



Gender Representation in Narrative Texts of Elementary School Indonesian Language Textbooks in the Merdeka Curriculum

Elsa Rahmalia Putri
Universitas Pendidikan
Indonesia
Purwakarta, INDONESIA

Nadia Tiara Antik Sari
Universitas Pendidikan
Indonesia
Purwakarta, INDONESIA

Neneng Sri Wulan
Universitas Pendidikan
Indonesia
Purwakarta, INDONESIA

Article Info

Article history:

Received: June, 15, 2026

Revised: July, 18, 2026

Accepted: August, 6, 2026

Keywords:

Elementary School;
Gender Representation;
Indonesian Language
Textbooks;
Merdeka Curriculum;
Narrative Texts.

Abstract

Textbooks play an important role in shaping students' understanding of gender roles by portraying characters, activities, and social interactions within narrative texts. Despite the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, empirical evidence regarding gender representation in Indonesian language textbooks remains limited, particularly from a multidimensional perspective. This study aimed to analyze gender representation in narrative texts contained in Grades IV, V, and VI Indonesian language textbooks under the Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative descriptive content analysis was employed using 38 narrative texts selected from three official textbooks published through the Indonesian Book Information System (SIBI). Data were collected using a structured coding sheet adapted from the gender representation framework of Brugeilles and Cromer and analyzed through the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, including data reduction, data display, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that gender representation varies across grade levels. Grade IV remains characterized by stronger male representation, particularly in public activities and educational spaces, whereas Grade V demonstrates a more balanced distribution of gender roles. Grade VI presents the most inclusive pattern, with female characters appearing more frequently as central figures and participating more actively in educational, social, and leadership contexts. However, the continued association of female characters with domestic activities suggests that traditional gender stereotypes persist alongside more inclusive representations. These findings demonstrate that evaluating gender equality in textbooks requires a multidimensional perspective that considers character position, activities, identity roles, interaction roles, and activity spaces in addition to character visibility, thereby providing evidence to support the development of more gender-responsive learning materials.

To cite this article: Putri, E.R., Sari, N.T.A., Wulan, N.S. (2026). Gender Representation in Narrative Texts of Elementary School Indonesian Language Textbooks in the Merdeka Curriculum. *Al Qodiri: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sosial dan Keagamaan*, 24(2), 1.272-1.285.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a fundamental role in shaping not only students' cognitive development but also their understanding of social identities, cultural values, and interpersonal relationships (Lau & Shea, 2024). As educational systems increasingly emphasize equity and inclusion, schools are expected to cultivate learning environments that promote equal opportunities for all learners regardless of gender (Rahman, 2025). Nevertheless, the transmission of social values within formal education often occurs implicitly through learning resources that students encounter every day (Zieher et al., 2024). Among these resources, textbooks occupy a particularly influential position because they organize knowledge while simultaneously reflecting societal assumptions about gender, culture, and power (Canale & Furtado, 2021; Fawaid & Handayani, 2025). Rather than functioning as neutral instructional materials, textbooks frequently communicate normative expectations regarding how individuals should behave, interact, and contribute to society. Such representations become especially influential during elementary education, when children are actively constructing their perceptions of social roles and personal identities (Brown, 2024; Master, 2021; Rubegni et al., 2022). Consequently, examining the messages embedded in elementary school

* Corresponding author:

Putri et al, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
nadiatiara.as@upi.edu

textbooks has become increasingly important for understanding how educational materials contribute to the formation of gender-related perspectives in contemporary society.

The growing international commitment to gender equality has intensified scholarly attention toward the ways educational materials portray women and men across different cultural contexts. International frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals emphasize that quality education should foster inclusive learning environments free from discrimination and gender bias. Despite these commitments, empirical evidence from many countries continues to demonstrate that textbook content often reproduces unequal representations through the allocation of occupational roles, leadership positions, domestic responsibilities, and social participation (Bachore & Semela, 2022; Fithriani, 2022; Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023). These patterns are not always expressed through explicit discrimination but frequently emerge through subtle narrative structures in which one gender consistently occupies more visible, authoritative, or socially valued positions than the other (Ederoclite et al., 2025; Schumacher et al., 2025). Such recurring portrayals may gradually shape children's expectations regarding appropriate gender roles and influence how they perceive their future educational and professional opportunities (Zhao, 2022). Because textbooks remain one of the primary instructional resources in elementary education, understanding how gender is represented within their narratives constitutes an essential step toward promoting more equitable educational practices.

The Indonesian educational context presents a particularly important setting for investigating this issue following the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes learner-centered education, character development, diversity, and inclusive values ("Pedagogical Model Innovation Based on Ki Hajar Dewantara's Among System for History Learning in the Merdeka Curriculum," 2025). The curriculum encourages students to develop critical thinking, empathy, collaboration, and respect for differences, suggesting that textbooks should likewise reflect balanced and inclusive social representations. Indonesian language textbooks are especially significant because narrative texts expose students to fictional and real-life characters whose actions, relationships, and experiences serve as models for understanding everyday social life (Pratiwi et al., 2023). Through these narratives, students encounter representations of family responsibilities, educational participation, leadership, community engagement, and professional aspirations that may consciously or unconsciously influence their perceptions of gender (Sulla et al., 2025; Worku, 2025). Although the Merdeka Curriculum represents a substantial policy reform intended to support more inclusive education, the extent to which its narrative textbooks embody these principles remains insufficiently understood. This uncertainty creates an important empirical question regarding whether contemporary Indonesian language textbooks have successfully moved beyond traditional gender stereotypes or continue to reproduce conventional patterns of representation in more subtle forms. Addressing this question is therefore essential for evaluating the consistency between curriculum objectives and the values communicated through classroom learning materials.

Although gender representation in educational materials has received increasing scholarly attention over the past decade, the existing body of research reveals several recurring patterns rather than substantial transformation. Numerous studies consistently report that male characters remain more visible than female characters and are more frequently portrayed in positions associated with authority, leadership, occupational success, and public participation, whereas female characters continue to be connected with domestic responsibilities and supportive social roles (Phipps & Prieto, 2021). Similar tendencies have also been documented in textbook studies conducted across Asia, Africa, and Europe, indicating that gender imbalance is a persistent issue despite educational reforms aimed at promoting equality (Adal, 2025). Recent investigations further demonstrate that gender stereotypes are reproduced not only through written narratives but also through visual illustrations, character interactions, and the allocation of activity spaces (Elorza, 2023; Scarcelli & Farci, 2024). Collectively, these findings suggest that textbook content continues to function as a medium through which traditional gender norms are maintained, even when explicit discriminatory language has largely disappeared. However, previous studies have primarily concentrated on identifying disparities in character frequency or occupational roles, providing only a partial understanding of how gender is constructed throughout narrative discourse (Kostas, 2021; Nussbaumer et al., 2025). Consequently, there remains a need for analytical approaches capable of capturing the multidimensional nature of gender representation beyond simple numerical comparisons.

Within the Indonesian context, studies examining gender representation in school textbooks have similarly identified the persistence of unequal portrayals, although important methodological and contextual limitations remain. Previous research has shown that male characters generally dominate public activities, while female characters are more frequently associated with domestic responsibilities and caregiving roles (Kumar et al., 2025; Shah, 2024). Other studies have demonstrated that visual and verbal representations jointly contribute to reinforcing gender stereotypes, even when the numerical distribution of male and female characters appears relatively balanced (Carpinella & Bauer, 2021; Tyarakanita et al., 2021). Investigations focusing on Indonesian-language learning materials have likewise revealed that female characters are often portrayed within conventional family contexts, whereas male characters are more commonly positioned as decision makers or authority figures (Duby et al., 2023; Msofi Mgalamadzi et al., 2024). Nevertheless, most of these studies were conducted using textbooks developed under previous national curricula, examined English-language textbooks rather than Indonesian-language materials, or emphasized only one or two dimensions of gender representation. Consequently, the existing literature provides limited evidence regarding whether the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has produced meaningful changes in the way gender is represented within elementary school narrative texts. This limitation indicates not only a contextual gap related to curriculum reform but also a methodological gap arising from the tendency to evaluate gender representation using relatively narrow analytical perspectives.

These limitations provide a clear rationale for conducting a more comprehensive investigation of gender representation in Indonesian language textbooks developed under the Merdeka Curriculum (Abdilla et al., 2025). From a theoretical perspective, previous studies have generally treated gender representation as a matter of character visibility or activity distribution, while paying considerably less attention to the interconnected dimensions of character position, identity roles, interaction roles, and activity spaces that collectively shape readers' perceptions of gender. Methodologically, few studies have employed an integrated analytical framework capable of examining these dimensions simultaneously within elementary school narrative texts. Contextually, empirical evidence concerning the Merdeka Curriculum remains scarce despite its explicit commitment to fostering diversity, inclusiveness, and learner-centered education. These three limitations theoretical, methodological, and contextual constitute a significant research gap that has yet to be adequately addressed in the current literature. Addressing this gap is important because a multidimensional understanding of gender representation provides a more accurate basis for evaluating whether contemporary textbooks genuinely reflect the inclusive values promoted by current educational policy (Vydra & Kováčik, 2025). Such evidence is expected to contribute not only to the advancement of gender representation research but also to the continuous improvement of textbook development and curriculum implementation in Indonesian elementary education.

Against this background, the present study aims to analyze gender representation in narrative texts contained in Grades IV, V, and VI Indonesian language textbooks developed under the Merdeka Curriculum. The analysis adopts the gender representation framework proposed by Boddington (2024), Fike & Mattis (2024), which conceptualizes gender as a multidimensional construct reflected through character visibility, character position, activities, identity roles, interaction roles, and activity spaces. By examining these six analytical dimensions simultaneously, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how male and female characters are represented throughout elementary school narrative texts rather than limiting the analysis to numerical character distribution alone. This multidimensional perspective enables a more nuanced interpretation of the social meanings embedded in textbook narratives and reveals how different aspects of representation interact to construct gender identities (Purnomo et al., 2025; Yoshida, 2023). In addition, the study investigates whether patterns of gender representation differ across grade levels, thereby offering insights into how inclusiveness is progressively articulated throughout the elementary education curriculum. Such an approach extends existing scholarship by integrating theoretical, methodological, and contextual perspectives into a single analytical framework that has rarely been applied to Indonesian language textbooks under the Merdeka Curriculum. Accordingly, this research responds directly to the identified gaps in previous studies while providing empirical evidence on the alignment between curriculum ideals and textbook content.

The expected contributions of this study are both theoretical and practical. From a theoretical perspective, the findings enrich the growing literature on gender representation in educational materials by demonstrating that meaningful evaluation should incorporate multiple interconnected dimensions of representation instead of relying solely on character frequency or occupational distribution. The study also provides additional empirical support for the applicability of the Boddington (2024) framework within the context of Indonesian elementary education, thereby extending its use beyond settings that have been more extensively examined in previous international research. From a practical perspective, the findings may serve as valuable evidence for textbook authors, curriculum developers, educational publishers, teachers, and policymakers who seek to strengthen gender-responsive learning materials that are consistent with the inclusive principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. More balanced representations of gender can contribute to creating classroom learning environments in which boys and girls encounter comparable opportunities to participate in educational, social, community, and leadership contexts. Furthermore, the study offers a systematic analytical reference that can be adapted for future evaluations of textbooks across different subjects, educational levels, and curriculum contexts. Ultimately, strengthening gender representation within educational materials is expected to support the broader goal of developing learning resources that foster equality, inclusiveness, and social justice from the earliest stages of formal education.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive content analysis design to investigate gender representation in narrative texts contained in Indonesian language textbooks developed under the Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative approach was selected because the primary objective of the study was to explore and interpret how gender is socially constructed through textual narratives rather than to test causal relationships or measure statistical associations. Content analysis was considered the most appropriate methodological approach because it enables researchers to examine textual materials systematically, objectively, and contextually by identifying recurring patterns, categories, and meanings embedded within written discourse. In educational research, qualitative content analysis has been widely applied to investigate how textbooks communicate social values, cultural ideologies, and identity constructions through language and narrative structures. In the present study, the analysis focused on identifying gender representation through six analytical dimensions adapted from the framework proposed, namely character gender, character position, character activities, identity roles, social interaction roles, and activity spaces. Rather than examining isolated textual elements, the analysis emphasized the interrelationships among these dimensions to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how male and female characters were portrayed throughout the narrative texts. The qualitative descriptive design was therefore considered suitable because it allowed the study to provide an in-depth and systematic interpretation of gender representation while preserving the original context of each narrative.

Research Setting and Time

The study was conducted in Indonesia throughout 2026 using official Indonesian language textbooks for elementary schools implemented under the Merdeka Curriculum. Instead of collecting data from schools or classroom observations, the research was undertaken within a document analysis context by examining textbooks officially published by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and distributed through the Indonesian Book Information System (Sistem Informasi Buku Indonesia SIBI). These textbooks were selected because they constitute the principal instructional materials used in elementary Indonesian language learning and therefore represent authoritative curriculum documents that communicate educational values, language competencies, and social perspectives to students. The analysis focused exclusively on narrative texts because narratives provide rich descriptions of characters, social interactions, activities, and settings that enable gender representation to be examined comprehensively. Data collection and analysis were carried out sequentially during the research period, beginning with the identification of relevant textbooks, followed by the selection of eligible narrative texts, coding development, validation

procedures, data coding, and qualitative interpretation. Conducting the study within an official curriculum context ensured that the findings accurately reflected the gender representations presented in nationally endorsed instructional materials under the current educational reform.

Population and Sample

The population of this study comprised all narrative texts contained in the official Indonesian language textbooks for Grades IV, V, and VI developed under the Merdeka Curriculum. Narrative texts were selected as the unit of analysis because they present characters, dialogues, events, and social interactions that explicitly and implicitly portray gender identities and social roles. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that the selected data were directly relevant to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria consisted of narrative texts published in officially authorized textbooks available through the SIBI platform, written for elementary school students under the Merdeka Curriculum, and containing identifiable characters and narrative structures that allowed gender representation to be analyzed. Non-narrative materials, including explanatory texts, procedural texts, informational passages, exercises, and visual illustrations without accompanying narratives, were excluded because they did not provide sufficient contextual information for multidimensional gender analysis. Based on these criteria, a total of 38 narrative texts were selected, consisting of 12 texts from Grade IV, 20 texts from Grade V, and 6 texts from Grade VI. These texts were drawn from three official textbooks: Bahasa Indonesia: Lihat Sekitar (Revised Edition) for Grade IV by Eva Yulia Nukman and Cicilia Erni Setyowati, Bahasa Indonesia: Bergerak Bersama (Revised Edition) for Grade V by Maya Lestari and G. F. Zulqarnain, and Bahasa Indonesia: Anak-Anak yang Mengubah Dunia for Grade VI by Ade Kumalasari Latifah. Because the selected texts represented the complete corpus of narrative texts contained in the three official textbooks, the sample was considered sufficiently comprehensive to provide an in-depth understanding of gender representation across the upper elementary grades of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument employed in this study was a structured coding sheet developed to systematically identify and classify gender representation within the selected narrative texts. The instrument was adapted from the gender representation framework proposed, which has been widely recognized as a comprehensive analytical model for examining gender portrayal in educational materials. To better accommodate the characteristics of Indonesian language narrative texts, the original framework was refined by incorporating concepts from previous textbook studies conducted in Indonesia and other educational contexts to reach equity: Unearthing gender discourse in the paradigm of Indonesian history education curriculum. The final coding instrument consisted of six analytical dimensions: character gender, character position, character activities, identity roles, social interaction roles, and activity spaces. Character gender was classified into male, female, and gender-neutral categories based on explicit textual information. Character position distinguished between main and supporting characters according to their narrative prominence. Character activities were categorized into domestic, educational, public or occupational, social, and recreational activities to examine the distribution of gendered participation across different forms of engagement. Identity roles included family member, student, worker, and community member, while social interaction roles consisted of leader, decision maker, follower, and equal participant. Finally, activity spaces were classified into domestic, educational, and public settings to identify the social environments in which male and female characters were predominantly represented. The coding sheet was designed to ensure that every character appearing in each narrative text could be analyzed consistently across all six dimensions, thereby enabling a multidimensional examination of gender representation rather than relying solely on character frequency or visibility.

Instrument Validity and Reliability

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the coding process, several procedures were undertaken to establish the content validity and coding reliability of the research instrument. Content validity was evaluated through expert judgment involving two specialists with expertise in Indonesian language education and gender studies. The experts reviewed the operational definitions of each coding category, assessed the relevance and clarity of the indicators, and examined the consistency between the analytical framework and the objectives of the study. Their

recommendations focused primarily on refining category descriptions, clarifying operational boundaries between similar coding categories, and improving the overall consistency of the coding manual. Revisions were subsequently incorporated before the formal coding process commenced.

Following the content validation stage, the reliability of the coding instrument was strengthened through an intercoder reliability assessment. Two independent coders who had received prior training on the coding manual analyzed a subset of the selected narrative texts using the same coding procedures. The coding results were then compared to identify discrepancies in category assignment and interpretation. Any inconsistencies were discussed collaboratively until consensus was reached regarding the operational application of each coding category. This iterative calibration process enhanced coding consistency and minimized subjective interpretation throughout the analysis. After satisfactory agreement had been achieved, the principal researcher proceeded to code the entire dataset using the finalized coding manual. Throughout the coding process, repeated cross-checking was also conducted to ensure that category assignment remained consistent across all narrative texts and grade levels. These validation and reliability procedures enhanced the methodological rigor of the study and increased the dependability of the findings by ensuring that the analysis was conducted systematically, transparently, and consistently.

Research Procedures

Data collection was conducted through a systematic procedure designed to ensure that every stage of the analysis was transparent, rigorous, and replicable. The research process began with identifying the research problem concerning gender representation in narrative texts contained in Indonesian language textbooks under the Merdeka Curriculum. Subsequently, a comprehensive review of relevant literature was undertaken to establish the theoretical foundation, identify empirical trends, and formulate the analytical framework based on the gender representation model developed. Following the literature review, a qualitative descriptive content analysis design was selected because it enabled the systematic examination of textual representations within educational materials. Official Indonesian language textbooks for Grades IV, V, and VI were then obtained from the Indonesian Book Information System (SIBI), after which eligible narrative texts were selected using purposive sampling according to predetermined inclusion criteria. A structured coding instrument was subsequently developed, validated through expert judgment, and refined before being applied to the complete dataset. To strengthen analytical consistency, an intercoder reliability assessment was conducted prior to the full coding process. The validated coding instrument was then employed to identify and classify every character according to the six analytical dimensions of gender representation. Finally, all coded data were organized and analyzed to identify recurring patterns of gender representation across the three grade levels. The complete sequence of the research procedures is presented in Figure 1.

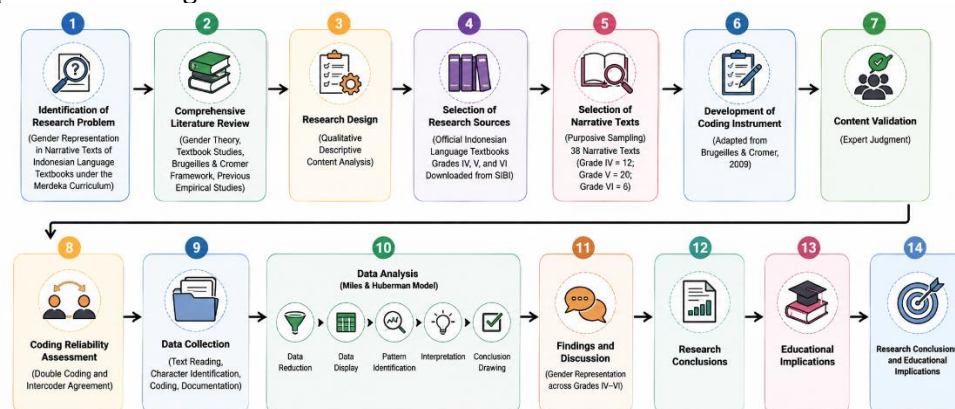


Figure 1. Research Procedure Flowchart

As illustrated in Figure 1, the study followed a sequential and interconnected analytical process. The research commenced with identifying the research problem, followed by a comprehensive literature review to establish the conceptual and theoretical basis of the study. A qualitative descriptive content analysis design was subsequently adopted to guide the overall methodological framework. The next stage involved selecting official Indonesian language textbooks

published through the SIBI platform, from which eligible narrative texts were identified using purposive sampling. A coding instrument adapted from the framework was then developed to classify gender representation systematically across six analytical dimensions. Before formal data coding commenced, the instrument underwent content validation through expert judgment and coding consistency was strengthened through an intercoder reliability assessment. The validated coding scheme was subsequently applied during data collection through repeated text reading, character identification, coding, and systematic documentation of textual evidence. The resulting coded data were then organized and analyzed to identify patterns of gender representation across the selected narrative texts, providing the empirical basis for subsequent interpretation and discussion.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative data analysis model proposed, which consists of data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. During the data reduction stage, all textual evidence relevant to gender representation was carefully selected, coded, and organized according to the predetermined analytical categories. Text segments that did not contribute directly to the research objectives were excluded to maintain analytical focus. The reduced data were subsequently organized during the data display stage through descriptive matrices, frequency tables, and comparative summaries that facilitated systematic comparisons across Grades IV, V, and VI. These visual displays enabled recurring patterns, similarities, and differences in gender representation to be identified more effectively across the six analytical dimensions.

The next stage involved pattern identification and interpretation, in which the distribution of male, female, and gender-neutral characters was examined in relation to their narrative positions, activities, identity roles, interaction roles, and activity spaces. Rather than merely describing frequencies, the analysis emphasized the relationships among these dimensions to understand how gender identities and social roles were constructed throughout the narrative texts. The interpretation of findings was continuously guided by the theoretical framework while also considering relevant findings from previous studies on gender representation in educational materials. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification were conducted through iterative comparisons between the coded data, emerging analytical patterns, and the conceptual framework. Throughout this process, coding decisions and interpretations were repeatedly reviewed to ensure consistency, credibility, and coherence. This systematic analytical procedure enabled the study to generate a comprehensive and trustworthy understanding of gender representation within Indonesian language narrative textbooks developed under the Merdeka Curriculum.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

To illustrate the analytical process, this study presents coding examples from narrative texts in Indonesian language textbooks of the Merdeka Curriculum. Characters were coded according to gender, character position, activities, identity roles, interaction roles, and activity spaces using the research instrument. This analysis is important because textbooks not only function as language learning resources but also shape students' understanding of gender roles and social relations. Previous studies have likewise shown that textbook texts and illustrations continue to reproduce gender stereotypes through the distribution of activities, social spaces, and social positions assigned to male and female characters.

Table 2. Example of Gender Analysis in SIBI Textbook

No	Data Source	Character	G	Position	Activities	Identity Roles	Interaction Roles	Spaces
1	<i>Tak Muat Lagi</i>	Lala	P	TU	AD, AS, AP	KF, PL	KP, ST	RD
2	<i>Tak Muat Lagi</i>	Kiki	P	TU	AD, AS	KF	PG, ST	RD
3	<i>Berkunjung ke Gedung Djoeang '45 Solo</i>	Aku	N	TU	AR, AS	MS	ST	RP

Notes: G = Gender. Coding categories follow the framework presented in Table 1.

As shown in Table 2, the narrative *Tak Muat Lagi* portrays the female characters Lala and Kiki as main characters (TU) engaged in domestic (AD), social (AS), and educational (AP) activities. The quotation, “Lala baru saja pulang sekolah. Cuaca panas membuatnya buru-buru masuk rumah,” indicates Lala’s role as a student while placing the event within a domestic setting, whereas “Kakak pasti haus. Ini, minum dulu” reflects social interaction. Both characters are identified as family members (KF), while Lala is also categorized as a student (PL). Their interaction roles include decision maker (KP), follower (PG), and equal (ST), with all activities occurring in a domestic space (RD). In *Berkunjung ke Gedung Djoeang '45 Solo*, the character *aku* is categorized as gender-neutral because the text provides no explicit indication of gender. By contrast, Pak Budi Pur is portrayed as a male museum guide who occupies a public role associated with authority and expertise. These examples illustrate how the coding framework was applied consistently throughout the study. Gender representation was identified through character visibility, activities, identity roles, interaction roles, and activity spaces before the complete dataset was analyzed.

Table 3. Frequency of Gender Representation in Grade IV Narrative Texts

Variable	Category	L (n)	(%)	P (n)	(%)	N (n)	(%)	Total
Character Gender	L	24	55.8	-	-	-	-	24
	P	-	-	15	34.9	-	-	15
	N	-	-	-	-	4	9.3	4
Character Position	TU	9	64.3	4	28.6	1	7.1	14
	TP	15	51.7	11	37.9	3	10.3	29
Character Activities	AD	1	14.3	6	85.7	0	0	7
	AP	7	50.0	4	28.6	3	21.4	14
	AK	4	66.7	2	33.3	0	0	6
	AS	6	42.9	5	35.7	3	21.4	14
	AR	9	75.0	2	16.7	1	8.3	12
Identity Roles	KF	14	48.3	12	41.4	3	10.3	29
	PK	4	57.1	3	42.9	0	0	7
	PL	7	58.3	3	25.0	2	16.7	12
	MS	2	33.3	1	16.7	3	50.0	6
Social Interaction Roles	PM	3	27.3	5	45.5	3	27.3	11
	KP	3	42.9	4	57.1	0	0	7
	PG	5	50.0	1	10.0	4	40.0	10
	ST	13	59.1	9	40.9	0	0	22
Activity Spaces	RD	11	42.3	12	46.2	3	11.5	26
	RP	15	57.7	5	19.2	6	23.1	26

RS	5	62.5	2	25.0	1	12.5	8
----	---	------	---	------	---	------	---

Notes: n indicates the frequency of character occurrences based on gender categories in each variable, while (%) indicates the percentage of occurrences.

Table 3 shows that male characters account for 55.8% of all characters in Grade IV narrative texts, followed by female characters (34.9%) and gender-neutral characters (9.3%). Male characters also appear more frequently as main characters (64.3%) than female and neutral characters. Regarding character activities, female characters dominate domestic activities (85.7%), whereas male characters are more frequently represented in public or occupational activities (66.7%) and recreational activities (75.0%). In terms of activity spaces, male characters appear more often in public spaces (57.7%) and school spaces (62.5%), while female characters are slightly more dominant in domestic spaces (46.2%). For identity roles, male characters are more frequently represented as workers (57.1%) and students (58.3%), whereas female characters show relatively similar representation in family roles (41.4%). In social interaction roles, female characters are more frequently portrayed as leaders (45.5%) and decision makers (57.1%), while male characters are more commonly represented as followers (50.0%) and in equal relationships (59.1%).

Table 4. Frequency of Gender Representation in Grade V Narrative Texts

Variable	Category	L (n)	L (%)	P (n)	P (%)	N (n)	N (%)	Total
Character Gender	L	15	45.5	-	-	-	-	15
	P	-	-	13	39.4	-	-	13
	N	-	-	-	-	5	15.2	5
Character Position	TU	9	47.4	8	42.1	2	10.5	19
	TP	6	42.9	5	35.7	3	21.4	14
Character Activities	AD	1	20.0	4	80.0	0	0	5
	AP	8	38.1	9	42.9	4	19.0	21
	AK	14	58.3	6	25.0	4	16.7	24
	AS	4	44.4	2	22.2	3	33.3	9
	AR	5	38.5	6	46.2	2	15.4	13
Identity Roles	KF	8	42.1	8	42.1	3	15.8	19
	PK	6	75.0	2	25.0	0	0	8
	PL	7	36.8	9	47.4	3	15.8	19
	MS	3	60.0	1	20.0	1	20.0	5
	PM	7	63.6	2	18.2	2	18.2	11
Social Interaction Roles	KP	7	53.8	5	38.5	1	7.7	13
	PG	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	ST	8	42.1	8	42.1	3	15.8	19
Activity Spaces	RD	5	38.5	7	53.8	1	7.7	13
	RP	14	46.7	8	26.7	8	26.7	30
	RS	7	46.7	7	46.7	1	6.7	15

Notes: n indicates the frequency of character occurrences based on gender categories in each variable, while (%) indicates the percentage of occurrences.

Table 4 shows a more balanced distribution of gender representation in Grade V narrative texts than in Grade IV. Male characters account for 45.5% of all characters, while female characters represent 39.4% and gender-neutral characters 15.2%. Male characters remain slightly more dominant as main characters (47.4%), although female characters also appear frequently in this role (42.1%). Regarding activities, female characters dominate domestic activities (80.0%) and show relatively high participation in educational (42.9%) and recreational activities (46.2%). Male characters are more frequently represented in public or occupational activities (58.3%). In terms of identity roles, female characters appear more frequently as students (47.4%), whereas male characters dominate worker roles (75.0%). For social interaction roles, male characters are more frequently portrayed as leaders (63.6%) and decision makers (53.8%). Equal interaction is

represented equally by male and female characters (42.1%). Activity spaces also show a relatively balanced distribution, particularly in school settings, where male and female characters each account for 46.7%.

Table 5. Frequency of Gender Representation in Grade VI Narrative Texts

Variable	Category	L (n)	L (%)	P (n)	P (%)	N (n)	N (%)	Total
Character Gender	L	12	35.3	-	-	-	-	12
	P	-	-	19	55.9	-	-	19
	N	-	-	-	-	1	2.9	1
Character Position	TU	3	33.3	8	88.9	0	0	11
	TP	9	39.1	11	47.8	1	4.3	21
Character Activities	AD	0	0	1	100	0	0	1
	AP	6	28.6	15	71.4	0	0	21
	AK	5	45.5	5	45.5	1	9.1	11
	AS	10	32.3	20	64.5	1	3.2	31
	AR	2	40.0	3	60.0	0	0	5
Identity Roles	KF	7	43.8	8	50.0	1	6.3	16
	PK	4	44.4	5	55.6	0	0	9
	PL	8	38.1	13	61.9	0	0	21
	MS	3	42.9	4	57.1	0	0	7
Social Interaction Roles	PM	3	27.3	8	72.7	0	0	11
	KP	1	100	0	0	0	0	1
	PG	0	0	0	0	1	100	1
	ST	11	47.8	12	52.2	0	0	23
Activity Spaces	RD	4	33.3	8	66.7	0	0	12
	RP	6	42.9	7	50.0	1	7.1	14
	RS	7	33.3	14	66.7	0	0	21

Notes: n indicates the frequency of character occurrences based on gender categories in each variable, while (%) indicates the percentage of occurrences.

Table 5 presents the frequency of gender representation in Grade VI narrative texts. Female characters appear more frequently (55.9%) than male characters (35.3%), while gender-neutral characters account for only 2.9%. Female characters also dominate the main character category (88.9%), whereas supporting characters are more evenly distributed, although female characters remain slightly more frequent (47.8%) than male characters (39.1%). Across activity categories, female characters are most prominent in educational activities (71.4%) and social activities (64.5%). Public or occupational activities are represented equally by male and female characters (45.5% each), while the only domestic activity identified is assigned to a female character. In terms of identity roles, female characters appear more frequently as family members, workers, students, and community members than male characters. A similar pattern is found in social interaction roles and activity spaces. Female characters dominate leadership roles (72.7%), while equal interactions are relatively balanced between female (52.2%) and male characters (47.8%). Female characters are also more frequently represented in school spaces (66.7%) and domestic spaces (66.7%), whereas public spaces show a more balanced distribution, with female characters accounting for 50.0% and male characters for 42.9%.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that gender representation in Indonesian language textbooks under the Merdeka Curriculum is undergoing a gradual transformation toward greater inclusiveness rather than a complete departure from traditional gender norms. The progression from male-dominated representations in Grade IV to more balanced portrayals in Grade V and increasingly inclusive narratives in Grade VI suggests that curriculum reform

has begun to influence the construction of gender identities in educational materials. This pattern supports the view that textbooks function not merely as instructional resources but also as socializing agents that shape children's perceptions of gender roles and social expectations (Canale & Furtado, 2021; Master, 2021). The results are consistent with studies reporting that curriculum reforms have encouraged more equitable gender representation while acknowledging that stereotypes often persist in subtle forms (Bachore & Semela, 2022; Fithriani, 2022; Worku, 2025). Consequently, the findings indicate that gender equality in textbooks should be understood as an evolving process rather than a binary condition of equality or inequality.

The predominance of male characters in Grade IV, particularly in public activities, educational settings, and narrative prominence, reflects the continued influence of conventional gender norms within elementary educational materials. From the perspective of the multidimensional gender representation framework, visibility and character positioning contribute significantly to children's perceptions of authority, competence, and social participation. Although female characters are portrayed as decision-makers in several narratives, they remain strongly associated with domestic activities, suggesting that traditional gender expectations continue to coexist with more progressive representations. This finding aligns with previous research demonstrating that textbook revisions frequently reduce explicit gender bias without fully eliminating implicit stereotypes embedded in character roles and activity distribution (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023; Kumar et al., 2025; Tyarakanita et al., 2021). Therefore, the findings imply that increasing the number of female characters alone is insufficient unless accompanied by more diverse and non-stereotypical role assignments.

A notable transition emerges in Grade V, where gender representation becomes more balanced across character positions, educational participation, and interaction roles. This finding suggests that the Merdeka Curriculum has begun to operationalize its inclusive educational philosophy by providing boys and girls with relatively comparable opportunities to participate in learning and social activities. Such a pattern supports contemporary perspectives on gender-responsive education, which emphasize balanced participation rather than numerical equality alone (Rahman, 2025; Purnomo et al., 2025). Compared with earlier studies that reported persistent male dominance across textbook narratives (Phipps & Prieto, 2021; Kostas, 2021), the present findings indicate measurable progress toward more equitable representation. Nevertheless, the continued concentration of female characters in domestic activities illustrates that curriculum reform has not yet completely transformed the cultural narratives embedded within educational texts.

The most significant finding appears in Grade VI, where female characters become more visible as main characters and assume leadership, educational, and community roles more frequently than in the preceding grades. This result extends previous studies by demonstrating that female empowerment can be represented not only through character frequency but also through leadership, agency, and participation across multiple social contexts. The findings are consistent with recent international research emphasizing that meaningful gender equality requires the integration of representation across identity, interaction, and social spaces rather than isolated improvements in visibility (Adal, 2025; Ederoclite et al., 2025; Yoshida, 2023). At the same time, the persistence of female involvement in domestic settings indicates that inclusive narratives continue to coexist with culturally embedded gender expectations. This coexistence suggests that textbook development is influenced by both progressive educational policies and broader societal values, producing a gradual rather than revolutionary transformation of gender representation.

Another important contribution of this study lies in the application of a multidimensional analytical framework encompassing character visibility, position, activities, identity roles, interaction roles, and activity spaces. Unlike many previous studies that focused primarily on character frequency or occupational roles, the present analysis demonstrates that gender equality cannot be adequately evaluated through a single indicator. Instead, different dimensions interact to construct more nuanced representations of masculinity and femininity within textbook narratives. This finding reinforces the theoretical relevance of the Brugeilles and Cromer framework while extending its application to the context of Indonesian elementary education under the Merdeka Curriculum. Accordingly, this study contributes to the growing international literature by showing that multidimensional analysis provides a more comprehensive basis for evaluating gender responsiveness in educational materials.

Overall, the findings suggest that the Merdeka Curriculum has made meaningful progress toward promoting more inclusive gender representation, although important challenges remain. The coexistence of equitable participation with persistent domestic stereotypes indicates that curriculum reform alone is insufficient to transform deeply rooted cultural assumptions reflected in textbook narratives. From a practical perspective, textbook authors and curriculum developers should not only increase gender balance in character representation but also diversify leadership roles, occupations, social interactions, and activity spaces assigned to both male and female characters. Theoretically, this study contributes to the global discourse on gender representation by demonstrating that inclusiveness should be assessed through interconnected dimensions rather than isolated indicators. In this way, the research fills an important gap in previous Indonesian studies and provides evidence that the implementation of inclusive curriculum policies must be accompanied by equally inclusive narrative construction within learning materials.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that gender representation in narrative texts contained in Grades IV, V, and VI Indonesian language textbooks under the Merdeka Curriculum is characterized by a gradual progression toward greater inclusiveness while still reflecting elements of traditional gender stereotypes. The analysis indicates that male characters remain more prominent in Grade IV, particularly in public activities and educational settings, whereas Grade V exhibits a more balanced distribution of gender roles, and Grade VI presents the most inclusive representation through the increased visibility of female characters in educational, social, and leadership contexts. Nevertheless, the continued association of female characters with domestic activities suggests that conventional gender norms have not been completely displaced. These findings highlight that assessing gender equality in textbooks requires a multidimensional perspective that considers not only the numerical visibility of male and female characters but also their positions, activities, identity roles, interaction patterns, and activity spaces. By applying the analytical framework of Brugeilles and Cromer (2009) to official Indonesian language textbooks across three elementary grade levels, this study contributes to the literature by providing a more comprehensive understanding of gender representation within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings also offer practical implications for textbook authors, curriculum developers, publishers, and educational policymakers to strengthen gender-responsive learning materials that promote more equitable representations of boys and girls across diverse educational and social contexts. Future research is encouraged to expand the scope of analysis by incorporating visual representations, textbooks from other subject areas and educational levels, as well as classroom perspectives from teachers and students, in order to

develop a more comprehensive understanding of how gender representation in educational materials shapes learners' perceptions of equality and social inclusion.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Elsa Rahmalia Putri Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, coding, formal analysis, interpretation of findings, visualization, writing original draft preparation. Nadia Tiara Antik Sari Conceptualization, supervision, methodology validation, investigation, critical review and editing of the manuscript, project administration, and corresponding author responsibilities. Neneng Sri Wulan Supervision, validation, interpretation of findings, manuscript review and editing, and final approval of the manuscript. All authors contributed substantially to the study, discussed the results, critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, and approved the final version for publication.

REFERENCES

- Abdilla, A. J., Draji, N. A., & Sariyatun. (2025). A pathway to reach equity: Unearthing gender discourse in the paradigm of Indonesian history education curriculum. *Education as Change*, 29(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/16986>
- Adal, J. M. (2025). Any progress after a decade? Comparing gender representation in government mandated primary education textbooks in Ethiopia. *Quality Education for All*, 2(1), 577–597. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QEA-03-2025-0013>
- Bachore, M., & Semela, T. (2022). Is gender-bias in textbooks spilled over from schools to universities? Evidence from Ethiopian university English language course textbooks. *Cogent Education*, 9(1), 2152616. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2022.2152616>
- Boddington, M. I. (2024). Reshaping gendered norms in entrepreneurship: Incorporating gender identity and entrepreneurial practice. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 31(2), 378–398. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13075>
- Brown, G. T. L. (2024). Teaching advanced statistical methods to postgraduate novices: A case example. *Frontiers in Education*, 8, Article 1302326. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2023.1302326>
- Canale, G., & Furtado, V. (2021). Gender in EFL education: Negotiating textbook discourse in the classroom. *Changing English*, 28(1), 58–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2020.1812377>
- Carpinella, C., & Bauer, N. M. (2021). A visual analysis of gender stereotypes in campaign advertising. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 9(2), 369–386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1637353>
- Duby, Z., Bergh, K., Jonas, K., Reddy, T., Bunce, B., Fowler, C., & Mathews, C. (2023). “Men rule... this is the normal thing. We normalise it and it's wrong”: Gendered power in decision-making around sex and condom use in heterosexual relationships amongst adolescents and young people in South Africa. *AIDS and Behavior*, 27(6), 2015–2029. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-022-03935-8>
- Ederoclite, M., Villano, P., & Castro, A. (2025). “You’re a man, so you’re out of place”: Reflexive thematic analysis of focus group with Italian teachers and educators. *Social Psychology of Education*, 28(1), Article 37. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-025-10020-0>
- Elorza, I. (2023). Gender-inclusive picture books in the classroom: A multimodal analysis of male subjective agencies. *Linguistics and Education*, 78, Article 101242. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2023.101242>
- Fawaid, A., & Handayani, P. (2025). Visualizing inequality: Uncovering gender bias in Islamic textbooks of Indonesia. *Cogent Education*, 12(1), 2593342. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2593342>
- Fike, K. J., & Mattis, J. S. (2024). Gender, race, and space: A qualitative exploration of young Black women’s perceptions of urban neighborhoods. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 74(1–2), 152–168. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12752>
- Fithriani, R. (2022). Gender stereotypes in educational texts: A comparative study of Indonesian and international primary English textbooks. *Discourse and Interaction*, 15(2), 53–76.
- Košir, S., & Lakshminarayanan, R. (2023). Do visual constructs in social science textbooks evince gender stereotypes and bias? A case study from India. *Gender and Education*, 35(1), 69–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2022.2144626>
- Kostas, M. (2021). Discursive construction of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity in the textbooks of primary education: Children’s discursive agency and polysemy of the narratives. *Gender and Education*, 33(1), 50–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1632807>

- Kumar, A., Kumari, A., McKeown, D., & Syed, H. (2025). Tale of textbooks: A critical discourse analysis of gender representation in Pakistani elementary English language textbooks. *Linguistics and Education*, 88, Article 101441. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2025.101441>
- Lau, W. S., & Shea, M. (2024). Empowering English learners in the classroom through culturally responsive social-emotional teaching practices. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 45(7), 2880–2897. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2078337>
- Master, A. (2021). Gender stereotypes influence children's STEM motivation. *Child Development Perspectives*, 15(3), 203–210. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12424>
- Msofi Mgalamadzi, L., Matita, M., & Chimombo, M. (2024). The gendered nature of household decision making and expenditure choices in the context of smallholder agricultural commercialization in Malawi. *CABI Agriculture and Bioscience*, 5(1), Article 65. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43170-024-00270-x>
- Nussbaumer, L., Blankvoort, N., & Farias, L. (2025). Challenging the gender binary in occupation-based research: A feminist critical discourse analysis of sex differences. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 32(3), 517–532. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2024.2374309>
- Phipps, S. T. A., & Prieto, L. C. (2021). Leaning in: A historical perspective on influencing women's leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 173(2), 245–259. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04566-6>
- Pratiwi, Y., Andajani, K., Suyitno, I., Ismail, A., & Prastio, B. (2023). Representing and implementing moral values to foreign students in Indonesian textbooks for learners other than Indonesians. *International Journal of Language Education*, 7(1), 58–76.
- Purnomo, A. M., Fauziah, R. S. P., Martin, A. Y., Roestamy, M., Nita, K. S. R., & Warizal. (2025). Communicating gender equality: Critical analysis of gendered language in social science textbooks for Alpha generation. *International Journal of Language Education*, 9(4), 720–738.
- Rahman, Y. A. (2025). Developing inclusive education models to advance gender justice and social equity for all learners. *Nusantara Education*, 4(2), 11–25. <https://doi.org/10.66325/nusantaraeducation.v4i2.249>
- Rubegni, E., Landoni, M., Malinverni, L., & Jaccheri, L. (2022). Raising awareness of stereotyping through collaborative digital storytelling: Design for change with and for children. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 157, Article 102727. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2021.102727>
- Scarcelli, C. M., & Farci, M. (2024). Negotiating gender in the digital age: Young people and the representation of femininity and masculinity on social media. *Italian Sociological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.13136/isr.v14i1.645>
- Schumacher, K. J., Bundock, L., & Clough, P. (2025). Resisting uniformity: How transgender and gender-diverse teachers subvert school dress codes for self-affirmation and possibility. *Social Sciences*, 14(12), Article 706. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14120706>
- Shah, R. (2024). Navigating non-normative roles: Experiences of female-breadwinning couples in Pakistan. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 54(1), 251–264. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.3013>
- Sulla, F., Agueli, B., Lavanga, A., Logrieco, M. G. M., Fantinelli, S., & Esposito, C. (2025). Analysis of the development of gender stereotypes and sexist attitudes within a group of Italian high school students and teachers: A grounded theory investigation. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(2), Article 230. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15020230>
- Tyarakanita, A., Drahati, N. A., Rochsantiningsih, D., & Nurkamto, J. (2021). The representation of gender stereotypes in Indonesian English language textbooks. *Sexuality & Culture*, 25(3), 1140–1157. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-021-09813-0>
- Vydra, M., & Kováčik, J. (2025). A global review of biology textbook analyses: Exploring the trends, gaps and silences across topics. *Review of Education*, 13(3), Article e70124. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.70124>
- Worku, M. Y. (2025). Examining gender responsiveness in Ethiopian educational materials: Implications for Sustainable Development Goals. *Sustainable Development*, 33(6), 8468–8478. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.70111>
- Yoshida, M. (2023). Representations of gender and sexual orientation over three editions of a Japanese language learning textbook series. *Gender and Language*, 17(2), 198–221. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.23358>
- Zhao, W. (2022). The impact of gender stereotypes in education on female students' psychological development. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 1012–1017. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220704.184>
- Zieher, A. K., Bailey, C. S., Cipriano, C., McNaboe, T., Smith, K., & Strambler, M. J. (2024). Considering the “how” of SEL: A framework for the pedagogies of social and emotional learning. *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy*, 3, Article 100030. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sel.2024.100030>