

# **Gender Representation in Elementary Level, African Language Textbooks**

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## **Abstract**

Foreign language learners' perceptions and understanding of a target culture(s) are affected by the information presented by their teacher(s), textbooks and other instructional materials. This paper focuses on an analysis of gender representation in elementary level, African language textbooks, with a specific concentration on Hausa, Swahili, Yoruba, and Zulu textbooks. Although the study of gender representation in textbooks is not new (see Blankenship, 1984; Clausen, 1982; Neussel, 1977 and others), relatively few authors have focused on gender representation in foreign language textbooks (Graci, 1989; Rifkin, 1998). This study seeks to extend the work of these scholars into the field of African languages. As a result, the present analysis focuses on (1) establishing criteria for evaluating African language textbooks for gender representation; (2) applying these criteria to seventeen different, elementary level, African language textbooks to create a basis for a comparative case study; (3) presenting the findings of a detailed analysis; and (4) utilizing the findings to formulate guidelines for future textbook writers.

## **Introduction**

Gender bias and its prevalence in educational textbooks are not new issues. However, much of the previous research on gender bias stems from fields like primary education, science, sociology and social studies (Bazler & Simonis, 1990; Blankenship, 1984; Graebner, 1972; Hall, 1988; Jennings, 1975; Kingston & Lovelace, 1979; Marten & Matlin, 1976; Rossser & Potter, 1990; Tibbetts, 1979; Women on Words & Images, 1972). Although some work has been done on gender representation in foreign language textbooks, primarily in the

languages of Russian, French, German, and Spanish (Bügel & Buunk, 1996; Clausen, 1982; Nuessel, 1977; Rifkin, 1998; Stern, 1976; Willeke & Sanders, 1978), there has been no previous research on gender representation in African language textbooks.

Since foreign language learners' perceptions and understanding of a target culture(s) are affected by the information presented by their teacher(s), textbooks and other instructional materials, the presentation of culturally appropriate gender information is an important component of language instruction. This study examines seventeen textbooks from four of the most commonly taught African languages, Hausa, Swahili, Yoruba, and Zulu, on the basis of gender representation. There were three primary objectives in undertaking this research project:

- 1) to establish criteria for evaluating African language textbooks for gender bias;
- 2) to determine if gender bias existed in African language textbooks; and
- 3) to provide African language teachers and textbook authors with practical recommendations on how and why to avoid gender bias in their teaching of the language and their writing of textbooks.

For this analysis of African language textbooks, several previous studies on gender representation were reviewed. Although the studies did not utilize a standard set of criteria in their analyses, some common criteria did emerge from the different studies. A brief review of these criteria provides background information pertinent to the present analysis.

### **Previous Research on Gender Representation**

One common theme among gender representation studies concerns the depiction of women within a textbook. Researchers (Blankenship, 1984; Rifkin, 1998; Rosser & Potter, 1990) have examined textbooks to determine whether or not they include information on famous women or culturally important females. The information can be contained in cultural notes, reading selections or dialogues.

Other researchers (Bazler & Simonis, 1990; Graci, 1989; Rifkin, 1998; Stern, 1976) have sought to understand a textbook's portrayal of women through its pictorial texts. A pictorial text is any picture, photograph, cartoon or other illustration contained within a textbook (Rifkin, 1998). Researchers examine pictorial texts to determine if and how females are represented. A detailed analysis of a pictorial text may evaluate a woman's position within a picture (is she in the foreground or background?), the age of the woman (is she a girl or a grown woman?), and her role within the scene being portrayed (is the woman serving dinner to her husband or teaching a classroom full of children?).

The sex of a textbook's author(s) is another type of criterion frequently used in gender representation studies (Clausen, 1982; Stern, 1976). Researchers attempt to ascertain whether or not a textbook written by a female author, or a team of male and female authors, is less gender biased than a textbook written by a male author. The studies by Clausen (1982) and Stern (1976) were unable to conclusively prove that an author's gender had any statistically significant effect on diminishing or eliminating gender bias within a textbook.

A study conducted today may refute these earlier studies, as the use of politically correct language is now more common. As people's awareness of the language they use in public spaces increases, textbook authors may consciously, or unconsciously, alter the language they use in their writing. One could hypothesize that a male or female author who tends to use gender-neutral language in his or her personal life may unconsciously transfer this practice into the writing of a foreign language textbook. An author may also consciously choose to include, in a foreign language textbook, material that portrays men and women in a variety of societal roles. Both practices serve to eliminate gender bias in textbooks.

The final set of criteria focuses on the text itself, including reading selections, dialogues, grammar exercises and cultural notes. In examining the contents of a textbook, researchers have created several sub-criteria, including:

- a) **Number of female and male references throughout a text** (Bazler & Simonis, 1990; Biraimah, 1988; Graci, 1989; Hartman & Judd, 1978; Rifkin, 1998): Most studies contain a simple count of the number of times males and females are explicitly referred to in the body of a textbook. This provides researchers with a quick overview of a textbook and often serves to demonstrate gender bias on an overt level.
- b) **Number of male-centered versus female-centered reading selections** (Bordelon, 1985; Hartman & Judd, 1978; Stern, 1976): Again, this criterion provides a researcher with an idea of the prevalence of female and/or male characters in dialogues, reading selections and other narrative passages. The gender references do not have to refer to human beings, although a distinction is usually made between those selections with humans as main characters and those with animals as main characters. Nonetheless, by counting the number of reading selections explicitly referring to a male and/or female character, a researcher can quickly assess the exposure of a student to information about both men and women in the culture being discussed.
- c) **Occupations associated with males and females** (Biraimah, 1988; Graci, 1989; Stern, 1976; Rifkin, 1998): Studies employing this criterion examine the different occupations associated with each gender. The results can indicate a more subtle form of gender bias where women are associated with stereotypical roles, such as wife and mother, while men are portrayed in a variety of occupational situations, such as father, clerk, doctor or teacher.

This type of gender bias also manifests itself in the exercises presented in the textbook. Students are frequently presented with fewer female-specific responses in vocabulary exercises that ask questions like “What do you want to do when you grow up?” In other words, in a language with gender-specific vocabulary, the number of male-specific vocabulary words contained in a textbook is usually greater than the number of female-specific vocabulary words.

- d) **Reinforcing stereotypes through exercises** (Clausen, 1982; Stern, 1976; Rifkin, 1998): This criterion relates, in part, to the above discussion. In gender-biased exercises, a student might have to translate sentences like “Jane’s mother baked wonderful cookies.” and “Jim studies astronomy. He wants, one day, to work for NASA.” These two examples, although deliberately exaggerated, demonstrate what researchers mean when they use the phrase “reinforcing stereotypes through exercises.” The examples above link Jane’s mother with the stereotypical roles of housewife and mother, and Jim with the fields of science and mathematics (two academic areas traditionally dominated by men).

- e) **Use of titles** (Rifkin, 1998): This criterion ties in with the two criteria mentioned above. In analyzing a textbook for gender bias, a researcher may choose to examine the titles used with males and females. For example, men may be addressed as “Mr.,” “Professor,” or “Sir,” while women may be addressed only as “Mrs.” Or “Ms.” It is even possible that females will not have any titles at all. Using a title to address another individual is generally a sign of respect. A textbook that commonly employs different titles when referring to men while simultaneously neglecting to use titles with women exhibits gender bias.
- f) **Sex attributed to a sexless character** (Clausen, 1982): The premise of this criterion is not as complex as it may sound. Basically, it is when an author assigns a sex to a character that is not inherently male or female. For example, an author may ask a student to translate the following English sentences into another language:  
 “Call the cook. Someone has gone to call him” (Perrott, 1950, p. 128). The author implies that the cook is a man by using “him” in the second sentence although a cook can be either male or female.
- g) **Order of male and female references** (Rifkin, 1998; Rosser & Potter, 1990): This refers to the practice of placing male references before female references when the two appear in the same phrase. For example, for the Swahili word *yeye*, which means “she, he or it,” an author generally gives the English translation as “he, she or it.” Most authors never consider the possibility of placing the female reference before the male reference.
- h) **Adjectives, adverbs and verbs associated with gender** (Rifkin, 1998): The idea underlying this criterion is that a textbook author uses different adjectives, adverbs and verbs for males and females. For example, active verbs, like run, jump and climb, may only be associated with males while other verbs, like cook, clean and sew are associated with females. The verbs used to describe women’s activities perpetuate specific ideas about the role of women in a society. Studies utilizing this criterion reveal a less obvious form of gender bias.

### **Analysis of African Language Textbooks**

The current analysis of African language textbooks employed criteria derived from the studies discussed above, especially Rifkin’s (1998) work on gender bias in Russian language texts.

One of the primary objectives in conducting this study was to determine how gender is represented in African language textbooks. The analysis focused on textbooks from four of the most commonly

taught African languages: Hausa, Swahili, Yoruba, and Zulu. These textbooks range in publication date from 1904 to 1998. Two chapters were selected from each textbook. Every chapter chosen contained, if available, diverse teaching material (i.e., pictorial texts, dialogues, reading passages, etc.) and the likelihood of a good sample distribution of male and female references based upon the chapter's subject matter. For the purpose of this study, gender bias was defined as an inequitable distribution of female and male references within the body of a textbook, with females being under-represented and/or misrepresented.

To minimize bias from the criteria unintentionally designed to highlight the weaknesses of different textbooks, the study's criteria were selected prior to the analysis. The selected criteria provided a broad overview of the textbooks' contents with regard to male and female references.

This study is based on the following set of criteria:

- 1) **Number of females and males throughout the text:** This criterion focuses on the number of unambiguous references to females and males in the two chapters examined in each textbook. The references could relate to a specific character (human or non-human), the definition of a word, or any other unambiguous use of a gender term.
- 2) **Order of male and female references:** This study specifically examined the number of times, in the two chapters, that females preceded males when females and males were included in a single phrase. Three of the four languages examined in the study are gender neutral, but gender bias can be seen in the arrangement of female and male references within a single phrase. For example, in Yoruba, the word *òun* can be translated as "he, she or it." In most cases, authors place the male reference before the female reference when translating the word into English.
- 3) **Number of male and/or female appearances in pictorial texts:** Pictorial texts are any hand-drawn picture, photo or other illustration portraying human characters of an identifiable sex. This study took into account the portrayal of women in textbooks' pictorial texts because pictorial texts frequently provide language students with information that is as important as that contained in the written text. However, since this analysis focused on providing a broad overview of several different African lan-

guage textbooks, it does not include a detailed study of pictorial texts similar to those mentioned earlier.

- 4) **Number of female-centered versus male-centered reading selections:** Reading selections, in this analysis, include not only short passages pertaining to specific themes but also dialogues. Only those reading selections where the characters were human and clearly identified as female and/or male were included in the analysis.
- 5) **Types of occupations associated with men and women:** For this final set of criteria, information was gathered on the specific occupations associated with males and females. The analysis only took into account specific instances where an unambiguous association existed between an occupation and particular gender.

The results of the analysis showed clear evidence of gender bias in all of the seventeen textbooks included in the study. It is especially interesting to note that, although the publication dates for the textbooks included in the study span nearly a century, the portrayal of females remained virtually unchanged until the 1990s. On the following page, Table I indicates the results for criteria 1-4 for each textbook examined.

Table 1: *Conclusions for Criteria 1-4*

CRITERIA:	Language	Number of refer-ences to females	Number of refer-ences to males	Number of times females precede males (both in a single phrase)	Number of female appear-ances in pictorial texts	Number of male appear-ances in pictorial texts	Number of female-centered reading selec-tions	Number of male-centered reading selec-tions
TEXTBOOKS:								
Cowan & Schuh (1976)	Hausa	18	68	0	4	8	N/A	N/A
Hinnebusch & Mirza (1998)	Swahili	21	28	9	2	2	0	1
Stevick, Mlela & Nienga (1963)	Swahili	0	5	0	N/A	N/A	0	5
Hodge & Umaru (1963)	Hausa	17	44	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Kraft & Kirk-Greene (1973)	Hausa	10	48	0	N/A	N/A	0	4
Lasebikan (1958)	Yoruba	16	28	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Malcolm (1956)	Zulu	18	58	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mavr (1904)	Zulu	18	45	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Nvembezi (1972)	Zulu	52	70	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Oduinrin (1964)	Yoruba	7	55	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Perrott (1950)	Swahili	5	37	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Rowlands (1969)	Yoruba	7	22	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Schleicher (1993)	Yoruba	48	52	0	17	9	2	1
Skinner (1973)	Hausa	7	21	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Stevick & Aremu (1963)	Yoruba	0	17	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Wilson (1985)	Swahili	17	29	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Zawawi (1973)	Swahili	78	94	10	2	2	1	3



The third and fourth columns of Table I demonstrate that every textbook contained more male references than female references in the set of chapters examined. Two textbooks, the Swahili textbook by Hinnebusch and Mirza (1998) and Schleicher's (1993) Yoruba textbook, are worth mentioning, if only because the difference in number between female vs. male references was relatively small compared to the other textbooks examined.

However, it is important to note that the textbooks by Hinnebusch & Mirza (1998) and Schleicher (1993) are the only two textbooks in the study that were published in the last decade. Since most publishers and writing handbooks now provide guidelines to potential authors to prevent the usage of discriminatory and/or sexist language, (Britton & Lumpkin, 1977), newer textbooks might be expected to exhibit less gender bias than older textbooks.

During the 1960s, when several of the textbooks used in this study were written (See Table I), no established author guidelines existed (Britton & Lumpkin, 1977). The apparent discrepancies in the number of female references versus male references may be due, in part to a lack of clear-cut guidelines for authors to follow. However, African language learners continue to be exposed to the gender bias inherent in the older textbooks because they do not have access to newer teaching materials.

Most African language programs do not have the student enrollment numbers or financial backing to support the development and publication of updated teaching materials. Those working in the field of African languages must choose between using outdated textbooks, creating their own classroom materials for use at their home institution or some combination of these two possibilities. For most African language teachers, creating new material is difficult due to financial and time constraints, and those materials developed for use by an individual rarely find their way into publication for dissemination to the larger community of African language teachers. This is an area of great concern for teachers and students of African languages and is beginning to be addressed by organizations like the National African Language Resource Center (NALRC).

The fifth column in Table I reveals that only two textbooks (Hinnebusch & Mirza, 1998 and Zawawi, 1971) contain instances

where females precede males in a single phrase. Two examples from the texts themselves are:

- 1) *Anafundiha*: “s/he is teaching” (Hinnebusch & Mirza, 1998, p. 4)
- 2) *Huyu ni msichana na yule ni mvulana?*: “This is a girl and that is a boy?” (Zawawi, 1971, p. 29)

It might be interesting to contrast these findings with an analysis of the number of occurrences, in a chapter, when males precede females in a single phrase. A comparative analysis of this type would undoubtedly underline the gender bias present in all the textbooks examined.

Columns six and seven of Table I provide data with regard to the textbooks’ pictorial texts. Insufficient data, with regard to the number of pictorial texts in the chapters selected for inclusion in the study, make it impossible to determine conclusively whether or not gender bias manifests itself in the textbooks’ illustrations. The study did reveal that of the seventeen textbooks examined, only four (Cowan & Schuh, 1976; Hinnebusch & Mirza, 1998; Schleicher, 1993; Zawawi, 1971) contained any pictorial texts. Of those four, only one (Schleicher, 1993) contained, in the chapters examined, actual photos as well as hand-drawn illustrations. (Note: Although Zawawi’s 1971 textbook did not include any photos in the chapters selected for analysis in the study, a number of photographs were included in section II of the textbook.) Authors typically used illustrations to enhance a) grammar exercises, b) chapter themes, or c) dialogues.

Below are several examples of the types of illustrations commonly found in the textbooks included in the study.

- 1) Schleicher (1993, p. 36): A photo shows a man with his arms around two children. One child is a girl and the other is a boy. This picture accompanied a chapter on family members.
- 2) Hinnebusch & Mirza (1998, p. 2): A hand-drawn illustration of people greeting one another. A man carrying a briefcase is approaching four people with his right arm extended. The four people walking toward the man are in an informal line. A young boy is at the head of the line. Behind the boy is an older man with his left arm extended. A woman is standing a short way behind

the man, also with her left arm slightly extended. Standing at the end of the line, a little apart from the rest of the group, is a small girl. One presumes, looking at the picture, that the group of four people is a family. The picture was used in conjunction with a dialogue and short reading passage on greetings.

- 3) Cowan & Schuh (1976, p. 59): There are four hand-drawn pictures of people. Two of the pictures are of men. The men are shown by themselves. In the first picture, one sees only a close-up of a man's upper body and head. The male figure, in the second picture, is shown in miniature (to give the impression of distance) and his whole body is visible. There are also two pictures of women. The first is a close-up of two smiling women. The second picture shows two women talking to each other. They are also drawn in miniature (again, to give the impression of distance). All of the above pictures accompanied a grammar exercise.

Due to a lack of pictorial texts in these textbooks, a language learner must rely heavily upon the written word to garner a comprehensive mental picture of the target culture(s) and, in most cases, the written text provides a learner with a gender-biased perspective.

An examination of the textbooks' male-centered and female-centered readings (see columns eight and nine in Table I) also revealed gender bias. In the chapters examined, only five of the seventeen textbooks contained any reading texts with a human character of an indefinable gender. Three of these five textbooks contained no female-centered reading selections at all. The two textbooks with female-centered reading selections were Zawawi (1971) and Schleicher (1993). One example of a female-centered reading selection is found in Schleicher's (1993) textbook, where a female professor has an interview with a newspaper reporter (p. 257). Most textbooks containing reading texts used dialogues and stories involving men, as in the fable of "Audu and Ali" found in Kraft & Kirk-Greene (1973, p. 165).

Tables II and III below demonstrate that women are typically associated with far fewer occupations than men. The information in this table is a compilation of all the occupations contained in the textbooks examined. The total number of occupations unambiguously associated with women was seven, while twenty-seven occupations were unambiguously associated with men.

Table II

*Types of Occupations Associated with Males in the 17 Textbooks Examined*

Artisan	Fisherman
Author/poet	Government Employee/Official
Barber	Herder
Chief	King
Clergyman	Lawyer
Clerk (business)	Market Seller
Clothing store owner	Meat Seller
Cotton factory worker	Policeman
Craftsman	Salesman
Doctor	Teacher
Emir	Waiter
Factory Worker	Watchman
Farmer	Weaver
Father	

Table III

*Types of Occupations Associated with Females  
in the 17 Textbooks Examined*

Doctor
Farmer
Gown-Maker
Market Seller
Mother
Nurse
Teacher

In conjunction with Table I, these tables further demonstrate the problems generated by gender biased textbooks. Gender bias in

textbooks perpetuates stereotypical ideas that women are a marginal part of most cultures and negatively influences a language learner. A first-semester, African language learner, who tends to be unfamiliar with Africa, needs a textbook that realistically portrays the roles of women in the cultures associated with the language. By eliminating gender bias, language teachers can provide African language students with a better understanding of the roles played by both men and women within different African cultures. How else can teachers expect their students to leave their classrooms with a better understanding of the present-day African continent?

Although there are male-dominated societies within Africa, women within such societies are not only mothers and wives, but also political leaders, writers and poets, entertainers, market sellers and farmers. One example of a woman with an extensive list of achievements is the Tanzanian Ambassador Gertrude Mongella. Ambassador Mongella has a long list of career accomplishments, including serving as a member of Tanzania's parliament and as Secretary General for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. Her contributions to her country are numerous, and she is only one example of the many women who play an increasingly important role in the nations of Africa.

### **Recommendations**

The current analysis shows gender bias in all the textbooks, although to varying degrees of severity. Nuessel (1977) cites Betty Schmitz (1975) in stating that sexism typically manifests itself in four ways:

- 1) exclusion;
- 2) subordination;
- 3) distortion; and
- 4) degradation.

The textbooks examined demonstrate the first type of sexism, whereby women are severely under-represented (in other words, excluded) from African language textbooks. Many of the textbooks failed to

represent females in reading passages, grammar exercises, dialogues or pictorial texts. The lack of representation of females, in any context, curtails a discussion of whether or not females are presented in an appropriate manner with relation to the target culture. How can the problem of under-representation be corrected?

Eliminating gender bias in elementary level, African language textbooks does not require completely revamping the current language textbooks, but it does require some gender consciousness on the part of textbook authors during the writing process. One way to minimize the presence of gender bias is to make a conscious effort to reverse the order of male and female references. Referring back to an earlier example, a textbook author can define the Swahili word *yeye* as “she, he or it” instead of defining it as “he, she or it.”

An equally simple solution is including more sample exercises with female references. Instead of asking a student to translate the sentence “He went to school in Dar es Salaam,” the student could be asked to translate the sentence “She went to school in Dar es Salaam.” One way to eliminate gender bias stemming from exclusion is by actively including female references in textbooks.

A textbook author can include not only more written female references, but also pictorial texts that portray males and females in a variety of situations. For example, an author could include photographs of women working as teachers, political leaders, or doctors. Pictorial texts that realistically portray the lives of women and men reveal to the language learner the variety of occupations open to people of both sexes. Pictorial texts should also be presented in a variety of mediums, including black and white and color photographs, hand-drawn illustrations and cartoons. Teachers and textbook authors can obtain photographs from embassies, the Internet, personal travel, colleagues and/or peers, and books.

An author can also include authentic cultural dialogues, reading selections, and notes that discuss male and female roles within the target language’s culture(s). Although some societies may be male dominant and thereby exhibit gender bias in authentic cultural material, a textbook author and/or language teacher can use the authentic material to prompt class participation and discussion about the role of women in that present-day culture, and ultimately, to encourage a

greater understanding of a different culture. An author can also include reading passages with male and female main characters. By including stories and dialogues with female main characters, an author further decreases the marginalization of women, thereby decreasing the presence of gender bias. Authors and teachers alike can collect these materials personally or enlist the help of friends and colleagues traveling to the target country.

These recommendations are not meant to suggest that a textbook author completely reverse the order of gender bias. Both men and women play important roles in a culture, and a language learner needs to understand these roles in order to better understand target culture. A textbook must include women in its discussion of a language's culture(s), but it should not do so from the exclusion of men.

### Conclusion

This analysis shows a clear need for elementary level, African language textbooks that do not exclude examples of and discussion about the roles of women in different African societies. Textbook authors, in attempting to eliminate gender bias, should not present students with another false portrait of a language's culture(s). If African language teachers want to teach something more than grammar and vocabulary to language students, they need to incorporate culturally appropriate gender awareness into their textbooks. By providing students access to accurate information, language teachers can ensure themselves that their students will leave their classrooms with an increased understanding, knowledge, and appreciation of the various roles played by both men and women in different African societies.

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