

Language Curricula and Gender Equality

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GENDER INEQUALITY IN LANGUAGE CURRICULA REMAINS A PRESSING AND PERNICIOUS ISSUE

If the pace of progress in women’s representation in national parliaments across the world were to remain constant, women and men would not achieve equal representation for another 40 years. This lack of representation can be found not only in governmental positions worldwide but also across the private sector: As of 2020, fewer than three in ten workers in managerial positions were women. These are only two among many other telling statistics in the annual United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals report that offer evidence of the continued entrenchment of gender inequality worldwide.

In 1979, government leaders across the globe committed to take action in their respective countries to address gender inequality when the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. One of the 30 articles in the treaty focused on the power of education in maintaining progress, with mandates ranging from ensuring access to equal programs of study to revising curricular materials designed to eliminate gender bias and gender-based stereotypes. Yet four decades later, a UN global monitoring report issued in 2020 identified “remov[ing] stereotypes and gender bias from teaching and learning materials” as one of the six key measures still necessary to achieve gender equity in education.

TEXTBOOKS AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR CHANGE IN THE US AND ABROAD

The United States is not an exception to the “remarkably similar pattern of gender bias in textbooks virtually worldwide” according to the UN global monitoring report. At the university level, for example, studies published between 2008 and 2021 analyzing leading textbooks in Psychology, Economics, Chemistry and Biology consistently revealed the exclusion of women in images, historical references and hypothetical examples. A 2022 study that analyzed six popular textbooks in Linguistics—the scientific study of language—showed a similar trend. In examples used throughout the texts, men were portrayed as protagonists twice as often as women and were more likely to be portrayed in prestigious roles, as doctors or professors, for example. Women, on the other hand, were largely absent from gendered portrayals of occupations other than as students or aspirants of a profession. Women were also more likely to be portrayed as displaying emotions, particularly unhappiness or anger.

Aspects of gender bias are found in the grammatical structures of all languages, and the continued practice of these conventions can contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality. For this reason, textbooks present a powerful tool for social change by challenging the norms that reinforce and reproduce inequality across generations.

Textbooks used to teach certain foreign languages, for example, can be heavily gendered—

particularly those with gender-marked pronouns, nouns and adjectives. In many such languages, male dominance is reflected by the fact that, when a reference is made to a mixed group of men and women, the collective group is referenced with masculine language conventions, even if there is but a single man.

The Language Curricula and Gender Equality group is conducting rigorous research to foster a better understanding of how language pedagogy reinforces and perpetuates cultural assumptions and stereotypes about gender.

EXPERTS BREAK DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES TO GENERATE SOLUTIONS

A group of language, education and gender experts at Northwestern University have banded together to tackle the problem of gender bias in language pedagogy through textbooks. In an interdisciplinary approach to the issue, professors of Education and Social Policy, Computer Science, Linguistics, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Middle Eastern and North African languages, German, Spanish and Portuguese have formed the [Language Curricula and Gender Equality Global Working Group](#).

The group is supported by [Northwestern University's Roberta Buffett Institute for Global Affairs](#), which brings together the brightest minds from Northwestern University and around the world to address critical global challenges that cannot be solved from a singular disciplinary or geographic perspective. [Northwestern Buffett Global Working Groups](#) undertake collaborative, interdisciplinary research that addresses pressing global issues related to one or more of the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#).

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tions and stereotypes about gender. The group will investigate how language curricula can be marshalled to confront gender discrimination by interrogating stereotypes and advancing gender equality in language learning and beyond. They also aim to build a collaborative network of researchers and practitioners focused on developing best practices for language pedagogy that enable dynamic teaching about the intersection of language learning and social justice.

DEVELOPMENTS TO FOLLOW

With its first year of research underway, the Language Curricula and Gender Equality group has gained insight into the ways language curricula can reinforce and exacerbate cultural assumptions about gender. In particular, the group is exploring the role of specific language and cultural material in language curricula, such as the topics and themes covered in teaching materials as well as the depiction of gender roles and audio-visual gender representations in those materials.

In the spring of 2023, the group [surveyed](#) current and former language instructors at Northwestern to understand how they perceive gender in their language teaching materials and classroom dynamics. They found that 45 percent of instructors believed their textbooks did not contain gender-inclusive language, and 48 percent believed their textbooks did not reflect the gender diversity of their students. While most instructors reported feeling comfortable leading discussions on gender representation and equity in the classroom, 60 percent indicated that they had not received prior pedagogical training that dealt with gender and gender equity in language instruction.

The group is applying this knowledge to the development of a set of best practices that can be formalized across textbooks for various languages and at different levels of instruction. Once developed, the Language Curricula and Gender Equality group's resources—both curricular materials and connections with different instructional communities of target languages—will support language instructors in their efforts to identify, disrupt and eliminate gendered assumptions and stereotypes.