



Girls: a Minority in Children's Literature

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Interest in the concepts of masculinity and femininity in children's literature, an outgrowth of the women's movement, has focused on sex role stereotypes and the adverse effects they have on personality development. The gender bias portrayed in the stories that children and young people read contributes negatively to their development, limits their career aspirations, and shapes their attitudes toward their future roles. This is an issue that social scientists have been focusing on for some time with good reason. The exploration of the socialization process, through which sex-typing behavior is learned, has become a challenge to social scientists in different parts of the world.

Research in socialization indicates that sex role definitions in a certain society are learned and internalized through “observational learning” and “identification”. Observational learning behavior is mostly acquired through observing models and identifying with them, or through language symbols and illustrations.

It has been a known fact that the media, television, movies, books, stories and computers offer socially sanctioned behavioral models that transmit information about sex-typed behavior in a particular society. Based on this assumption it becomes imperative to be aware of the kind of models we are advocating through the content, the language and the illustrations in books we are writing for children and young people.

What we hope to accomplish in our encounter special focus on girls. We know that the topic is enormous and there is no way we can cover all aspects of it, but our experts will try to answer questions like the following:

Why is it important to talk about gender bias in literature?

Are girls underrepresented in the literature for children and young people?

Is gender bias in children's books at present as prominent as it was 50 years ago?

Are there any noticeable changes in female representation, in sex-role behavior, in personality traits attributed to female and male characters in the stories written?

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What kind of change, if today, in this round table discussion is to shed some light on the status of gender issues in children's books in a few selected countries and some international literature, with any, is occurring? How wide spread are the changes?

Are these changes positive or negative?

What can be said about this new trend of writing special literature for girls and special literature for boys?

Can we truly say that the model that Astrid Lindgren has set for female characters in her writings has changed children's literature across the world?

Don't we wish that we could have more writers with vision, courage and imagination like Astrid Lindgren who would defy the gender bias in the world with their creative writings????? What a challenge for IBBY!!!!!!

We do not claim to know all about children's literature around the world, but we hope that you will challenge the speakers with questions that you raise and enrich the discussion with your active participation.

In preparing for this presentation I realized the wealth of gender studies in the Western world, however, the situation seemed like mission impossible when it came to the Arab World. Research in the Arab World in general, unfortunately, is not well documented and both topics of our concern, children's literature and gender issues, are not top priority for researchers in that part of the world. The three studies I will report on are taken from the Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World of the Lebanese American University in Beirut Lebanon, an institute that I had founded in 1973 and directed till 1998. The fourth is a survey that was prepared for this Congress.

The first study was conducted in 1982 by Dr. Ilham Kallab on 52 Lebanese elementary children's text books printed in Lebanon between 1970 and 1977. These are used for teaching the Arabic language in public and private schools in the absence of a unified text book in the country for this purpose. Some may question why text books when our present concern is "Reading Books". That is true, but reading books, during those horrible war years, were scarce and text books were the only reading material accessible to most Lebanese children especially those in public schools. Text books play an important role in the process of socialization since all children are exposed to them through a person whose authority is never challenged by them.



She Cooks and He Reads is the title of this very thorough analytical study of content, language and illustrations where the author focused her attention on the presence of the woman in the text books, the identity given to her, the occupations she engages in and the personality traits attributed to her.

The frequency of the presence of women is closely related to her role, so the results came as follows:

Mother	325	45%
Grandmother	104	15%
Little girl	190	27%
Working woman	39	5%
Others	57	8%

Mother is present in 45% of the texts reviewed, grandmother who has completed her duty as mother, occupies a less important role than the mother in the family but she is there. The little girl is present in 27% of the books while the working woman is present in 5% only. The category “others” includes aunts, cousins, neighbors, visitors, fairies, princesses...

The woman is denied a personal identity specified through a personal name, age or physical appearance. In 90% of the times she is identified by her role as mother “Um” (means mother)... (name of her first born son, not daughter). “Um Ramzie”. In the other 10% she is known by her husband's name.

There is no problem in giving “grand mother” and “little girl” an identity since both of them, due to their age, are not sex objects. Grandmother's age and the traditional physical characteristics of an old woman, white hair, a hunched back, a wrinkled face... identify her. The little girl is also given a personal name and her physical characteristics and age are also mentioned. The working woman is denied the title of mother and is identified by her low status as “working woman” with no identity.

Woman's predominant occupations, especially in her role as mother, are domestic chores. Her world revolves around her house, husband and children. She is not engaged in any intellectual endeavors nor does she venture outside the house except to



buy the family food supplies from the neighborhood. She has no interests outside her house.

The working woman, whose occupation is an extension of her domestic functions, is engaged in jobs like house maid, agricultural helper, baker, nurse, teacher and is a source of pity because she is working out of economic need. The grandmother, who shares the household with her son and his family, is not required to engage in any house work. Her main occupation is to protect the children from the cruelty of the father and to tell stories to the children. The little girl is her mother's helper especially in assuming responsibility for younger siblings, and in cleaning and tidying the house.

A number of gender stereotyped traits are attributed to the mother, grandmother and working women alike. They are generally meek, kind, tender, overprotective, faithful, affectionate, dependent, obedient, patient and dedicated to their families. However, the most dominant trait of the mother is martyrdom.

The little girl is continuously reminded that she is the “little lady of the house”. She is obedient, passive, quiet, dependent, clean, frivolous, weak-physically, emotionally and cries easily, well-mannered and generally naïve. She can never solve a problem on her own but always seeks help even from a younger brother.

The second study is one of Arabic readers used by primary school children in seven Arab countries namely Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, Qatar, and Lebanon that was conducted in 1983 by Drs. Julinda Abu Nasr, Ilham Kallab and Ms Irene Lorring. The sample consists of seventy-nine readers whose content was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

The findings with respect to representation, sex-role, identity and personality traits attributed to female characters that appear in these books yield the following results.

The representation of female figures in these books is also related to the sex role they play. The most frequent presence is that of “little girl” with “mother” coming next in all countries studied except Lebanon and Saudi Arabia where mother appears more frequently.

Little girl appears in:

Egypt	46%
Qatar	48%



Lebanon	27%
Kuwait	58%
Yemen	38%
Tunisia	29%
Saudi Arabia	21%

Mother appears in:

Lebanon	46%
Saudi Arabia	44%
Other countries	28%

Grandmother has no significant presence in countries other than Lebanon where she is mentioned 14% of the time. The highest percentage of women workers is found in: Yemen 22%, Egypt 16% and Tunisia 11%.

Women's lack of identity explains why women are not given a personal name, an age or any physical characteristics. Their self-effacement is apparent in the traditional way of being called by their son's name "UM"... "or by the husbands" name "wife of...". "Little girl" however, has a personal name but no age or any physical attributes.

Women's most frequent functions are traditional and they do not differ from those reported in Lebanese books. Domestic chores dominate the scene and jobs outside the household are an extension of those practiced at home. Little girl, in addition to her role as assistant mother, is recognized in 20% of the times as student and grandmother as educator in 10% of the times.

As for traits attributed to women in addition to the stereotyped ones previously mentioned, one can add piety and resourcefulness in the kitchen. The little girl is endowed with additional traits of cooperation, sensitivity and love for flowers.

The third study is a survey of gender issues in 100 children's story books written by authors from different Arab countries but printed in Lebanon between 1977-1993.

The study was conducted by Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr and Ms. Zeinat Batrouni in 1994.

The contents and language of these books are analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively to map out any changes in gender issues that are apparent in text books a



decade before. The topics of concern are also women's representation, sex-roles, occupations and personality traits attributed to female characters. The study yielded the following results:

Women representation in the role of mother occupies 55% of her presence, while little girl is featured 38% but the other 7% reflect diversified roles for women like wife, princess, working women, fairy, aunt... An increase in representation for both mother and little girl is apparent in the absence of grandmother who took a minor role.

The majority of the occupations assigned to the female characters seem to converge on the nurturing and dependent qualities. There is no drastic change in the functions of women from that reported in textbooks studied earlier. Women seldom extend their interests or work beyond the sphere of the home and if they do it is out of economic need only. Little girl is still playing the role of substitute mother but a little more exaggerated which makes you wonder how in the world little girls are capable of doing so much.

Stereotyped sex role traits appear in the majority of the stories. The same traditional traits that describe women and little girls in the textbooks are given to women and little girls in the stories reviewed. Mothers are “self-denying” and their femininity is synonymous with self-effacement. Little girls reflect the same image portrayed in the textbook with more emphasis on passivity and dependence. They are highly praised for playing little mothers and demonstrating “female behavior” that made “little women” out of them.

Female images are absent in 41% of the illustrations; in 17.1% of the times they are performing domestic functions and in 12.8% they appear passive.

Based on these studies one can say that women's roles, functions and personality traits in the text books and the story books studied across a 23 year span from 1970-1993, still reveal the traditional patriarchal culture of the Arab World and the outlook towards women and girls as seen by authors and illustrators of children's books. Restricting women's activities to domestic functions and attributing to them those personality traits they call “feminine traits” reflect the low status assigned to them. Other indices of their low status include exclusion from the paid work force in the labor market and from decision making positions.



The last survey is one prepared especially for this encounter in a very short period of time by Julinda Abu Nasr and Diana Khoury, an expert in children's literature. It gives some indicators that may be of value to our discussion. The sample consists of 70 Arabic story books written for children between the ages of 3-14 and printed in Lebanon in the last ten years, 2000-2010. The analysis includes the content of the story but does not include the language or illustrations for lack of time.

The analytical frame work is designed to include the frequency of girls' and boy's presence and the gender of the main character in the stories, the roles assigned to each and the traits attributed to them. We also take note of female and male adults' presence and roles in the stories but do not include them in the analytical frame work.

Looking at gender representation, the results indicate that 54 of the characters in the stories are girls and 53 are boys. However, only 35 of the girls are main characters while 42 of the boys enjoy that privilege. In five of the stories the girl and the boy are both main characters. The presence of female and male adults is minimal as opposed to previous research. It is interesting to note that 23 of the authors are females while only seven authors are males. One male author writes only about boys while the others alternate their characters between the two sexes.

As for roles we notice very little change in those assigned to adult females whose major role is motherhood and their main sphere of action is the home and its surroundings. The change is more evident in relation to the girl as compared with previous research. In addition to her traditional role in which she is featured 61% of the time, she is dealt with as a person who has rights and engages in activities she never ventured into before. She plays, gets into adventurous situations along with the boys, demands attention, plans projects with friends of both sexes, takes decisions and plays the role of leader even when boys are involved, questions her parents' demands, argues and demands her rights, asks for pets and gets into mischief. In other words she is assuming the role of a normal child.

The traditional role of the boy as rescuer, protector, leader, planner, head of the household, decision maker, has undergone some changes too in the recent children's literature. He assumes that traditional role in 58% of the events, but he is also assigned new roles in 23 of the stories. He is a follower, a younger brother who needs help and



protection, and even a house keeper who accepts the challenge of engaging in domestic chores. He is also portrayed more as a child than before.

The next item to consider is personality characteristics or traits attributed to boys and girls in the recent books reviewed. We chose to divide these into negative traits, and positive traits.

The negative traits comprised the following: dependent, cries easily, fearful, submissive, obedient, hesitant and reluctant to take decisions, passive, naïve, shy, withdrawn, frivolous and follower.

The positive traits featured the following: outgoing, ambitious, independent, assertive, defiant, adventurous, courageous, problem solver, initiator, nurturer, sensitive, friendly, tolerant, good observer, creative, imaginative, responsible, honest, self-confident, leader, cooperative and helpful.

In previous research girls were mostly endowed with negative traits while boys in general enjoyed the positive traits. In the present survey we notice some deviation from the norm. Here is a summary of the findings:

Boys are attributed with 49% of the negative traits and 63% of the positive, while girls show 51% of the negative and 37% of the positive.

It is worth noting the change in this domain compared to previous research. The girl in recent stories whose presence is more noticeable than before and who is behaving more like a child is also starting to be endowed with personality traits previously assigned to boys. She is showing some signs of independence, courage, self confidence, problem solving ability, creativity, awareness of her rights but she has not reached the level of competence the boy has reached yet. The traits given to boys are also undergoing some change along with their roles which are definitely more realistic than the previous traits and roles they were burdened with earlier.

Conclusion

The results from the above studies covering the span of almost 40 years do not reflect the real image of women in Lebanon nor in other Arab countries, but rather depict a stereotyped traditional biased gender image that had been attributed to them for a long time. Change is creeping into the children's literature in a slow fashion but at a different pace for each of the Arab countries. It is not possible to talk about a unified



image of the Arab woman because Arab countries are at different levels of development but there is no Arab country in which the real image of women is reflected in these books. Many Arab women at the present are educated, work as directors, artists, journalists, writers, professors, doctors, lawyers, judges, government officials and some hold high ranking positions, ambassadors, deputies, ministers, bankers and others and are playing important roles in their respective countries.

One can conclude that the majority of authors and illustrators in the Arab countries need to be sensitized to gender issues and urged to reflect the reality of the present situation in their stories setting more realistic models that little boys and girls can aspire to. This is a real challenge for IBBY chapters in this part of the world!!!!

