



## Gender Equality in Arabic Language Education in the Digital Era: A Critical Analytical Study of the *Al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah al-Muyassarah* Textbook at Islamic University of Pemalang

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### Abstract:

Gender representation in educational materials has become a significant issue because it shapes learners' perceptions of social roles and identities. Previous studies on Arabic language textbooks have largely reported gender bias, male dominance, and stereotypical portrayals of women. However, few studies have examined textbooks that promote balanced gender representation, particularly those developed within Islamic higher education institutions. This study analyzes gender equality in *Al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah al-Muyassarah*, an Arabic language textbook developed by the Language Development Center of Islamic University of Pemalang. Using a qualitative approach, the research employs content analysis and Sara Mills' feminist discourse analysis to examine five dimensions of gender representation: subject position, object position, professional role representation, activity representation, and visual representation. The findings indicate that male and female characters are represented in relatively balanced ways throughout the textbook. Female characters frequently occupy subject positions, actively participate in academic and social interactions, and appear in diverse professional roles. The textbook also presents masculine and feminine occupational forms in parallel structures while depicting women in educational, recreational, and professional activities. Visual representations further reinforce these inclusive patterns. From Sara Mills' perspective, the textbook constructs gender equality by positioning women as active learners, professionals, and social actors rather than passive objects. The study concludes that *Al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah al-Muyassarah* demonstrates the characteristics of a gender-responsive Arabic language textbook and offers a valuable model for developing inclusive Arabic language teaching materials in the digital era. Keywords: gender equality, Arabic language education, Sara Mills,

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## Introduction (مقدمة)

Gender equality has become one of the most prominent issues in contemporary education due to its close relationship with social inclusion, educational justice, and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2023; Unterhalter, 2019). In recent decades, educational institutions worldwide have been encouraged to provide learning environments that promote equal opportunities for all learners regardless of gender. This commitment is reflected in various international frameworks, including Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which emphasizes the importance of eliminating discrimination and fostering gender equality across all sectors, including education (United Nations, 2023). Within this context, educational materials are increasingly expected not only to facilitate knowledge acquisition but also to reflect values of inclusivity, fairness, and equal participation.

The rapid development of digital technology has further intensified demands for inclusive educational resources. In the digital era, students are exposed to diverse sources of information and increasingly engage with global discourses concerning equality, diversity, and social justice. Consequently, textbooks can no longer be viewed merely as instructional tools designed to teach linguistic knowledge. They also function as cultural and ideological texts that shape learners' perceptions of social identities, gender relations, and acceptable social roles (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Curdt-Christiansen & Weninger, 2015). Through dialogues, narratives, illustrations, examples, and vocabulary choices, textbooks implicitly construct particular understandings of how men and women should behave, interact, and participate in society. Therefore, the issue of gender representation in educational materials remains highly relevant despite ongoing technological transformations in education.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that textbooks often contain unequal gender representations. Research conducted in various educational contexts indicates that male characters are frequently portrayed as active participants in public life, occupying positions associated with leadership, professional achievement, and decision-making. In contrast, female characters are commonly represented within domestic environments and supportive social roles (Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020; Xiong et al., 2021). Such patterns may contribute to the reproduction of gender stereotypes and influence learners' perceptions regarding social expectations and gendered responsibilities (Blumberg, 2008). As a result, textbook analysis has become an important area of inquiry within educational and linguistic research.

Similar concerns have emerged in language education. Studies on language textbooks have revealed that gender representation is frequently embedded within linguistic structures, textual narratives, occupational descriptions, and visual illustrations (Sunderland, 2000; Barton & Sakwa, 2012). These representations are particularly influential because language learning materials do not merely provide grammatical knowledge but also expose learners to social realities through

contextualized examples and communicative situations. Consequently, language textbooks play a significant role in shaping students' understanding of social relationships, identities, and cultural norms.

Within the field of Arabic language education, research on gender representation has gained increasing attention. Several studies examining Arabic language textbooks used in schools and madrasahs have reported gender imbalance in textual and visual content. Male figures are often presented more frequently than female figures and tend to dominate professional, academic, and public activities. Female characters, meanwhile, are frequently associated with family-related responsibilities and domestic roles (Setiawan et al., 2023; Fajriah, 2024). Other studies have identified unequal occupational representation, limited female visibility, and stereotypical depictions of women within Arabic language learning materials (Mufidah & Hasanah, 2022). These findings indicate that gender representation remains a critical issue in the development of Arabic language textbooks.

Although the existing literature provides valuable insights into gender representation in Arabic language education, several important gaps remain. First, most previous studies focus primarily on identifying gender bias, discrimination, and unequal representation. As a result, scholarly attention has been directed largely toward revealing problematic portrayals rather than examining how educational materials may promote balanced and inclusive gender representation (Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020; Xiong et al., 2021). Second, existing research predominantly investigates textbooks designed for primary and secondary education, while studies focusing on Arabic language textbooks developed within higher education institutions remain relatively limited. Third, Arabic language teaching materials produced by Indonesian Islamic universities have received little scholarly attention despite their growing role in developing contextualized and innovative learning resources.

These gaps are particularly important because contemporary Arabic language education is experiencing significant changes. Universities are increasingly expected to develop teaching materials that are not only linguistically effective but also socially responsive (UNESCO, 2023). In this regard, gender-responsive textbooks can contribute to more inclusive learning environments by providing equitable representation of both male and female learners. Investigating such materials is therefore essential for understanding how educational institutions respond to contemporary demands for equality and inclusivity.

To investigate these patterns systematically, this study employs Sara Mills' feminist discourse analysis framework. Sara Mills argues that gender representation is constructed through discourse, particularly through the positioning of subjects and objects within texts (Mills, 1995; Mills, 1997). This perspective enables researchers to examine not only the visibility of male and female characters but also the ways in which they are positioned, represented, and assigned social roles. By focusing on subject positions, object positions, professional role representation, activity representation, and visual representation, the framework provides an effective analytical tool for exploring how gender equality is constructed within educational materials.



## Method (منهج)

This study employed a qualitative approach using content analysis to investigate gender representation in an Arabic language textbook. Qualitative content analysis was selected because it enables researchers to systematically examine textual and visual data while identifying underlying meanings, social values, and patterns of representation embedded within educational materials (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Schreier, 2012). This approach is particularly suitable for

exploring how gender identities and social roles are constructed through language and discourse in textbooks.

The primary data source of this study was *Al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah al-Muyassarah*, an Arabic language textbook developed by the Language Development Center of Islamic University of Pemalang in 2025. The textbook consists of ten thematic units covering self-introduction, university life, family, hobbies, sports, professions, transportation, travel, shopping, and employment after graduation. The textbook was selected because it serves as one of the primary Arabic learning resources for university students and contains various textual and visual elements that potentially reflect gender representation.

The unit of analysis included dialogues, reading passages, vocabulary items, exercises, occupational references, illustrations, and other visual representations appearing throughout the textbook. Both textual and visual data were examined to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how male and female characters were represented within the learning materials.

Data were collected through document analysis. The researchers carefully read and reviewed the entire textbook to identify textual and visual elements related to gender representation. Relevant data were then classified and organized according to predetermined analytical categories derived from Sara Mills' feminist discourse analysis framework. Document analysis is widely used in qualitative research because it allows researchers to examine written materials systematically and contextually without interfering with the natural setting of the data (Bowen, 2009).

The analytical framework was adapted from Sara Mills' feminist discourse perspective, which emphasizes the construction of gender through discursive positioning (Mills, 1995; Mills, 1997). According to Mills, gender representation can be examined through the ways individuals are positioned as subjects or objects within discourse and how social identities are constructed through textual representation. Based on this framework, five analytical categories were employed in the present study: (1) subject position, referring to male and female characters who actively perform actions or become central actors in discourse; (2) object position, referring to individuals who become the target or object of discussion; (3) professional role representation, referring to occupational identities assigned to male and female characters; (4) activity representation, referring to social, academic, professional, and daily activities associated with each gender; and (5) visual representation, referring to the portrayal of male and female characters in illustrations and other visual elements.

The data analysis followed three stages. First, the researchers identified and coded all textual and visual data related to gender representation throughout the textbook. Second, the coded data were categorized according to the five analytical dimensions derived from Sara Mills' framework. Third, the findings were interpreted critically to identify patterns of gender representation and to evaluate whether the textbook tended to reproduce gender stereotypes or promote balanced gender representation. This analytical procedure follows the principles of qualitative content analysis, which emphasize systematic coding, categorization, and interpretation of textual data (Schreier, 2012).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, data interpretation was conducted systematically using explicit analytical indicators derived from the theoretical framework. All interpretations were based on textual and visual evidence identified within the textbook. The analysis focused on observable representations rather than personal assumptions, thereby ensuring that the findings remained grounded in the data. Trustworthiness was maintained through consistent coding procedures and evidence-based interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

One of the researchers was involved in the development of the textbook under investigation. To minimize potential bias, the analysis was conducted using predetermined analytical categories established prior to data coding. Furthermore, all interpretations were derived from documented textual and visual evidence found throughout the textbook, ensuring transparency and consistency during the analytical process.

Through this methodological approach, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how gender equality is represented in *Al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah al-Muyassarah* and to contribute to discussions on gender-responsive Arabic language teaching materials in higher education.



## Result (نتائج) and Discussion (مناقشة)

### Gender Representation through Subject Position

One of the primary dimensions examined in this study concerns the positioning of male and female characters as subjects within the discourse. According to Sara Mills, subject position refers to individuals who actively perform actions, express opinions, initiate interactions, and become central actors within a narrative. This concept is central to feminist discourse analysis because it reveals whose voice is authorized to construct meaning within a text and whose experiences are foregrounded in the narrative (Mills, 1995; Mills, 1997). The analysis revealed that both male and female characters occupy subject positions throughout the textbook.

Table 1. Gender Representation in *Al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah al-Muyassarah*

| Analytical Dimension    | Findings                                                                                                | Interpretation                                                |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Subject Position        | Male and female characters actively participate in dialogues and communication activities               | Both genders are represented as active discourse participants |
| Object Position         | Male and female characters appear as discussion topics and social actors                                | Representation is relatively balanced                         |
| Professional Roles      | Male and female occupational forms are presented in parallel (e.g., mudarris/mudarrisah, ṭabīb/ṭabībah) | Professional opportunities are represented for both genders   |
| Activity Representation | Female characters engage in academic, social, and recreational activities                               | Female representation extends beyond domestic roles           |
| Visual Representation   | Male and female characters appear in various educational and social contexts                            | Visual content supports balanced representation               |

In the introductory units, male and female learners are represented through parallel linguistic structures. The textbook introduces masculine and feminine forms simultaneously, including *ṭālib* (male student) and *ṭālibah* (female student), as well as masculine and feminine pronouns. Such parallel representation indicates that female learners are positioned as equal participants in the learning process rather than as secondary linguistic references.

Table 2. Examples of Female Subject Position

| Character | Context          | Subject Role                                 |
|-----------|------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Fatimah   | Family dialogue  | Provides information and responds actively   |
| Zainab    | University life  | Participates in academic interaction         |
| Salma     | Hobby discussion | Expresses preferences and future aspirations |

The representation becomes more visible in the units discussing university life and family. Female characters such as Fatimah, Zainab, and Salma actively participate in conversations, ask



questions, provide information, and express personal experiences. Rather than functioning as passive recipients of information, they become central actors in the discourse. For example, Fatimah actively explains her family background, introduces family members, and responds to various questions during the dialogue.

These findings differ from many previous studies that reported the dominance of male characters in educational materials and the marginalization of female voices within textbook discourse (Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020; Xiong et al., 2021). The presence of female characters as active speakers and information providers suggests that the textbook promotes a more balanced distribution of discursive agency between male and female learners.

#### Gender Representation through Object Position

Sara Mills also emphasizes the importance of examining object positions within discourse. Object position refers to individuals who become the focus of discussion, description, or representation. The analysis indicates that both male and female characters appear as objects of discourse throughout the textbook.

In family-related dialogues, male and female family members are introduced and described in relatively balanced ways. Fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters are discussed within the same conversational context. Female characters are not restricted to peripheral roles but are represented as important members of social and family networks.

Furthermore, the textbook does not portray women solely through relational identities such as wives or mothers. Female characters are also described through educational and professional identities, indicating broader forms of representation. This finding suggests that the textbook avoids reducing women to purely domestic identities and instead acknowledges multiple dimensions of female participation in society.

Similar concerns have been highlighted in previous gender studies, which found that women are frequently represented through relational identities such as wives, mothers, or daughters rather than through autonomous educational and professional identities (Blumberg, 2008; Sunderland, 2000). In contrast, the present textbook demonstrates a broader representation of female social roles.

#### Professional Role Representation

Professional representation constitutes one of the most significant indicators of gender equality in educational materials. Previous studies frequently reported that male characters dominate prestigious occupations, while female characters are associated with limited professional roles. However, the findings of this study demonstrate a different pattern.

The textbook presents various occupations, including teachers, doctors, engineers, drivers, lawyers, farmers, and nurses. More importantly, professional identities are frequently introduced through both masculine and feminine linguistic forms. Examples include *mudarris* and *mudarrisah* (teacher), *ṭabīb* and *ṭabībah* (doctor), and *tājir* and *tājirah* (merchant).

Table 3. Gender Representation in Occupational Roles

| Masculine Form | Feminine Form | Occupational Category |
|----------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Mudarris       | Mudarrisah    | Education             |
| Ṭabīb          | Ṭabībah       | Health                |
| Tājir          | Tājirah       | Commerce              |
| Ṣaydali        | Ṣaydaliyah    | Pharmacy              |

As presented in Table 3, occupational identities are represented through parallel masculine and feminine forms. Such linguistic representation reflects an inclusive approach to professional

identity construction and suggests that both men and women are equally entitled to participate in public and professional domains (Mills, 1995).

Female professional representation is also evident within the dialogues. In one example, Fatimah introduces her mother as a doctor working at the university clinic. This representation is particularly noteworthy because it places a female character within a respected professional occupation rather than restricting her role to household activities.

From a gender perspective, these findings indicate that the textbook recognizes women's participation in professional life and presents occupational opportunities as accessible to both genders. Such representation reflects contemporary educational values that encourage equal participation in public and professional domains. This finding contrasts with several previous studies on educational textbooks that reported the concentration of prestigious occupations among male characters and the underrepresentation of women in professional roles (Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020).

### Activity Representation

The analysis of activity representation reveals that male and female characters are associated with diverse social, academic, and recreational activities. Female characters are portrayed as participating in higher education, reading, sports, artistic activities, photography, cycling, and music-related hobbies. For example, dialogues involving Fatimah and Salma show their interests in reading, sports, drawing, photography, and other creative activities.

These activities extend beyond traditional domestic responsibilities often associated with women in educational materials. Female characters are represented as individuals with personal aspirations, intellectual interests, and active social engagement. Meanwhile, male characters also participate in educational, professional, and recreational activities, creating a relatively balanced pattern of representation.

Although some units, particularly those discussing sports, feature male characters more prominently, this tendency does not appear to dominate the textbook as a whole. Instead, the overall distribution of activities demonstrates that both genders are represented as active participants in various aspects of everyday life. This pattern differs from findings reported in several studies where female activities were predominantly associated with domestic responsibilities and supportive roles (Blumberg, 2008; Sunderland, 2000).

### Visual Representation

Visual representation constitutes another important aspect of gender construction in educational materials. Images often communicate social messages more directly than textual content and may reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes.

The analysis indicates that male and female characters are both visible within the textbook's illustrations. Female characters appear in academic, social, and recreational contexts, while male characters are likewise represented in educational and social activities. The visual content does not exclusively associate women with domestic environments or men with public authority. Instead, the illustrations generally support the balanced representation found in the textual material.

This finding is important because previous research has frequently identified gender imbalance not only in textual narratives but also in visual depictions. Studies have shown that illustrations often reinforce stereotypes by assigning public roles primarily to men while limiting women to domestic settings (Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Sunderland, 2000). In contrast, the visual elements of *Al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah al-Muyassarah* tend to complement the textbook's broader pattern of inclusive gender representation.

## Toward a Gender-Responsive Arabic Language Textbook

The findings collectively indicate that *Al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah al-Muyassarah* presents a relatively balanced representation of gender across textual and visual dimensions. Female characters appear as active subjects, occupy professional roles, participate in academic and social activities, and receive visible representation in illustrations. Similarly, male characters are represented without monopolizing public or professional spaces.

Unlike many previous studies that reported male dominance and stereotypical portrayals of women in Arabic language textbooks, the present study suggests a different tendency. The textbook demonstrates efforts to represent male and female learners through parallel linguistic forms, diversified occupational identities, and inclusive social participation. These characteristics indicate that the textbook aligns with contemporary principles of gender-responsive education, which emphasize equitable representation, participation, and visibility for all learners regardless of gender (UNESCO, 2023).

From the perspective of Sara Mills' feminist discourse analysis, the findings suggest that gender equality in the textbook is constructed not merely through numerical balance but through discursive positioning. Women are represented as speaking subjects, knowledgeable individuals, learners, and professionals. The findings also support the view that gender equality in educational materials should not be measured solely by numerical balance but by the quality of representation and the opportunities afforded to both genders within discourse (Mills, 1997; UNESCO, 2023). Consequently, the textbook contributes to a more inclusive understanding of gender roles within Arabic language education and offers an alternative model for developing Arabic teaching materials in higher education institutions.



## Conclusion (خاتمة)

This study investigated gender equality in *Al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah al-Muyassarah* using Sara Mills' feminist discourse analysis framework. The analysis focused on five dimensions of representation, namely subject position, object position, professional role representation, activity representation, and visual representation. The findings demonstrate that the textbook generally presents a balanced representation of male and female characters across textual and visual content.

Female characters are not positioned merely as passive participants but frequently occupy subject positions within dialogues and communicative interactions. They actively express opinions, provide information, participate in academic activities, and engage in various social contexts. Similarly, male and female characters are represented as important actors within family, educational, and social environments, indicating a relatively balanced distribution of discursive roles.

The findings also reveal that professional representation is not limited to male characters. The textbook introduces various occupations through both masculine and feminine linguistic forms, reflecting recognition of women's participation in professional life. In addition, female characters are portrayed as engaging in diverse academic, recreational, and social activities that extend beyond traditional domestic roles. The visual representations contained in the textbook further support these findings by presenting male and female characters in various educational and social contexts.

From the perspective of Sara Mills' feminist discourse analysis, the textbook demonstrates a tendency toward gender-responsive representation. Gender equality is constructed not only through the visibility of female characters but also through their positioning as active subjects, learners, professionals, and social participants. These findings differ from many previous studies that reported male dominance and stereotypical portrayals of women in Arabic language textbooks.



Therefore, *Al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah al-Muyassarah* may be considered an example of a gender-responsive Arabic language textbook within the context of Indonesian Islamic higher education. The study contributes to the growing discussion on inclusive Arabic language education and highlights the importance of developing teaching materials that reflect contemporary principles of equality and social inclusion. Future studies may expand the scope of analysis by comparing multiple Arabic language textbooks from different educational institutions and examining learners' perceptions of gender representation in Arabic language learning materials.

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