

# SEXISM IN TEXTBOOKS: A CASE STUDY OF G.C.E. O/L TEXTBOOKS

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## INTRODUCTION

When perceiving language in the light of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which states that language determines thought, use of language as a means of establishing and sustaining relationships within a speech community becomes a significant phenomenon. If Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is accepted to be valid, then learning a second language not only improves the ability of an individual to communicate with another but also introduces the learner to a whole new dimension of perceiving the world. However, if a language is with prejudice, i.e. if the use of language is prejudiced, then according to Sapir-Whorf, the users of the said language also become prejudiced as language determines thought. Thus, if the learner of a language is exposed to its use in a prejudiced manner, it can be declared that the perception of the world by the learner would also adjust to align with the prejudices learnt through language.

Among numerous possible language based prejudices such as race and religion, sex is an important aspect in that it is universally applicable to all nations across the world. When investigating language related sexism, this paper seeks to analyze ESL textbooks in Sri Lanka, which plays a central role in language learning in the classroom. Textbooks have a central role to play in education in that it is one of the cheapest and most effective ways of transforming knowledge and values. (Esen Y., 2007) Therein lies the significance of portraying equality or lack thereof pertaining to gender roles in textbooks. In the context of Sri Lanka, school is more often than not the only place where the average child is exposed to English. Therefore, the child's associations with the language are heavily dependent upon the teacher, teaching atmosphere, and most importantly, teaching the material. Being a compulsory subject from grade 3 to grade 13, English is imparted to the majority of the children through the government provided textbooks. It is necessary that Sri Lanka is examined for its use of language due to the dire implications a sexist language would pose to a young learner. Therefore, this research seeks to investigate if the text provided for ESL textbooks for the GCE O/L is sexist.

## METHODOLOGY

English language textbooks of grades 9, 10 and 11 were analyzed as per the criteria introduced by Hartman and Judd in the first sexism in textbooks study of 1978. These criteria include, gender visibility and firstness (whether male or female is mentioned first in instances where both sexes are mentioned); occupational and family roles present in the text as well as occupations assigned to each gender; character attributions such as hobbies; and linguistic occurrences such as masculine generic constructions and marked language for females.

### Quantitative Analysis

The texts were analyzed for gender visibility and firstness in expression. First, the frequency of occurrence of female and male characters in illustrations was tabulated, as well as the number of times each sex was mentioned in the text. Gender visibility was also calculated in terms of the presence of male and female figures from history, mentioned in the text. Second, the firstness, i.e. the number of times females and males were mentioned first in the text, in instances where both the sexes are mentioned, was calculated. Visibility of each gender is important in that presence of each gender and their importance is acknowledged, while which gender is mentioned first provides an indication as to superiority awarded for a particular gender, if that is always mentioned first. Historical figures were also tabulated to observe if

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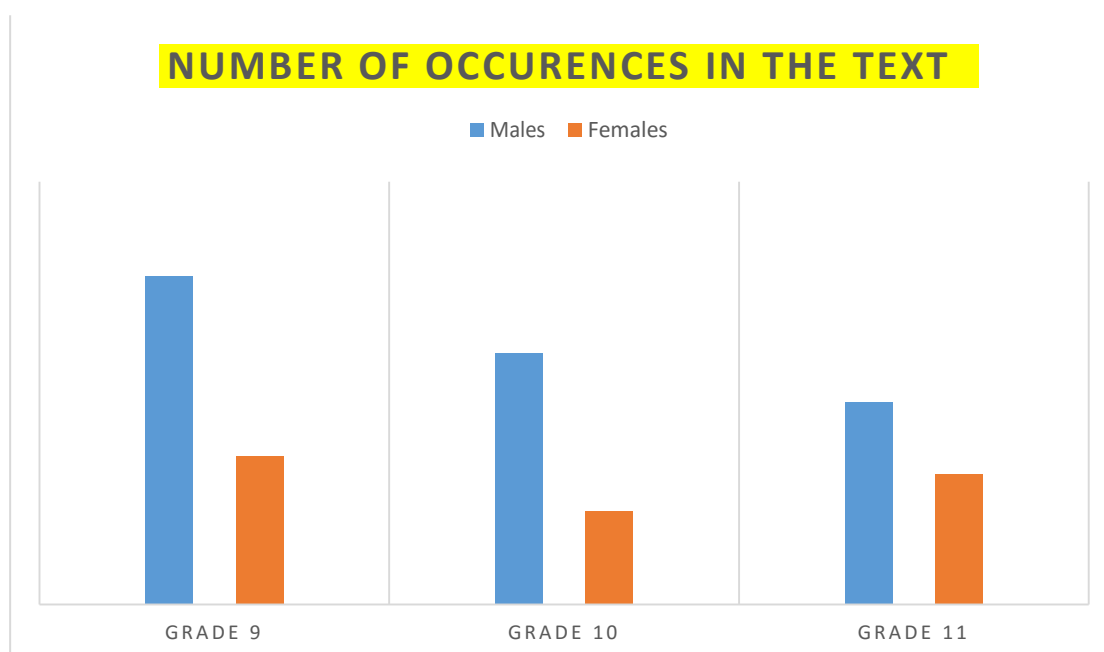
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both the sexes have been mentioned equally in this aspect, as historical figures are the role models for learners.

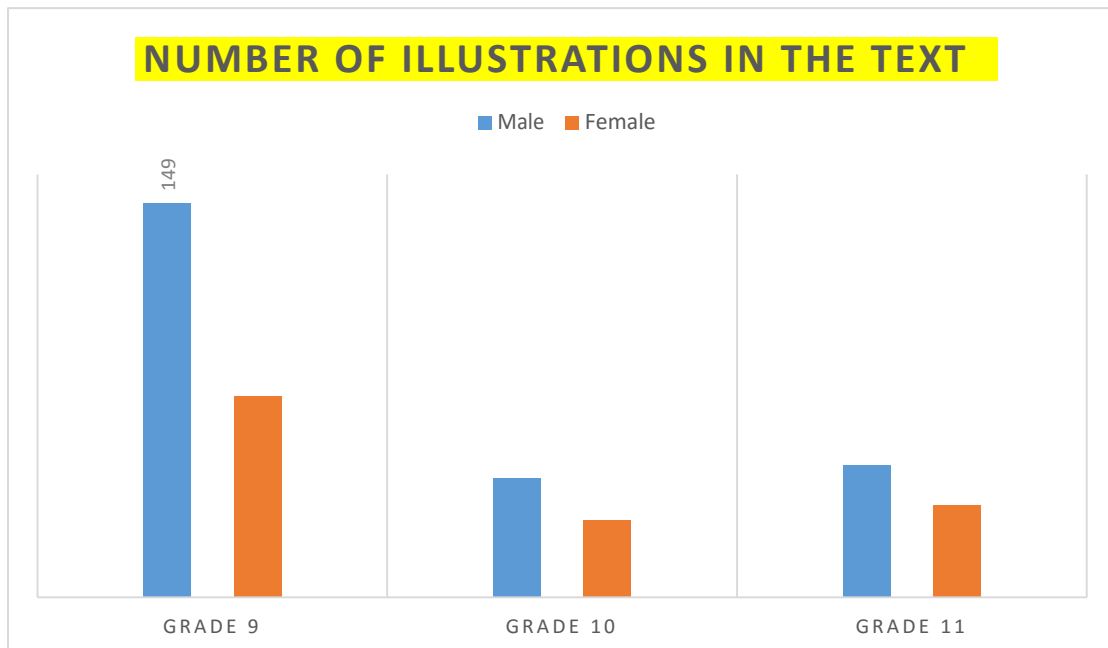
### Qualitative Analysis

Occupational roles of characters, family roles of characters and character attributions of males and females in the text were investigated. This provided an insight into the presence of stereotyping each gender, and if the text reflected cultural norms and not the practical world. Features of each gender in illustrations present in the textbooks were also analyzed in this category to determine whether gender stereotyping was present. Finally, the text was studied for linguistic occurrences of usage of masculine generic constructions and for marked language for females. Masculine generic constructions such as “man” to represent humans would mark the language used as sexist in that men were assumed to be the umbrella term while presence of marked language for females indicated that females were purposefully set apart, and would often carry negative connotations, as with the use of the word “mistress”, to indicate owner of a house.

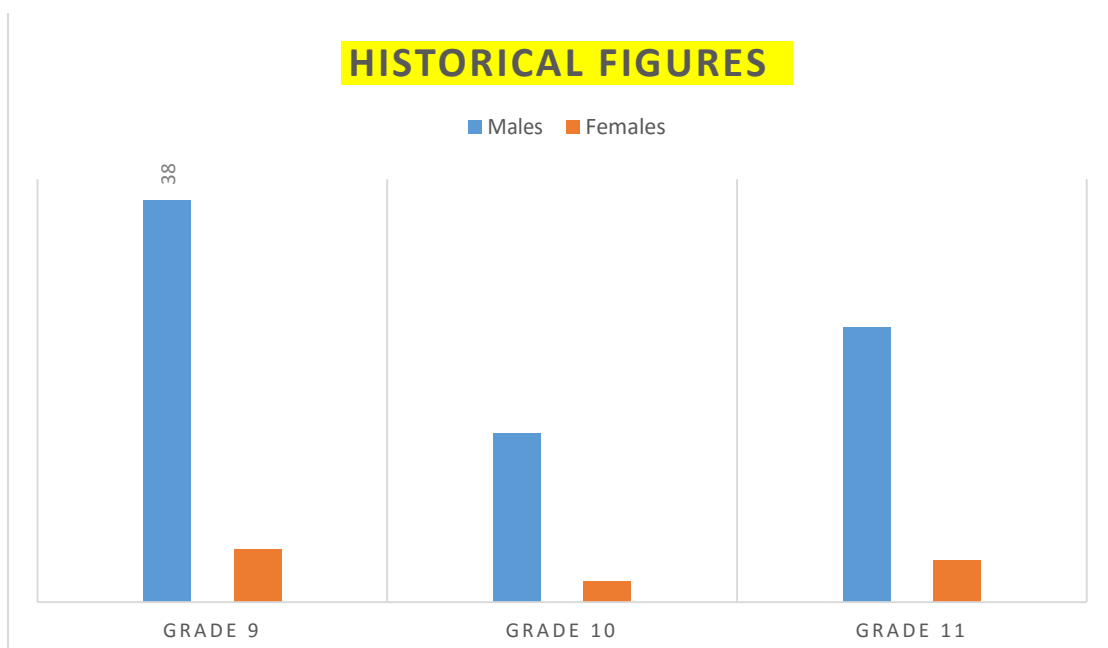
### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION



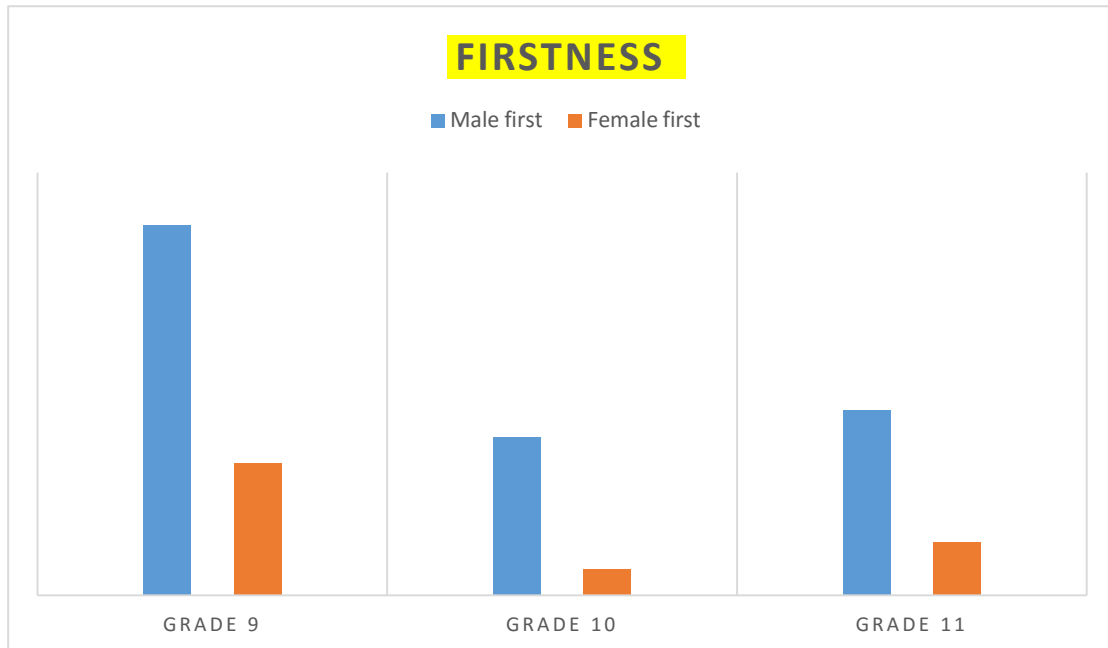
It was discovered that all three textbooks had a large number of male characters, while female characters were often few. It was interesting to note that units that focused on travelling and outdoor activities had barely any female characters, implying that outdoor activities are the male realm, and not for the female to enjoy.



The trend of occurrences was reflected in the illustrations as well. Apart from the sheer lack of female representation, the instances where females were portrayed showed them engaging in stereotypical work of sweeping, cleaning or decorating while males were illustrated in a wide range of areas.



More than the clear difference between the number of historical figures who would serve as role models for the learner, the lack of modernization in the characters was significant. Centuries after initial recognition, the main female historical figure was still Marie Curie, although other prominent female figures such as Malala Yousafzai have been out and about in the modern society. This, in contrast to the mentioning of Usain Bolt and Michael Jordan for male figures, was a clear indication of inequality.



Males were almost always mentioned first in the texts. In instances where females were mentioned first, it was in instances such as “mother and father” or “bride and groom”, once again reducing females to a stereotypical construction.

When analyzing the occupational roles of the characters, all three textbooks contained more occupational roles for men as opposed to women. It was noted that teachers of English were commonly assumed to be female, while those of science were clearly defined as male. The family was clearly divided into the father providing financial support while the mother was a figure to provide refreshment. All knowledge imparted in the dialogues were uttered by males, while females played a supportive role. Females were also portrayed to be dissatisfied with their appearance, often making remarks on their insecurities. The emotional range of each gender was clearly stereotyped, with males having a wide range of emotions against females who were limited to confident, sensible and shy. However, males are displayed as loving husbands in the text who lay the table for dinner while the mother prepares the meals. In contrast, no activity or trait has been attributed to females which are stereotypically considered male.

## CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Sri Lankan ESL textbooks ascribe agency to males, particularly in the sphere of economics and knowledge. The male is the financial center and female is the dependent. Firstly, the dependent role of the female might not be accurate in the material sphere, considering that there is a powerful female presence in the labor market according to a survey done by Sri Lanka Labor Force Survey 2014. Secondly, this might not impart a sense of motivation for a female learner in that she would be given the idea that females are to play only a family role. In this light, the ESL textbooks of grades 9, 10 and 11 were found to be sexist in their use of language, thus promoting prejudices against females and contributing to causing a wider rift in the already existent gender disparity of the Sri Lankan society.

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