (Gullicks et al. 2005; Lee 2014, 2018, 2019; Lee and Collins 2010; Mustapha 2012; Ndura 2004). The positive and negative influence of textbooks on learners' perceptions of self and others can therefore be strong. Bandura's (2001, 2003) social cognitive theory states that people observe how others behave and this information can guide their subsequent behaviours. If school textbooks contain any biases that depict the two genders in different subcultures, these may be mimicked by school learners (Bandura 2003; Foroutan 2012; Litosseliti 2006). Therefore it is necessary to examine textbooks carefully to uncover any hidden biases and to eliminate negative influences caused by biased content so as to empower students' learning experiences.

Previous studies have revealed that gender inequity can be manifest in textbooks in different forms. One common observation that plagues many feminists is female omission or underrepresentation, textually and/or visually, which implicitly suggests that women are less important or less worthy of mention than men (Foroutan 2012; Gupta and Lee 1990; Lee 2019; Lee and Chin 2019; Ndura 2004; Paivandi 2008; Porreca 1984; Wharton 2005). Gender inequity can also appear in textbook dialogues. If the dialogues are gender imbalanced, the language practice opportunities for male and female students may be affected (Ariyanto 2018; Jones et al. 1997; Lee 2019; Poulou 1997). Another manifestation of gender inequality is stereotyping, with females being portrayed as more fragile and passive and engaging mainly in household activities, and males as more active and engaging in more physically demanding work and a wider range of social roles (Amare 2007; Ariyanto 2018; Baghdadi 2012; Evans and Davies 2000; Gooden and Gooden 2001; Lee 2014; Lee and Chin 2019; Ndura 2004; Paivandi 2008; Setyono 2018; Tahririan and Sadri 2013).

Gender inequity can also be in the form of linguistic sexism, which refers to the use of words or expressions in a way that intentionally or unintentionally excludes a gender, usually females. One common example is the use of masculine generics when the gender is unknown (e.g. masculine *he/him/his*, *man/men*, and compound words ending with *-man* or *-men*). There have been calls in various non-sexist guidelines (e.g. National Council of Teachers of English 2002; UNESCO 1999) to replace the pseudo-generic *he* with the paired pronoun *he/she*, and to abandon gender-marked terms such as *chairman* in favour of gender-inclusive terms such as *chairperson* and *chair*.

The Present Study

Prior to the 1979 Revolution, the Iranian educational system was secular. However, the post-revolutionary period witnessed fundamental changes in the education system, which has come to emphasise an ideological framework based mainly on religious values (Paivandi 2008). Public education is now under the direct aegis of the theocratic government as a medium, both explicitly and implicitly, to maintain social control consistent with political and religious beliefs (Baghdadi 2012). EFL textbooks aim to enable students to communicate with English speakers and provide opportunities for individuals in education, work, and mobility. Given the promotion of gender equality in many English-speaking countries in recent decades, it is expected that EFL textbooks may not depict as many religious and traditional contexts as other textbooks (Baghdadi 2012; Foroutan 2012; Kennedy 2015). The present study aims to investigate the extent of male prominence in Iranian EFL textbooks. It will examine whether the authors of the selected textbooks have made any attempt to follow the global strategy of redressing gender inequality (Litosseliti 2006; UNESCO 1999). Different from previous research, the present study combined both manual and computational analyses in order to examine how gender is constructed in contemporary Iranian EFL textbooks from different perspectives. Specifically, this textbook study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the proportion of male to female characters in the textbooks studied?
2. How are women and men represented visually?
3. What are the social roles performed by females and males?
4. What are the common activities engaged by males and females?
5. To what extent are gender-marked and gender-neutral constructions used?
6. How are males and females presented in dialogues?

Sunderland et al. (1997) argue that teachers play an important role in the perpetuation of gender (in)equality because they may ignore, extend or subvert traditional gender roles in their treatment of texts. However, previous studies have mainly focused on the analysis of school textbooks, and scant attention has been paid to teachers' views on gender representation in the books and their ways to redress gender unfairness, if it is present. In order to fill this gap, the second part of this study includes an investigation of Iranian teachers' perceptions of gender construction in EFL textbooks. The following questions will be addressed:

1. How do the teachers perceive the gender roles presented in school textbooks?
2. What future changes in EFL textbooks in relation to gender constructions do teachers recommend?

Method

The newly designed English textbooks named “English for School Series, Prospect”, aimed at junior high schools, were developed by the Ministry of Education as part of an educational reform to develop students’ communication proficiency (Safari and Sahragard 2015; Zarrinabadi and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei 2018). Given the importance of this new publication, various studies were conducted to examine the effectiveness of the activity design (Mizbani and Chalak 2017a, b), and teachers’ attitudes towards the new series (Alipour et al. 2016). The present study aims to examine this publication from the perspective of gender representation in the school series. The series includes *Prospect 1* (2013), *Prospect 2* (2014) and *Prospect 3* (2015), for Grade 7, 8 and 9 students respectively.

The investigation integrated both manual analysis and computational analysis to make the study more objective and comprehensive. All the written texts, including tables of contents, dialogues, exercises, reviews and photo dictionaries, were converted into electronic files and counter-checked for accuracy before the investigation. The manual analysis included recording all the male and female characters and their roles. As for the corpus analysis, three textbook corpora were compiled using the WordSmith Choose Texts Tool. The Concordance Tool was then used to find the frequency of occurrence of the target words, and to organise data in a Keyword in Context (KWIC) format in order to identify the words collocating with the node words. All the data were cross-checked by the two researchers to ensure accuracy. When there was a discrepancy, the data were re-examined until a consensus was reached.

To seek answers to the research questions in relation to the textbook study, the following features were examined:

1. To answer research question 1 about the appearances of men and women, we manually recorded the number of gendered characters in each lesson. The frequency counts for the feminine pronouns (*she, her, hers, herself*) and masculine pronouns (*he, him, his, himself*) were computed using the Concordance Tool.
2. To seek answers to research question 2 regarding visual representation, we manually noted the appearances of females and males in visual images, and classified them into “females only”, “males only” and “mixed sex”. We also made a note of the characters’ activities in the male-only pictures and female-only pictures. The activities were divided into eight categories: (1) housework (e.g. cooking, setting the table), (2) work/profession (including pictures showing professional images), (3) study/at school (including classroom teaching and learning and school activities), (4) leisure (e.g. fishing, reading), (5) sports (e.g. swimming, horse riding, skiing), (6) social activities (e.g. calling a friend), (7) personal activities, (e.g. eating, drinking), and (8) others (for non-identifiable pictures).
3. To seek answers to research question 3 about the roles performed by males and females, the social roles of all the gendered characters in the written texts were recorded manually.

Table 1 Male and female characters

| | Prospect 1 | | Prospect 2 | | Prospect 3 | |
|-------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| No. of characters | 83 (58.9%) | 58 (41.1%) | 26 (52.0%) | 24 (48.0%) | 59 (55.7%) | 47 (44.3%) |

- To answer research question 4 regarding the common activities engaged by female and male characters, the KWIC concordances were examined in order to identify the process types (e.g. material, relational, mental) collocating with the nominative pronouns *he* and *she* (see Halliday 2014).
- To address research question 5 about the extent of use of gender-marked and gender-neutral vocabulary, we identified the pseudo-generic *man/men* and paired pronouns (e.g. *he/she*, *she or he*), as well as gender-marked and gender-inclusive vocabulary items (e.g. *policeman* vs *police officer*, *fireman* vs *firefighter*).
- To address research question 6 regarding how the two genders are presented in dialogues, we noted the number of mixed-sex dialogues, same-sex dialogues, female and male speakers, and the amount of speech (number of words and turns).

Another major contribution of the present study to the literature is our attempt to collect teachers' views on gender construction in Iranian textbooks. Six EFL high school teachers, including three males and three females with English teaching experiences ranging from two to 28 years, participated in individual interviews. The following questions were asked:

- What are the common roles constructed for females and males in Iranian EFL textbooks?
- Do you think that men and women are presented equally in the textbooks? If not, have you done anything to address the inequalities?
- Should there be any changes to the depiction of the two genders in future textbooks?

Results and Discussion

Textbook Analysis

Male-to-Female Appearances

Table 1 reveals that *Prospect 1* and *Prospect 3* depict males more frequently than females, with the ratio being 1.43:1 for the former, and 1.26:1 for the latter. Similar findings were noted for the use of masculine and feminine pronouns (see Table 2). Masculine pronouns outnumbered feminine pronouns in *Prospect 1* and *Prospect 3*, with the ratio of 1.46:1 in *Prospect 1* and 1.31:1 in *Prospect 3*. These findings are in line with some earlier Iranian textbook studies which noted female

Table 2 Masculine and feminine pronouns

| Book | Nominative | | Accusative | | Genitive | | Reflexive | | Total | |
|------------|------------|-----|------------|-----|----------|----------|-----------|---------|-------------|-------------|
| | He | She | Him | Her | His | Her/hers | Himself | Herself | M | F |
| Prospect 1 | 56 | 38 | 2 | 0 | 15 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 73 (59.3%) | 50 (40.7%) |
| Prospect 2 | 20 | 18 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 25 (50.0%) | 25 (50.0%) |
| Prospect 3 | 109 | 78 | 2 | 6 | 28 | 22 | 0 | 0 | 139 (56.7%) | 106 (43.3%) |

Table 3 Pictorial representation of men and women

| | Men only | Women only | Mixed-sex | Not identifiable | Total |
|------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------------|-------|
| Prospect 1 | 57 (70.4%) | 20 (24.7%) | 4 (4.9%) | 0 | 81 |
| Prospect 2 | 70 (71.4%) | 7 (7.1%) | 9 (9.2%) | 12 (12.2%) | 98 |
| Prospect 3 | 100 (61.7%) | 24 (14.8%) | 29 (17.9%) | 9 (5.6%) | 162 |
| Total | 227 (66.6%) | 51 (15.0%) | 42 (12.3%) | 21 (6.2%) | 341 |

underrepresentation (e.g. Amini and Birjandi 2012; Baghdadi 2012; Foroutan 2012). On the other hand, a fairer distribution of male and female characters, and masculine and feminine pronouns was observed in *Prospect 2*.

Visual Representation

As seen in Table 3, the gender balance identified in the written texts of *Prospect 2* does not apply to visual representation; male predominance is evident in all the three textbooks. Of the 341 pictures depicting humans in the school series, 227 pictures (66.6%) depict males only and 51 pictures (15.0%) depict females only. In other words, two-thirds of the pictures showing humans are devoted to males. This finding is consonant with previous findings (e.g. Amini and Birjandi 2012; Baghdadi 2012; Foroutan 2012; Paivandi 2008). Female invisibility is coupled with the portrayal of females in a very limited range of activities (see Table 4). Females are confined to the school context as student and teacher. There are only six pictures depicting women in the workplace, all performing stereotypical jobs such as nurse and receptionist. The major social activity that they engage in is talking to friends. Females are also depicted as family caregivers, making meals and taking care of family members in *Prospect 3*.

By contrast, males are portrayed in a much wider range of settings. They are presented as professionals and skilled workers (e.g. doctor, pilot, soldier, political leader, firefighter, actor, cook, farmer, gardener). They participate in different kinds of sports (e.g. swimming, skiing, horse riding, and playing tennis, football, badminton, volleyball, etc.). Further, males take part in different leisure activities (e.g. watching movies, listening to the radio, playing computer games, park walk). None of the female-only pictures shows females participating in any leisure activity.

Table 4 Activities engaged by men and women in pictures

| | | Housework | Work /profession | Study/at school | Leisure | Sports | Social activities | Personal activities | Others | Total |
|------------|---|-----------|------------------|-----------------|------------|------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------|-------|
| Prospect 1 | M | 0 (0%) | 29 (50.9%) | 10 (17.5%) | 2 (3.5%) | 2 (3.5%) | 1 (1.8%) | 3 (5.3%) | 10 (17.5%) | 57 |
| | F | 0 (0%) | 3 (15.0%) | 9 (45.0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (5.0%) | 0 (0%) | 7 (35.0%) | 20 |
| Prospect 2 | M | 0 (0%) | 15 (21.4%) | 2 (2.9%) | 15 (21.4%) | 19 (27.1%) | 0 (0%) | 19 (27.1%) | 0 (0%) | 70 |
| | F | 0 (0%) | 1 (14.3%) | 6 (85.7%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 7 |
| Prospect 3 | M | 5 (5.0%) | 21 (21.0%) | 12 (12.0%) | 8 (8.0%) | 2 (2.0%) | 12 (12.0%) | 38 (38.0%) | 2 (2.0%) | 100 |
| | F | 3 (12.5%) | 2 (8.3%) | 6 (25.0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 7 (29.2%) | 6 (25.0%) | 0 (0%) | 24 |

Table 5 Social roles

| | | Social roles | Total |
|------------|---|--|-------|
| Prospect 1 | M | Baker, cook, dentist, doctor, driver, engineer, farmer, florist, friend, mechanic, painter, pilot, policeman, postman, school secretary, secretary, shopkeeper, student, teacher, waiter, worker | 21 |
| | F | Doctor, employee, housewife, librarian, nurse, student, teacher | 7 |
| Prospect 2 | M | Biologist, doctor, friend, mechanic, philosopher, physician, student, teacher | 8 |
| | F | Student, teacher | 2 |
| Prospect 3 | M | Driver, friend, passer-by, police officer, postman, student, teacher, tourist | 8 |
| | F | Driver, friend, receptionist, student, teacher, tourist | 6 |

However, some departures from the traditional gender stereotypes were noted; males are portrayed as setting or clearing the table in five pictures in *Prospect 3*.

Social Roles

The traditional dichotomy between masculine and feminine social roles is evident in the textbook series. As shown in Table 5, similar to some previous studies (e.g. Amini and Birjandi 2012; Ansary and Babaii 2003), women were portrayed in a more limited range of social roles than men, with the ratio of 7:21 for *Prospect 1*, 2:8 for *Prospect 2*, and 6:8 for *Prospect 3*. While men were presented in the roles of pilot, engineer, doctor, teacher, driver, policeman, mechanic and painter, women were portrayed mainly in the stereotypical roles of nurse, teacher and housewife. Nevertheless, there were occasional challenges to gender stereotypes, with portrayals of women as doctors and dentists. This may be owing to the practice of gender segregation in Iran, and the requirement that female doctors and dentists serve the medical needs of female patients.

Activities Associated with Females and Males

To find out how the textbook writers portray the activities that the two genders perform, we examined the KWIC concordances and the process types collocating with the nominative pronouns *he* and *she*. We focused on the representation of human experience through transitivity processes expressed in the form of verb groups (Halliday 2014). The most common process types found in the textbook series are “relational” and “material”. Relational processes relate a participant to an attribute or an identity, usually with the relational verb *be* or stative verbs such as *become* and *remain*. Material processes construe doings and happenings (e.g. *play*, *cook*, *come* and *work*).

An examination of the relational processes confirms the presence of traditional gender stereotyping in the school series. In *Prospect 1* women are depicted as teachers, nurses and housewives, and men as mechanics and doctors (see Fig. 1).

Karimi. Who is that woman? **She's** my teacher Miss/Mrs.
 What is her aunt's job? **She's** a nurse. What is his job
 What is your mother's job? **She's** a housewife. What is his
 mother? Student 2: She's 35. **She is** a housewife. Practice 1
 What's your father's job? **He's** a (mechanic). Can you write
 What's his job? Student 2: **He's** a mechanic. Student 1:
 What is his uncle's job? **He's** a doctor. What is her aunt's job

Fig. 1 Concordances of relational processes associated with *he* and *she*

She's the young girl. **She's wearing** a grey scarf. Which
 She's the old woman. **She's wearing** a brown manteau.
 She's the tall girl. **She's wearing** a brown scarf. Which
 She's the tall woman. **She's wearing** a black chador.
 He's the young man. **He's wearing** a blue suit. blue red
 teacher is the tall man. **He's wearing** a grey suit. He's over
 math teacher? Student: **He's wearing** a blue suit and a white
 He's the (old man). **He's wearing** (a grey suit). Which
 He's the short boy. **He's wearing** a white shirt. Practice
 He's the old man. **He's wearing** a green jacket. Who's
 He's the tall man. **He's wearing** a grey suit. Who's

Fig. 2 Concordances of *he's wearing* and *she's wearing*

Similarly, in *Prospect 2*, adjacent sentences displaying gender stereotypes were noted, with *she* collocating with the domestic chore of cooking and *he* with the outdoor physical activity of football playing (p. 27):

Is she good at cooking? Yes, she is./No, she isn't.
 Is he good at playing football? Yes, he is./No, he isn't.

The relational process analysis also reveals different clothing descriptions for men and women in *Prospect 1*. While *he* is described as wearing formal suits or jackets in different colours, *she* has to follow the Islamic values and wear the traditional hijab, chador and manteau in dull colours (see Fig. 2). This finding is congruent with the visual representation, which shows that nearly all the females, young and old, wear a hijab, mostly in dull colours, both inside and outside their homes. Males, on the other hand, are shown as free to wear different kinds of clothes in different colours,

get gifts? Does your father **work** on holidays? Card B
 Hamid: I think he goes to **work** on shifts. Parsa: Oh!
 post office. Why does he go to **work** by bus? Because it's
 work with his computer? No, he **worked** with his mobile.
 Yes, we watched it. Did Amir **work** with his computer? No,
 2. Where does he **work**? He
 Parsa: Oh! Where does he **work**? Hamid: At a fire station
 2. Where does he **work**? He works at
 4. What time does he **work**?
 3. When does he go to **work**? He goes
 2. Where does he work? He **works** at
 the man doing? Fatemeh: He's **working**. Teacher: Say it
 He's working. Teacher: He's **working**. It's the /w/, not
 Say it again. Fatemeh: He's **working**. Teacher: He's working
 5. I do my homework. 6. She **works** for a company. Talk to

Fig. 3 Concordances of the verb *work**

ranging from formal suits, casual wear and sportswear to traditional clothing. These findings demonstrate that school textbooks play an important role to help the government maintain social control in line with certain religious-political beliefs—in this case, prescribing the traditional hijab, chador and manteaux to school girls.

As for material verbs, it was noted that the masculine pronoun *he* is commonly associated with *work* and the feminine pronoun *she* with *cook*. A further examination of the concordances of the node words *work**¹ and *cook** reveals that the traditional gender demarcation whereby men work and women cook is deeply rooted in the school series. As shown in Fig. 3, of the 15 instances indicating the node verb *work**, 14 are associated with males and only one with a female (*She works for a company*). In contrast, Fig. 4 shows the concordances in relation to the node word *cook**; half of them are about women cooking.

Use of Gender-Marked and Gender-Neutral Constructions

The findings show that both gender-marked and gender-inclusive vocabulary items are used in the school series (see Table 6). Three instances of generic *men* appear in the preface of the school series (*Signs for men of knowledge*), as part of a verse from the Holy Koran. The other three instances of gender-marked words

¹ The asterisk is used to broaden the word search so that words that start with the same letters will be identified.

a lot in Tehran? 3. Does she **cook** lunch? 4. Do you tell nice! Does your grandmother **cook** the New Year meal? below. My mom just baked some **cookies**. She put them on in. He took one this time. The **cookie** was hot. He burnt his Reza was hungry. He wanted a **cookie**. He climbed a chair to No, I'm not. Is she good at **cooking**? Yes, she is./ No, she What are you doing? I'm **cooking**. What is he doing? He you/they doing? I'm/They're (**cooking** lunch). What is he/she

Fig. 4 Concordances of *cook**

Table 6 Gender-marked and gender-neutral vocabulary

| Gender-neutral (N)/Gender-marked (M) | | Prospect 1 | Prospect 2 | Prospect 3 |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| M | Pseudo-generic man/men | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| N | People | 10 | 15 | 9 |
| N | Person | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| M | Policeman | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| N | Police | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| N | Police officer | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| M | Fireman | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| N | Firefighter | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| M | Postman | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| N | Postal worker/letter carrier | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| M | Salesgirl/salesman | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| N | Shopkeeper | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Total: | | | | |
| Gender-marked | | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| Gender-neutral | | 13 | 17 | 23 |

Table 7 Paired pronouns

| | She/he | He/she | Him/her | His/her |
|------------|--------|--------|---------|---------|
| Prospect 1 | 0 | 14 | 0 | 3 |
| Prospect 2 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Prospect 3 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 |

include one token of *policeman* and two tokens of *postman*. Compared with gender-marked words, more gender-neutral words are used in the school series studied. Examples include *police officer*, *firefighter* and *shopkeeper*. Use of the gender-inclusive paired pronouns (*he/she*, *his/her*) is also evident (see Table 7). In addition to following the conventional male–female order, which implies

Table 8 Same-sex dialogues

| | Prospect 1 | | Prospect 2 | | Prospect 3 | |
|---------------------------|------------|-----|------------|-----|------------|-----|
| | M | F | M | F | M | F |
| No. of same-sex dialogues | 8 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 13 | 10 |
| No. of speakers | 19 | 17 | 15 | 16 | 27 | 20 |
| No. of turns | 45 | 44 | 55 | 51 | 103 | 87 |
| No. of words | 251 | 213 | 350 | 377 | 579 | 517 |

female inferiority (Porreca 1984; Lee 2014), the authors of *Prospect 2* sometimes reversed the traditional word order, with females being presented before males (*she/he*). These findings indicate some textbook authors' awareness of the need to use gender-fair language, at least to a certain extent.

Representation of Males and Females in Dialogues

In line with the practice of gender segregation in Iran, there are only three mixed-sex dialogues but 52 same-sex dialogues in the school series. As shown in Table 8, gender balance was found in *Prospect 1* and 2 in terms of the number of male dialogues and female dialogues, the number of male speakers and female speakers, their turns as well as the amount of speech. One way to strive for gender equality is the textbook authors' attempt to alternate male dialogues and female dialogues. For example, in *Prospect 2* the conversations in Lessons 1, 4, 5 and 6 are conducted by males, and those in Lessons 2, 3 and 7 are conducted by females.

However, a qualitative analysis which involves an examination of the contexts reveals hidden gender biases in some dialogues. For example, the dialogue between the son and the mother in *Prospect 1* (see below) reinforces the stereotypical image that women's environment is the kitchen, while for men it is the garage:

Farid: Mom, where are you?
 Mom: I'm in the kitchen.
 Farid: Hello. Where's Dad?
 Mom: In the garage.
 Farid: What's he doing? I'm so hungry.
 Mom: OK, wash your hands and come for lunch.

I'll call Dad; he's fixing the car.
 Farid: OK.

(*Prospect 1*, p. 32).

Another example reflecting the gender stereotype that females are weaker and need men's help is evident in the mixed-sex dialogue in *Prospect 3* between a girl who has lost her way and a police officer who is offering assistance:

- Clara: Excuse me sir! I'm lost.
 Police officer: Don't worry. What's your name?
 Clara: My name's Clara.
 Police officer: Where do you live?
 Clara: On Main Street, near the gas station.
 Police officer: Don't worry. I can take you home.
 Clara: Thank you sir.

(*Prospect 3*, p. 68).

The findings show that although the textbook authors have made efforts to seek gender equality in terms of the amount of speech by females and males, latent gender stereotyping in terms of the contexts and the roles played by the characters merits further attention from textbook authors.

Teachers' Perceptions of Gender Construction in Iranian EFL Textbooks

The second part of this study aims to explore teachers' views on gender representation in Iranian EFL textbooks and the changes they called for. The findings show that regardless of their English teaching experience, all the teachers interviewed expressed their concern about the blatant gender inequity and bias present in Iranian EFL textbooks. One example mentioned by all was female invisibility. Teacher A, with over 20 years' teaching experience, compared earlier books and contemporary ones, concluding that despite more female mentions in contemporary books, female underrepresentation was still prevalent. Teacher B pointed out the predominance of males in the grammar sections, with example sentences such as "He is brave. He can ride a bike". This observation is in line with Amare's (2007) study of online grammar guides, which revealed that male-gendered words were mentioned almost twice as often as female-gendered words. In addition to textual imbalance, Teacher E noted the extension of gender inequality to visual representation. She estimated that the male-to-female ratios for pictorial images were approximately 3:1 in the textbook used, and 10:1 in the accompanying workbook. The implicit message of the pervasive female underrepresentation in Iranian EFL textbooks is that women are not as important as men. Teacher F espouses that textbooks should represent both genders equally as women are half of the world's population.

Another gender imbalance observed by all the teachers was the unequal social status and activities depicted for men and women, which confirms the textbook analysis in this study. Teacher A cited examples from two conversations found in a textbook: one is about a female attempting to lose weight while the other is about a male who is depicted as an important multilingual interpreter for television. Teacher A contended that this kind of gender stereotyping should be addressed.

All the interviewees shared similar views. In general, females are often portrayed in textbooks as doing nurturing and trivial work, or staying indoors, playing roles such as friends, family members, babysitters, nurses, teachers, librarians and housekeepers, whereas males occupy senior roles or work outdoors as managers, scientists, physicians, museum guides, soldiers, police officers, firefighters, pilots, drivers and sportspeople. To the teachers, the portrayal of females in a more limited range of activities than males would affect students' engagement in class activities and their learning, and if girls hold the belief that females are not as important as males in society, it will "hold back" their achievements, and the "unfair" long existing patriarchal system will continue. The following are some of the teachers' comments:

The portrayal of females in a more limited range of activities for sure affects the construction of their identity, attitude and emotions. I think that the development of children's gender identity is strongly affected by their reading materials... The different representation of gender in conversations and illustrations in these books reveals the bias and fossilises this idea in female students' mind that they are inferior, men are superior, and some jobs are just for men... They are gradually being pushed to accept the conventionally accepted gender role stereotypes. (Teacher B)

There is gender imbalance not only in activities but also in the language used to describe men and women. This will hold back girls' achievement. It can affect girls' engagement in class activities. So it will affect their learning. (Teacher F)

While the teachers acknowledged that the avoidance of mixed-sex dialogues was a result of the Islamic culture in Iran, they made various comments against this practice, including criticism of the gender imbalance in textbook dialogues which was more significant than the reality, the egregious effects of gender segregation on students' socialisation and the unnatural language used in same-sex dialogues on students' English learning and development of communication skills. Some teacher comments are extracted below:

Using same-sex dialogues in Iranian English textbooks is related to our religions, customs and mores. Students will learn they must speak only to the same sex and this will cause so many problems in their future life, and especially in society. (Teacher D).

Unfortunately, this is another problem which has its roots in some wrongly based or wrongly understood religious or cultural beliefs and attitudes. Though the situation has got much better nowadays in the real society, in these books written by some ignorant authors, we still see this type of unfair and unnatural dialogues throughout the whole book... We can see the false feeling of superiority for men, and being humiliated for women. Besides, a whole lot of unnatural language cannot help students use the language in real situations. (Teacher E).

With regard to the use of gender-neutral constructions, four teachers mentioned that gender-fair language was not used in their textbooks at all, while the other two respondents noted its limited use. Teacher E mentioned that except for the gender-neutral word *firefighter*, gender-exclusive terms such as *policeman* and masculine pronouns were widely used. The difference between the findings of the current textbook study and the teachers' observations suggests that the textbook writers in the new series of *Prospect* have taken a step forward in their attempt to seek more balanced gender representation in the language choice.

The six teachers unanimously agreed that major changes to achieve gender equality should be made in textbooks so as to motivate students to learn better and to prepare them for real life. Two teachers provided another major reason, stating that there is no male supremacy in the modern world. The recommended changes include the more equal assignment of roles, activities and dialogues to the two genders, and the avoidance of gender-biased language and over-generalisation such as "Boys are brave, and girls are shy". Notwithstanding that there is still a long journey to make in this regard, some teacher interviewees have made efforts to redress gender inequality, such as including both females and males in their self-developed supplementary teaching materials and in their choice of video clips, involving learners' own experiences about gender roles in families and in society, and avoiding the use of masculine generics. As said by Teacher B, by doing so, teachers will help students to realise that males and females have "the same talent and ability but just different genders".

To sum up, a close examination of teachers' views on the gender construction in Iranian EFL textbooks reveals that many teachers are aware of the unequal treatment of females and males in the instructional materials and they have made various attempts to address the problems. One teacher mentioned that she had sent comments to the person in charge of the textbook series that her school was using, and was disappointed that the identified gender bias was not addressed at all afterwards. As a result, the teacher "tried not to be so sensitive about that". This suggests that it is essential for the Iranian Ministry of Education and textbook producers to be in tune with the global demand for gender equality and make a concerted effort with school teachers to redress the problem of textbook sexism so as to enhance learners' understanding of the world and their own abilities.

Conclusion

The present study found that educational reform in Iran in recent years, which aims to enhance students' English communication skills, has not substantially improved gender representation in the new EFL school series for high school students. Gender inequality is still present in different forms. Although females comprise half the population of the Islamic Republic of Iran (49.6% in 2015–2016) (Statistical Centre of Iran 2015–2016), they suffer from low visibility, both textually and visually. The textbooks studied tend to embrace the Islamic culture of male predominance and leave little room for female visibility, especially in visual representation. Females are excluded from participation in daily leisure and sports activities. They are presented

in modest styles of clothing, and found only in domestic and school contexts and in limited workplaces, while males are family breadwinners and are presented in a much wider range of work and social contexts. The interviews with school teachers in this study confirmed the incorporation of the patriarchal orientation of the Islamic regime in school textbooks.

The male dominance portrayed in school textbooks does not reflect the Iranian society as a whole. It merely shows the viewpoint of a small sector of society and the ideology of the current Iranian government, as Iranian public textbooks are developed under the close scrutiny of the education authorities, which use textbooks as a medium to maintain social control consistent with Islamic and political beliefs. For example, the textbooks prescribe the hijab for students by showing all females, including children, in hijabs, although in reality small girls do not need to wear the hijab in public and women do not need to at home. Through the hidden curriculum in school books, the traditional attitudes towards “proper” female roles are reinforced.

Currently a number of Iranian women have highly skilled, professional jobs, such as doctor, lawyer and bank staff (Amini and Birjandi 2012; The Iran Project 2016). They include such high-achieving women as Maryam Mirzakhani, who was an Iranian-born mathematician and the first woman to win the Fields Medal, the equivalent of the Nobel Prize for Mathematics. Nevertheless, there is no mention of women’s achievements in the school series. Social cognitive theory holds that learners should be presented with role models that challenge outdated stereotypes (Burr 1998). The depiction of women’s accomplishments in school textbooks could be used to support females who are striving for success, thereby providing students with a model for their own personal and career pursuits.

Having said that, there should also be acknowledgement of the textbook authors’ attempts – albeit modest – to seek gender equality. *Prospect 2* shows textual gender balance in the portrayal of male and female characters, and the use of masculine and feminine pronouns. Gender-inclusive vocabulary that encompasses both females and males is also evident in the new school series. Furthermore, the writers have made efforts to seek gender equality in dialogues in terms of the number of male/female dialogues, the number of male/female speakers, and their amount of speech. These findings reveal the ambivalent attitudes of some textbook writers: on the one hand, they have to follow government policy to Islamise women through school education, but on the other they are conscious of the need to promote gender inclusiveness in tune with the global demand for gender equality.

While there is still a long journey to revolutionise school textbooks to establish egalitarian norms in Iran, school teachers can play a more active role in the promotion of gender equality among the younger generation. Teachers can redress the bias in textbooks through using gender-neutral language themselves, presenting males and females in similar roles in supplementary teaching materials, heightening learners’ gender consciousness, and enabling them to question issues of power, discrimination and language. Both textbook writers and school teachers across the globe could act as agents of change, and help learners to think and act according to their own interest and ability, beyond their gender, so that the next generation will have mutual respect and develop their potential to the fullest for the benefit of society.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Education University of Hong Kong.

Human and Animal Rights All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation.

Textbooks Examined

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