How the Nepali education system furthers gender inequality

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The gross underrepresentation of women in Nepal's social science textbooks promotes a lopsided evaluation of Nepali history and society.

Nepali social science textbooks detail the many facets of Nepali society -- its history, the movements, wars, and various conquests. But what the books neglect is the contribution of women to Nepal's social, economic, political, and historical development.

From grades eight to 10, a student following the prescribed Nepali curriculum is likely to come across just two female political figures in their classes -- Sahana Pradhan and Queen Rajya Laxmi Shah. The social studies textbook recognizes Sahana Pradhan as an important leader while discussing the first People's Movement of 1990, but her role is presented alongside her male revolutionary counterparts Ram Raja Prasad Singh and Ganesh Man Singh, the latter of whom has a separate biography page dedicated to his story, but the same detailing is absent for Sahana Pradhan.

Similarly, Queen Rajya Laxmi Shah is described as an individual who acted in accordance with the advice presented to her by her courtier, Jung Bahadur. There is little insight into her personal motivations and the larger role she played in catalyzing the Rana oligarchy.

In both cases, the women are mentioned as figures who played important roles in history but only alongside their male counterparts. The stories of other influential female figures like Mangala Devi and Hira Devi Yami are not mentioned at all.

Nepali school textbooks thus display both explicit and implicit gender biases. Explicitly, the textbooks only include a handful of women leaders, literary figures, and even fictional characters. Implicit biases require a more careful evaluation of not just how many women are represented but also 'how' they are represented.

Implicit biases can be observed in terms of the power relations within which women are presented. An interesting example of this can be seen on page 192 of the Nepali social studies textbook for grade nine students which illustrates a story titled "*Lucky Nani ko Bamshawali*". The story talks about Lucky KC's family tree and general background where her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather's professions and education are extensively detailed. Lucky's grandfather was a civil servant while his siblings went into the "Gurkha Army". But the story makes no mention of what Lucky's mother, grandmother, or great-grandmother were like. The one time a female family member is mentioned is when the story talks about Lucky's aunt, and all that is said about the aunt is that she has been supportive of Lucky's family.

The story is followed by an illustration of Lucky's family tree, which includes only her male family members. This is a reflection of what is still considered the traditional line of heritage in Nepali society, namely a patriarchal line of succession. Relations are drawn according to one's paternal lineage while their maternal ones are not even acknowledged. The only mention of a woman on the family tree does not even enumerate her name but just her caste -- *chhetrini*.

Page 192 of the social studies textbook for grade nine students includes this family tree that portrays Lucky KC's patrilineal descent with no mention of any female members of the family. Image: Curriculum Development Center

Passive victims, not active actors

In most government-sanctioned school books, women and women's issues are often relegated to contexts of 'social change' and discrimination, but they are largely absent as either leaders or actors in historical, political, and economic contexts. Even within this space of 'social issues', women aren't portrayed as active agents of change but just as victims of social ills.

Even when discussing gender discrimination and other forms of discrimination, the commentary is simplistic and superficial. For example, the grades nine and 10 civics (*nagarik sastra*) books point out changes in the legal standing of women and make definitive comments about the end of gender discrimination and how this is the "age of equality" ("*samanta ko yug*") where the state does not discriminate based on gender, class, or social standing. Even a cursory glance at the numerous articles and opinion pieces about women's rights today would attest to the fact that Nepal is still a long way away from an "age of equality".

Images taken from page 4 of the civics textbook for grade nine students and page 18 of the civics textbook for grade 10 students attest to the dawning of an "age of equality" in Nepal. Image: Curriculum Development Center

Here, equality is seen as a race, as though once a finish line is crossed, the journey comes to an end. The finish line in this case happens to be Nepal's legal provisions that aim to achieve gender parity. Whether or not these legal provisions are bringing about substantial societal change is never critically evaluated, neither do these texts examine the shortcomings of said legal provisions. Hence, students are discouraged to look beyond the letter of the law and critically engage with the substance of legal provisions and their implementation as the texts do not ask that of the students.

The lack of representation of women goes beyond social science textbooks. Males make up a majority of the authors and the characters in literature taught in Nepali, English, Optional English, and Moral Education.

In Nepali textbooks from grades eight, nine, and 10, out of a total of 85 characters, 69 (81.17 percent) were male and 16 (18.83 percent) were female. Similarly, in the Moral Education textbook for students in the 8th grade, we counted a total of 45 (79 percent) male characters as opposed to 12 (21 percent) female characters, and in the grade nine Optional English textbook, there were a total of 48 (63.2 percent) male characters and 28 (36.8 percent) female characters.

However, these numbers are not the only indicators of a lack of representation. In one story featured in the grade nine Optional English textbook, the number of female and male characters are evenly distributed, but while the male characters are named according to their professions, such as tailor, shoemaker, or innkeeper, the female characters are referred to as the tailor's wife, shoemaker's wife, and innkeeper's wife. Even when stories include both male and female characters, there is a clear difference and hierarchy in their portrayal.

In our content analysis, we found that in a majority of fiction, female characters are denied lead positions and statuses. In fact, in Nepali textbooks from grades eight, nine, and 10, we found that not a single story featured a female protagonist. In the grade nine Optional English textbook, out of a total of 11 pieces of fiction, only three featured female characters as a protagonist or a co-lead, and out of four stories that employed first-person narration, only one was by a female character. In the grade eight Moral Education textbook, there are only four out of a total of 15 stories and exercise passages where female characters are the lead or a co-lead.

Even when present, female characters are relegated to supporting and subordinate positions. Such differences can be observed in dialogue boxes used as exercises in English textbooks, where conversations play out between a female student and a male teacher, female patient and male doctor, female presenter and a male expert. Men are depicted as sources of knowledge and wisdom while women are passive recipients.

Two female students are in a classroom with three of their male peers -- one of whom is giving a presentation -- and one male teacher. Image taken from page 105 of the Nepali Social Studies textbook for grade nine students. Image: Curriculum Development Center

A lack of diversity

Even when textbooks include some representation of women, they fail to acknowledge any sense of intersectionality. Amidst the already limited number of women and female characters mentioned, there is a glaring lack of diversity in caste, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Women are seen as a homogeneous group, which can be especially harmful as historically, the representation of women has often been captured by those coming from privileged castes and classes. This homogenization has thus meant that the challenges faced by women belonging to marginalized groups are erased.

This narrative is advanced by the fact that the language used in these books are still entirely binary and heteronormative. Men and women, for example, are described as two sides of the same coin in chapter five of the Civics textbook for grade nine students. Such examples further the notion that gender is a binary, i.e., male and female, rather than portraying gender as a diverse spectrum where individuals can situate themselves. The perpetuation of such narratives erase the identity of transgender or genderqueer groups.

This lack of diversity is perhaps not surprisingly, given the gender distribution of the writers and poets featured in a few of the textbooks. In Nepali textbooks from grades eight to 10, out of a total of 25 writers, only four (16 percent) were women. In the grade nine Optional English textbook, only five (15.2 percent) out of a total of 33 stories, dramas, and poems were by women, while in the grade 10 English textbook, out of 12 writers, only three (25 percent) were women. A majority of these writers were white men from the West, followed by Nepali/South Asian men, and among the already limited number of female writers, a majority were white women.

Perpetuating bias

What we read and learn in class, who we read and learn about, and even who we learn from, shape our perceptions of the world, of other individuals, groups, societies, and even ourselves. When textbooks themselves are prejudiced or lack representation, it can lead students to internalize bias without even realizing what they are internalizing.

An intriguing study in Kenya found that when students were asked to point to an illustrated character that they identified with the most, 95 percent pointed to a character of their own gender. Kenyan textbooks largely represented women as caregivers and housewives in the family and nurses and teachers in the occupational sphere. The researchers found that this representation had a direct correlation with the lower educational and professional ambitions of the female students. The study concludes that gender stereotyping in textbooks negatively affects the "self-image, aspirations and motivations of girls who grow up reading and internalizing these textbooks".

In a dialogue box in the grade nine English textbook, two girls are depicted talking about their weight while the boys converse about their grades. Image taken from page 59 of the grade nine English textbook. Image: Curriculum Development Center

In Nepal too, the lack of representation of women in historical, political, social, and economic contexts, as well as in fiction stories, both as characters and writers, have significant implications for students. To ascertain how such normative depictions impact how students think, we spoke to students from grades eight, nine and 10 about leadership and politics through the organization, Political Literacy for Women.

The students came from various backgrounds, with some studying in Kathmandu while others studied out of the valley in smaller towns. The students represented six schools and consisted of nine female and 11 male identifying individuals.

When we asked them to picture what a leader or a politician might be wearing, 13 out of the 17 students responded that they imagined the leader to be wearing “shirt-pant”, “daura-suruwal”, or “Dhaka topi”; the remaining four answered with “gunyo cholo”, “saari”, “*rashtriya poshak*”. The majority of students thus pictured leaders wearing traditionally masculine clothes, which is indicative of how they think about leadership and politics. Moreover, the answers consisted of clothing associated with a certain caste.

During the course of conversation, we asked the students if they learnt about any female figures in school, and seven of them replied that they did. However, when asked to name any one of these figures, four of the seven kids retracted their statement as they couldn’t recall having extensively learned about any.

We further asked them who their role models were and who they viewed as an ‘ideal leader’. Amongst the 21 individuals they mentioned, only three -- Dev Kumari Thapa, Anuradha Koirala, and Bidya Devi Bhandari -- were female. Research shows that “racially, ethnically, and gender-matched” role models are essential to adolescents’ development as such role models have significant impacts on the development of one’s identity and their position in society. For female youth and youth from historically oppressed groups, having “matched” role models provides an explicit example of what their group, and thus themselves, can achieve.

Towards the end of our conversation, we asked some girls whether the stories they read in class affected how they positioned themselves in the world and five out of seven agreed that they did. They stated that they saw themselves to have the same potential as that of the women they read about. A common sentiment amongst these girls was that stories about women provided inspiration and courage. The corollary here would be that a lack of female role models limits the imagination of female students in what they can achieve and how much they can excel.

Much of Nepal’s education curriculum explicitly denounces gender discrimination but it does not substantially interrogate the structures that enable such discrimination, such as representation. An inclusive education would go beyond halfheartedly mentioning the names of a few token women to actively identifying and acknowledging the influence and achievements of women from different caste, class, and gender identities. Young students today should learn about Sahana Pradhan and Queen Rajya Laxmi Devi, but also other influential women, like Shailaja Acharya, Uma Devi Badi, Mangala Devi Singh, and Hira Devi Tuladhar. These women deserve to be depicted not as supporting characters, but as actors in and of themselves.

The same goes for female characters in literature. Women and other marginalized communities must be given lead roles within these stories, rather than being portrayed merely as side characters. Students should be learning about Lucky’s grandmother just as much as they learn about Lucky’s grandfather. Students should be learning about female doctors, experts, and teachers while reading more literature by female writers like Dev Kumari Thapa and Toya Gurung.

Students deserve strong, independent role models who they can identify and look up to. This means all female students, including those from Janajati, Madhesi, underprivileged, Dalit, or queer backgrounds. Without considerable, meaningful representation within these textbooks, our education system will simply continue furthering the gender inequality that it states is a thing of the past.

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