

## ARTICLE

# Gender Representation in SMILE Series: A Critical Study of Gender Roles and Bias

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## ABSTRACT

Gender representation in textbooks is currently receiving increasing attention in the literature of foreign language teaching and learning. Despite this interest in gender representation in EFL materials, little attention has been paid to locally developed textbooks. This study investigates the portrayal of gender in the Sudanese SMILE course books, with focus on Books 8 and 9, which are designed for intermediate-level students. It also explores how these portrayals influence students' self-perceptions and their understanding of gender roles. A qualitative approach, using thematic analysis, was adopted to analyse the texts, examining the extent to which the book addresses gender issues. The findings revealed that several lessons adhere to traditional stereotypes, portraying females in roles deemed socially acceptable, such as in healthcare, teaching, or performing domestic tasks like cleaning, cooking, and baking. In addition, the books seem to emphasize same gender relationships, e.g., male-male and female-female interactions. Furthermore, the Sudanese cultural diversities are absent from the course book. The results of the study contribute to an understanding of how the textbooks challenge the traditional gender stereotypes and help in promoting cognitive developments of teenagers. Practical recommendations were offered to educators and syllabus designers to write future textbooks that promote gender equality and inclusivity.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Development; EFL Textbooks; Gender Representation; Stereotype

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Setting the Scene

In many educational contexts, textbooks are not just tools for language instruction; they also reflect and shape cultural norms and social values. Gender representation in these materials can significantly influence how students perceive social roles and identities. In addition to that the portrayal of gender in textbooks is essential to influence learners socially, morally and ethically as claimed by Vijayaratnam et al<sup>[1]</sup>. Moreover, Course books play a significant role in increasing students' awareness of gender roles and identities. The course books may have the potential of influencing students' perceptions of gender either positively or negatively. When these books provide diverse and balanced representations of genders, they may help them develop a more inclusive and equitable view of society. Striking a balance in gender representation in the course books can instill in students gender equality and challenge the traditional societal gender stereotypes and biases. Seeing themselves equally represented in textbooks can inspire both boys and girls to view themselves as equal contributors in all areas of life. Moreover, diverse gender representations in textbooks go in line with the diversity in the real world around them. This way, the course books can shape how students learn about the real world and the roles the other gender should play in society. "However, gender inequalities are still tangible in many educational contexts and this, in turn, affects students' future prospects"<sup>[2]</sup>. Therefore, the presence or absence of the other gender may affect students' beliefs. Historically, there was an imbalance in representing gender. There was a bias towards male representations. This disparity underscores the need to examine how gender is portrayed in educational materials in Sudan. Although this is an important issue, it seems that it is in its infancy in Sudan to the best of the researchers' knowledge. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap in the field of education in Sudan.

## 1.2. Statement of the Problem

Despite growing awareness of gender equality in education, many English language textbooks still present stereotypical or imbalanced portrayals of gender roles. In

the case of the SMILE course books, which are being used in Sudanese schools nowadays, questions arise about the extent to which they reinforce or challenge such gender norms.

Building on this, the study aims to critically examine gender representations in the *Sudan Modern Integrated Learning of English* (SMILE) textbooks for grades 2 and 3 (see **Appendix A** and **Appendix B; Figures A1, A2, and A3**), and to assess how these portrayals may influence students' understanding of gender roles. By emphasizing the need for textbooks that promote gender-egalitarian values and respect for diversity, this article seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender equity in educational materials and to support the development of future generations who are well-informed and open-minded about gender issues, particularly in the Sudanese context. To examine how the two genders are represented in this book the researchers posed the following research questions:

- In what ways do textbooks serve as cultural tools that mediate students' cognitive and social development in relation to gender?
- To what extent do SMILE Course books (8 and 9) reflect patriarchal ideologies and gender stereotypes?
- How do the course books include gender perspectives from different cultural backgrounds and ethnic groups?
- What impact do the gender representations in these course books have on students' perceptions of gender roles and societal norms?
- What differences exist in the representation of gender in terms of roles, professions, and characteristics across this course book?

Using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as a framework<sup>[3]</sup>, the study analyzes the textbook as a cultural tool that mediates cognitive and social development in relation to gender. Having identified the research questions that will guide this article, in what follows, the researchers display the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, which will be used as a road map for this study. Theoretical framework helps interpret the phenomena under investigation and the conceptual framework to explain the key concepts, theories and relationships relevant to this study. Given the formative role of textbooks in shaping learners' perspectives, analyzing the SMILE course books provides valuable insight into

whether such materials promote inclusive, equitable views or reinforce outdated stereotypes. Furthermore, applying sociocultural theory allows a deeper understanding of how social messages in texts affect learners' development. The following section explores the relevant theories that inform this study and help address the research questions.

### 1.3. Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Framework

Learning is a socially mediated process shaped by interactions with others and by the cultural tools available in the learning environment. Among the most influential of these tools are educational materials—particularly textbooks—which do not merely transmit information but also convey underlying cultural values, including views about identity, relationships, and social roles. Through repeated exposure to specific images, narratives, and language, learners internalize ways of thinking, reasoning, and interpreting the world around them.

Textbooks, in this perspective, function as more than instructional guides; they serve as mediators of cognitive, emotional, and social development. They can influence how students form understandings of concepts such as gender, identity, and power. When a textbook consistently portrays males in active, professional roles and females in caregiving or domestic ones, students may begin to adopt these patterns as normative. Conversely, when learning materials offer diverse and balanced representations, they open space for learners to consider more inclusive perspectives. The impact of these materials is especially sig-

nificant in contexts where teachers' support and classroom interaction help shape students' interpretations. With appropriate guidance, students can move beyond passive reception of content to actively question or reinterpret what they encounter. In this dynamic, the role of the teacher is crucial, not only in delivering content, but in mediating students' engagement with the social messages embedded in the text. As such, the way gender is portrayed, and the way these portrayals are discussed and challenged in the classroom, can either reinforce traditional norms or foster critical, more equitable understandings.

It is therefore evident that textbooks not only transmit academic knowledge but also play a significant role in shaping learners' gender identities and understandings of societal roles. Gendered imagery and content can implicitly and explicitly influence students' behaviours, attitudes, and self-perceptions.

### 1.4. Social Constructivist Theory

The conceptual framework of this study views textbooks as cultural tools that mediate students' perceptions of gender roles (**Figure 1**). These tools impact learners both explicitly, through images and assigned roles, and implicitly, through embedded messages and stereotypes. The framework proposes that students internalize these representations, which then shape their cognitive and social understanding of gender. This internalization process may influence their behaviors, attitudes toward the opposite sex, and perceptions of social norms.

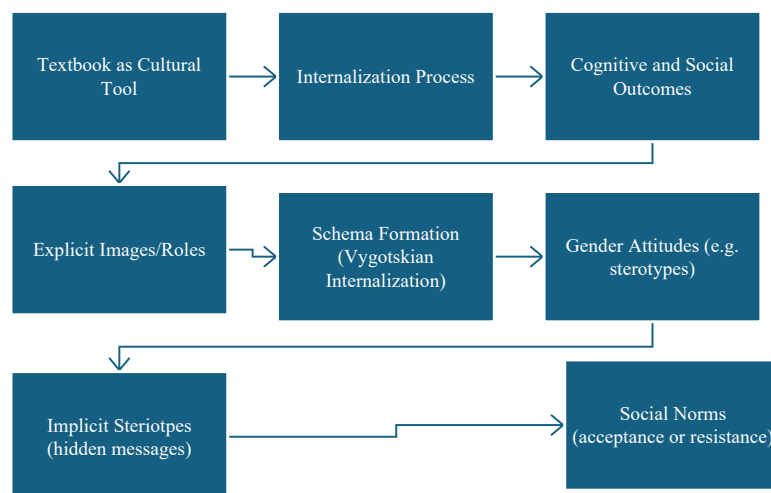


Figure 1. The Conceptual Framework.

## 2. Literature Review

Based on this theoretical foundation, the researchers review relevant studies that explore the role of course books in shaping students' cognitive and social development related to gender.

### 2.1. Sociocultural Context of Gender in Sudan

Sudan is a large Muslim-majority country in Africa sharing borders with several African nations. At the same time, it shares Muslim dominant cultural beliefs with Arab countries. This dual identity enriches Sudan with both African and Arab cultural influences, which has a complex impact on the status of women, both positively and negatively. It is evident that Sudan belongs to Global South reflecting its socio-economic challenges. As Bedri noted, formal girls education started in Sudan (1903) despite significant opposition and strong resistance from local people at that time <sup>[4,5]</sup>. However, the status of women has historically remained subordinate to men, requiring continuous efforts to overcome these social barriers. According to Daoud, feminist activities in Sudan were spurred by the Sudanese Women Union (SWU) which promoted liberation and emancipation in the country <sup>[5,6]</sup>. Notably, the SWU achieved milestone successes such as securing equal pay for the same job regardless of gender. Daoud further emphasized that the Sudanese feminist movement views gender equality not as an isolated issue but as deeply rooted in the broader societal structure <sup>[6]</sup>. This perspective underscores the importance of collective efforts and structural change in advancing gender equity in Sudan. It makes it necessary to examine textbooks to highlight how they represent gender, which may affect how the new generation perceives itself. According to Osman <sup>[7]</sup>, teachers can encourage students to interact socially regardless of their gender. This involves using textbooks that treat all students equally. However, the problem is that the textbooks portray females in more stereotypically traditional occupations (mothers, housewives, housekeepers). The role of the teachers is to show students that this is not the norm. Therefore, the researchers do agree with Achag and Amrani who claimed that it has been a challenge to select teaching and learning materials because students are the first to cope with their content <sup>[8]</sup>.

In general, as claimed by Deng <sup>[9]</sup>, "Sudan is a country in painful search of itself, afflicted by a wave of regional conflicts that are rooted in an acute crisis of national identity." As a result of the conflicts, the status of women in some regions, especially the western and southern parts of Sudan, was miserable. They were abducted, as claimed by Deng, into modern-day slavery <sup>[9]</sup>. It seems that the problem of ethnicity is obvious in Sudan as the population is divided between those who claim they are Arabs and those who claim that they are African indigenous blacks.

### 2.2. The History of EFL in Sudan

Sudan has witnessed an unstable situation since independence in 1956 because of the Civil War and the conflict between the government and the insurgents of the Southern Sudan. At this moment, there is a conflict between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the insurgents of the Support Rapid Forces (SRF). Therefore, discussing the roles of gender in the course books may seem to some Sudanese as a luxurious issue. However, the researchers believe that women are the victims of such wars, as they suffer from the complex intersection of war, such as ethnic and regional divides.

EFL textbooks in Sudan have undergone various stages of development that are continuing to improve over time. Until the 1990s, Longman series of books were used all over the country. The last batch of textbooks published by Longman was the *New Integrated Longman English Course (NILE Course)*. Afterwards, the Ministry of Education started producing the textbooks authored by Sudanese educators and teachers to address local needs and reflect Sudanese culture. The first series, *Sudan Practical Integrated National English (SPINE)*, was introduced in 1993, and this was later replaced by *Sudan Modern Integrated Learning of English (SMILE)*.

### 2.3. Gender, Language and Culture

Culture plays a significant role in forming the concept of gender. Women who live in patriarchal dominated societies have negative attitudes towards female education. According to Sultana <sup>[10]</sup>, women's perceptions of gender is influenced by the patriarchal ideology. This ideology prioritizes males over females in all areas of life, schools,

household, labour market and community. The role of syllabus designers is to bear this drawback in mind when they write textbooks especially in patriarchal societies. Therefore, the topic of gender representation is a significant area of focus at present because it plays a central role in shaping students' perspective on gender. As a matter of fact, the role of gender representation is affected by the feminist movement as claimed by Khalid and Ghania<sup>[11]</sup>. Examining how course books portray gender is crucial because it reflects the influence of social interactions and cultural contexts on learning and development. The researchers state that most textbooks lower females' status in most of the countries of the "broader" Middle East. According to Aljuaythin<sup>[12]</sup>, a study of Saudi elementary textbooks revealed that the male students were the focus of more than two-thirds of gender representations. This may reflect how Saudi cultural beliefs perceive gender. Aljuaythin's findings align with Suter's argument that "gender stereotypes are deep-rooted understandings of the characteristics of males and females<sup>[12,13]</sup>, which support the continuity of specific gender roles." The status of females is not different in Iran as claimed by Rahimi and Sahragard<sup>[14,15]</sup>. They believed that textbooks are manipulated in favour of males. Moreover, Bahman & Rahimi claimed that the Iranian textbooks they investigated manifest sexist language and that females were almost invisible and that the textbooks are biased towards males<sup>[15]</sup>. According to Ullah & Skelton<sup>[16]</sup>, there is an imbalance in the appearance of males and females in Pakistani course books in favour of males. They claimed that the textbooks are still influenced by traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. It is also noticed that in most of these textbooks male gender roles are often linked with characteristics such as strength, power, and authority, while female gender roles are commonly associated with weakness. In addition, they depicted the stereotypical roles, i.e., women depicted as homemakers, mothers, and working in medicine or teaching; while men work in positions of authority, such as working in offices or other occupations in public domains. On the other hand, in Hong Kong, as argued by Lee<sup>[17]</sup>, the gender representation in the textbooks is improving. However, according to the author, the gender stereotype is still in course books. Nowadays it is crucial to examine EFL textbooks because as asserted by Kookiattikoon et al., these textbooks are considered to

be primary instructional resources for language learning<sup>[18]</sup>. This idea goes in line with what Sulaimani<sup>[19]</sup>, as cited by AlJuaythin, asserted: that textbooks have the potential to shape learners' ideologies on various issues<sup>[12]</sup>. However, teachers' attitudes can affect these course books. For example, if they have sexist attitudes, the most non-sexist course books can be sexist, as claimed by Sunderland<sup>[20,21]</sup>.

## 2.4. Gender Stereotyping in Course Books

The authors claim that the most noticeable form of gender stereotyping in textbooks is the use of sexist language and gender bias in the depiction of roles and positions. Another factor, as highlighted by Benattabou<sup>[22]</sup>, is the role of visual depictions, which are an indispensable component of textbook content and play a significant part in shaping gender perceptions. Nasrin and Alqahtani underscore the importance of examining gender representation in EFL textbooks<sup>[23,24]</sup>. The following section outlines the research design, data collection methods, and analysis procedures used to address the aims of the study.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Research Design

This paper uses qualitative approach, using thematic analysis to collect and analyse data. The nature of the study entails using this approach as the goal is to gain in-depth understanding in how gender is addressed in the course book. The researchers intended to analyse the discourse qualitatively to interpret the status given to each gender. Thematic analysis is used because it is effective in exploring complex concepts such as gender represented in course books. It accommodated deductive and inductive approaches which may answer the research questions appropriately.

This study examines SMILE Books 8 and 9, which are designed for Levels 2 and 3 of the intermediate stage. English language is taught in Sudan from Grade 1 as a compulsory subject. The researchers chose this level because the age of the students range between 14–16 years old and they think this is the age which the teenagers feel the other gender and may be affected by what they read in the course books because they are at the stage of forming their



identities and practice their agency.

### 3.2. Data Collection Procedure

The key situations analyzed include illustrations, words, and contents that reflect gender roles and status. We have selected two books to analyse them thoroughly by delving deeply into their cultural, ideological, and educational dimensions. The introduction of book 8, for example, says, “The introduction of English language learning in the Intermediate level grades aims to prepare Sudanese pupils to participate productively in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”<sup>[25]</sup>. An important principle to participate productively in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is equality between the genders; therefore, the study intends to explore that.

### 3.3. Analytical Procedures

The study adopts Braun and Clarke’s six-step framework for thematic analysis<sup>[26]</sup>:

- Phase 1: To be familiar with your data
- Phase 2: To generate initial codes
- Phase 3: To search for themes
- Phase 4: To review themes
- Phase 5: To define and name themes
- Phase 6: To produce the report

### 3.4. Themes to Explore

To answer the research questions, these are the themes the researchers sought:

- Textbooks as a mediator of students’ cognitive and social development
- Patriarchal ideology and gender stereotype
- Different cultural background
- Students’ perceptions of gender roles and societal norms
- Gender roles, professions, and characteristics across SMILE

## 4. Ethical Considerations

As the focus of the study is on course books available to the public, no personal or sensitive data is involved.

The previous sections explained the thematic analysis which applied in the selected course books, key themes

were identified that reflect patterns of gender representation. The section that follows presents the findings in detail. The Findings and Discussion Section connects these patterns to existing literature and to the theoretical frameworks used in this study.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

At the beginning, before commencing the analysis, the researchers familiarized themselves with the course books under investigation. After that, they generated the following initial codes and then grouped them into themes (**Table 1**).

**Table 1.** The Codes and Themes of SMILE.

Codes	Themes
Hard work for males, e.g., harvesting and ploughing; mild work for women; male-male and female-female interactions	Traditional Gender Roles
Certain jobs, e.g., engineer, doctor, pilot for males and others, e.g., teacher, nurse, secretary	Occupational Gender Stereotypes
Males are invisible in domestic services, and females are invisible in work that needs muscles.	Gender-Based Role Invisibility
Males are looked upon as strong and wise	Masculine Empowerment
Females are knowledge agents	A female as knowledge provider

### 5.1. Textbooks as a Mediator of Students’ Cognitive and Social Development

As a matter of fact, textbooks play a critical role in shaping learners’ perceptions of the world around them. It is recognized that the representation of gender within these texts significantly affects students’ cognitive development, attitudes, beliefs, and social identities.

Based on the **social constructivist theory**, which argues that learning is mediated by cultural tools and social interactions, this research explores how these representations contribute to learners’ understanding of gender roles. By examining the contents of these textbooks, the study seeks to highlight the implicit and explicit messages conveyed through these course books and their potential egalitarian perspectives in education. The analysis started with the first research question: In what ways do textbooks serve as cultural tools that mediate students’ cognitive and social development in relation to gender?

At an initial review, the researchers found that the

book attempts to distribute gender appearances and their roles evenly. However, it seems to assign different works to both genders. For example, book 8 (see **Appendix B Figures A1 and A2**) cover illustrates two boys; a disabled male being helped by another male which may send a wrong message that students tend to help their gender only. However, this approach may be normal in some conservative societies. Also, in a lesson entitled “*Clean the Environment*” five pictures depict boys planting trees and cleaning the environment, while girls are absent from this task. This exclusion may imply the stereotype that physically demanding tasks are only for boys. This way, the course book may reinforce the traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

The second lesson offers a good example of how a textbook can be used as a cultural tool that mediates cognitive and social development. At the same time, it reflects gender roles and stereotypes positively. The unit entitled “*Protect the environment*” plays a pivotal role as a cultural mediator by introducing students to an important global issue such as the environmental values. Moreover, the lesson helps in promoting cognitive development by encouraging critical thinking and problem-solving. Additionally, it exposes students to multinational representation from different countries like Kenya and Jordan. This exposure enforces multicultural diversity. The lesson introduces the lifestyles of their countries and the way they save their environment. Another highlight is a boy asking how to protect the environment and the answer comes from a girl telling him to recycle rubbish (See **Appendix B Figure A4**). This interaction sends a cultural message, which may challenge or disrupt the traditional gender stereotype in their mind. The boy is asking a girl in a passive way to gain knowledge in a global matter from a girl who provides him with the necessary knowledge about how to save the environment. By having a boy seeking knowledge from a girl and not from another boy, the lesson challenges the patriarchal norms where men think they are the problem-solvers. The balanced representation of males and females in this lesson supports egalitarian principles. The researchers believe that such lessons may contribute to dismantling traditional stereotypes and fostering more inclusive perspectives in the minds of the new generation.

In terms of serving as a mediator of cognitive and so-

cial development, the second lesson’s outcome is of two-fold. On the one hand, the lesson introduces students to scientific concepts like life cycle. This approach contributes to the understanding and promoting of their cognitive development and helps them to be aware of saving endangered animals. This is very important in a country like Sudan, which has a variety of animals, and some of them are on the verge of extinction. On the other hand, there is a drawback in this lesson, “*Life Cycles*”. Although the topic of the lesson is important and opens students’ minds about the life cycle, there is a setback in the matter of gender. The lack of female-male interactions in the animal life cycle, as the course book depicts, may send a negative message about collaborative work and partnership in saving animals’ lives together. By reiterating female-female and male-male interactions in animal life, the text may send a wrong hidden message of cooperation between genders in problem-solving in matters concerning their environment. This approach could normalize gender segregation in work and may foster the traditional stereotypes of gender-segregated roles.

Unit 3 of Book 8 plays a significant role in promoting students’ cognitive and social development. This approach aligns with Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory<sup>[3]</sup>, when the unit defines words like bus driver, tourist guide and a doctor in gender-neutral language. This encourages students to engage with the social roles and professionals, which were stereotyped. The sociocultural theory asserted that learning occurs through social interaction and language and therefore, by using phrases like “a person who” the course book promotes cognitive development and social roles. By doing so, the course book broadens students’ understanding and goes in line with this view that language is a tool for socialization and cognitive promotion. This emphasizes the role of the teachers to reinforce this concept. On the other hand, Unit 4 of Book 9 depicts a drawback. It illustrates a job segregation in which females are assigned easy jobs such as hairdressing or cooking while males are assigned hard jobs, for example, mechanics and carpentry.

There is another setback in Unit 4 of Book 8, which reiterates gendered interactions, with male-male and female-female groupings. At the beginning of the unit, there are female students meeting a new female student and

similarly there are two male students meet and introduce themselves. In Sudanese intermediate schools, these groupings are not uncommon where schools at this level are not mixed. In the same line, there is an exchange of emails between a Sudanese male student and a male student from New Zealand recurring male-male interactions. However, in Vygotsky's view <sup>[3]</sup>, these types of interactions may limit the chances for students to understand the other gender. Therefore, the course book by reinforcing the traditional gender stereotypes could affect the way students view the other gender and view themselves in social and learning communities.

This sentence by a male student in Unit Four depicts a stereotype, "During the last *Eid El Fitr*, my aunt and my mother cleaned the house. They baked biscuits and cakes. They were delicious". Mentioning women's roles in the household like cleaning the house and baking cakes in course books in our opinions reflects traditional stereotyped roles. Students may understand that women are born to do these jobs and male students may feel ashamed to practice these tasks at home now and in the future. The student telling his classmate that anecdote reflects what he believes to be the norm culturally. In this way, the course book contributes to instilling this belief in students' minds. Based on Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis <sup>[26]</sup>, the researchers argue that this stereotype is reiterated in the course book in one way or another, implicitly taking the division of labour between males and females for granted. The course book risks bringing up students who hold negative attitudes towards women's roles in society. According to Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, this stereotype is perpetuated in the course book <sup>[26]</sup>, either explicitly or implicitly, as if the divisions of labour between males and females are the norm. Consequently, the course book risks fostering negative attitudes among students towards women's roles in society.

In Unit 6 of Book 8, there is a lesson about space. Both males and females involved in discussing about the planets in very interesting and enthusiastic ways although separately because of the education system that does not allow mixed-gender classes. A bright point about this lesson is that, it discusses about a female astronaut who may encourage the female students to know that studying about the space is not exclusive to men. This lesson, in our mind,

goes in line with the sociocultural view that a textbook can be used as scaffolding and can help in promoting cognitive development. It challenges the traditional stereotypes that STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) are only for males. It is expected that teachers can play a significant role in reinforcing those subjects, as space is open for everyone regardless of their gender. The researchers claim that this approach of the course book can be used as scaffolding, promoting cognitive development in students. Another example in favour of females is in the next lesson. It is about "*Women and Sports*". The lesson tells about the first woman to climb Mount Everest *Cathy O'Dowd*. The lesson also tells about different female sportspeople who participated in the Olympics. *Sara Jad Allah Jubara*, a Sudanese swimmer was also mentioned as a good example of female Sudanese athletes. Such lessons may broaden students' minds; expose them to different cultures, and challenge the traditional stereotypes about women and that sports are only for men. There is another good sign in Book 9, Unit 2, Lesson 3 entitled *Famous Sudanese Writers* which focuses on a Sudanese female writer (Leila Aoulela). This could inspire female and male students to opt to be like her.

## 5.2. Patriarchal Ideology and Gender Stereotype

According to Sultana <sup>[10]</sup>, the majority of women, she interviewed preferred educating their sons rather than their daughters. This may be true among Sudanese women. However, the course book does not stress this matter explicitly. It does not criticize this ideology either to dismantle it in students' minds or to show how women's education can benefit themselves, their families and their countries. The researchers are aware that this is a sensitive issue in a country like Sudan, but it could be tackled explicitly or implicitly. Another way is to promote critical thinking and social awareness, and introduce topics such as gender inequality and the way the community views educating females, giving students chances to reflect critically on such hot and sensitive topics.

## 5.3. Different Cultural Backgrounds

Sudan, as mentioned above, is composed of various



ethnic groups leading to ongoing conflicts over race, culture and religion among ethnic groups. In such a context, it is crucial for course books to reinforce the idea of unity in diversity, promoting students' cognitive development and to use the course book as scaffolding to replace the notion of Arabism and Africanism with a unified Sudanese identity, or Sudanism which aligns with the visions of some Sudanese politicians such as the late Dr. John Garang de Mabior, a prominent Sudanese and Sothorn Sudan's political and revolutionary leader. The researchers viewed SMILE Book 8 and 9 textbooks carefully to find such topics that resonate with the ideas that reinforce the vision of a New Sudan in which diversity is seen as a strength rather than a weakness, as it is these days. The researchers are of the opinion that the educational materials should be used as tools for societal transformation to adopt the best practices in societal equal representations and as cultural mediators in their diverse communities. They believe that in a country like Sudan with various ethnic groups, course books should not be used as mere educational materials imparting academic topics only.

#### 5.4. Students' Perceptions of Gender Roles and Societal Norms

Course books as a cultural mediator should play an important role in transforming students' perceptions of gender roles and social norms, especially when they are brought up in a patriarchal society. The first page of Book 8 portrays a woman as a teacher, a job that is stereotyped with females. On the second page, a group of boys are cleaning the environment and girls are absent from this activity. This may give a negative attitude and students may think that all hard work is the responsibility of the males. The course book, instead of removing this idea from their mind is fixing it. In other words, the course book is inadvertently reinforcing the traditional gender roles. On page 12, there is another "appropriate" job for females, a doctor. A student is sick and visited a female doctor. Actually, many people, in patriarchal societies, think that one of the appropriate jobs for females is being a nurse or a doctor. The book does not show a Sudanese woman engaged in physically hard work. No Sudanese woman depicted as an engineer, pilot or a great scientist. Only *Sara Jad Allah Jubara* is a swimmer. The researchers claim that the course

books rarely play as a scaffolding that aims to change the traditional stereotypes of gender roles in a serious way.

#### 5.5. Gender Roles, Professions, and Characteristics Across SMILE

The researchers argue that in countries like Sudan where gender inequality persists, course books should focus on transforming traditional gender roles and stereotypes and serve as tools for change. They should challenge, for example, stereotypes and foster inclusivity, presenting instead a more realistic and unbiased view of society. Upon scrutinizing the SMILE textbooks, the researchers found that it does not provide students with critical tools to transform traditional gender roles across the textbooks. They do not show equality, for example, both males and females participating in domestic tasks like cleaning, and caregiving. Additionally, it does not depict them as capable of feeling empathy, kindness and leadership. The course books lack critical thinking opportunities needed to assist students to criticize traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

### 6. Conclusion

This study examines the representation of gender in Books 8 and 9, EFL textbooks for intermediate-level students in Sudan. The analysis provides insights into how gender roles are represented in these course books and reveals significant shortcomings in the role it should play as a cultural mediator, particularly in challenging traditional cultural roles and stereotypes. In addition to that, the course books seem to fail in addressing the cultural diversity of Sudan. In some regions, e.g., Darfur, there is no clear division of labour between genders, yet the textbooks seem to reflect Arabic-Muslim dominated culture. They also likely fail to avoid gender bias and do not create an egalitarian representation of gender roles. Superficially, the textbooks employ gender-neutral language and include images depicting both males and females fairly. However, a deeper analysis of the contents in the books shows that they do not challenge traditional gender stereotypes. Furthermore, they do not provide students with opportunities to grasp the true concept of gender equality or to critically evaluate traditional gender roles and the underlying ideol-

ogies presented in the course books. In spite of shedding light on characters like *Leila Aboulela* and *Sara Jad Allah Jubara*.

### 6.1. Limitation of the Study

A limitation of this study is that the focus is only on two course books from the SMILE series. While this focus allowed the researchers to do in-depth analysis, it could not be generalized across the entire series. Therefore, future research is recommended to include a broader range of textbooks from the series to assess whether similar trends persist across different levels.

### 6.2. Recommendations

The researchers recommend the following:

- (1) The textbook should reflect the cultural diversities of Sudan.
- (2) The textbook should include active topics to challenge the traditional gender roles and stereotypes.
- (3) Incorporate critical thinking activities to give students opportunities to think critically about traditional gender roles.
- (4) Balanced gender representation is very important in terms of their appearance and the roles they play.
- (5) Include real local and international models representing both genders.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, O. H. O. and M.A.; methodology, O.H.O and M.A.; software, O.H.O.; validation, A.H.A. and M.A.; formal analysis, O.H.O and M.A.; investigation, O.H.O and A.H.A.; resources, M.A.; data curation, M.A and A.H.A.; writing—original draft preparation, O.H.O.; writing—review and editing, M.A and A.H.A.; visualization, M.A.; supervision, M.A and A.H.A.; project administration, O.H.O.; funding acquisition, A.H.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.” Authorship must be limited to those who have contributed substantially to the work reported.

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Not applicable

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No new data were created.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A

### Sudan Modern Integrated Learning of English (SMILE)

In 2014, the British Council was granted a World Bank award to develop the National English Language curriculum for Sudan.

The journey began in 2014 to create a series of English language textbooks called Sudan Modern Integrated Learning of English (SMILE). The primary aim of the project was to enhance the level of English language proficiency in primary schools. The project aimed to produce seven English language textbooks to be taught from grade 3 in primary education, with a target reach of approximately 10 million children.

In 2018, as the SMILE project came to an end, another period filled with challenges and risks began. Nurturing the SMILE series proved to be a greater challenge than the design of the books. The successful implementation of SMILE was integral to the process of supporting the ongoing efforts to improve the education system in Sudan.

In 2021, the Ministry of Education requested an extension of the books, covering the 12 years of the general education ladder: six years of Primary, three years of Intermediate, and three years of Secondary levels. Currently, this year marks the conclusion of the SMILE Curriculum series.

The SMILE project has endured a challenging period in Sudan's history, enduring a revolution in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a military coup in 2022, and the ongoing war. The journey is far from over, as efforts continue to support the substantial need for English education in Sudan, not only at the school level. An ongoing project with the Ministry of Higher Education is underway to develop a series of textbooks required for first-year university students. This project runs in parallel with the SMILE curriculum, ensuring that students enter universi-

ty with the same level of proficiency they graduate from schools.

Furthermore, as part of the country's strategy to support the development of teachers in Sudan, support has been provided for the establishment of an English language teachers association in Khartoum and two chapters in the states, along with English Language teaching forums for teachers with themes centred around teaching SMILE.

The SMILE series aims to reach 15 million students and 30,000 teachers across all levels. The impact of these books will be transformative, significantly improving English language proficiency for children and teachers in Sudan (see more at British Council Sudan – SMILE Programme).

## Appendix B

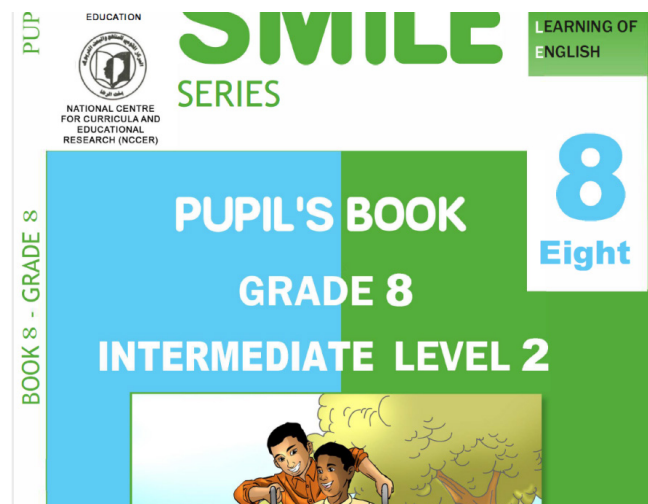


Figure A1. SMILE textbooks 8 (Grade 2) for intermediate level.

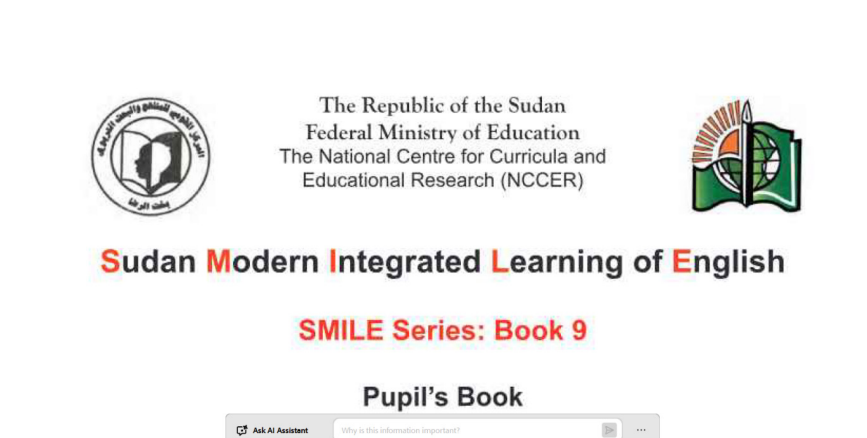


Figure A2. SMILE textbook 9 (Grade 3) for intermediate level.

1. Look at the pictures. What can you see?



2. Read the adverts. What are they about?

**Train to be a mechanic**

Are you good at working with your hands?  
Do you like cars and motorbikes?  
Would you like to learn and earn money at the same time?

We are working with a local college to train apprentice mechanics.  
You will spend three days at college and two days working in a garage.  
When you are working you will get a wage.

**Train to be a chef**

Do you enjoy eating different kinds of food?  
Are you good at cooking?  
Would you like to learn how to be a chef?

We are working with a college to train apprentice chefs.  
You will spend mornings at college and in the afternoons you will work in a restaurant.  
We will pay you a small wage when you are working.



Figure A3. Gender stereotypical jobs in SMILE textbooks.





Figure A4. Female as knowledge provider.

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