

Visual Analysis of Gender Representation in Indonesian ELT Textbooks

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Abstract. Textbooks have served as pedagogical tools at different educational levels and also generally play a socialization role in transmitting broader cultural norms, including tacit messages about gender roles. In contrast, awareness of gender equity studies has increased; however, existing research on visual gender representation across multiple textbook series and school levels in Indonesia remains sparse. This study examines gender representation in English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks in Indonesia across various educational levels and book series to identify the balance of gender representation in images, analyze the gender roles in various activities, explore variations in gender representation among textbook series, and analyze patterns of gender representation across educational levels. Qualitative methods are employed to measure gender visibility and activity roles, as well as to interpret and assess interaction patterns, contextual meanings, and the prevalence of stereotypes. The coding framework distinguished between stereotypical and non-stereotypical representations and was used to compare series and educational levels systematically. We find that male characters are more prominent across portrayals, and lead characters are often represented by men in leadership, professional, or active contexts, compared with female lead characters, who are typically depicted in domestic or leisure roles or as supportive. Stereotypical representations persist across educational levels, although some counter-stereotypical depictions are present in newer series and at higher levels. Cross-series comparisons reveal that gender balance varies across textbook series, reflecting differences in editorial and design decisions. Some textbooks present more balanced representations than others, while gender bias remains visible in several materials. These findings suggest that efforts toward gender inclusivity have been uneven across educational levels and textbook series. By examining visual representations across a wide range of ELT textbooks, this study provides evidence to inform the development of more equitable and inclusive learning materials at all levels of education.

Keywords: ELT textbooks; discourse analysis; gender representation; visual analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of textbooks in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is fundamental. Beyond being used as instructional resources, textbooks are recognized as ideological and cultural artifacts through which social values, identities, and power relations are represented and reinforced in both textual and visual forms (Murayag & Ravago, 2025; Taqdir et al., 2025). Visual representations, including illustrations and photographs, are incorporated to facilitate language learning and also to convey implicit messages about gender roles, identities, and social expectations (Suchana, 2025). By repeated exposure to these visual messages during children's formative years, particular understandings of gender and socially acceptable behavior may be constructed and internalized over time (Suchana, 2025). This occurs in subtle and significant ways that learners may not even realize that they are being taught such biases through implicit messaging about gender roles and social expectations.

The portrayal of gender in textbooks and other instructional resources may shape how students perceive gender equality and inclusion in schools. When these materials represent both genders fairly, they can provide equal opportunities and combat stereotypes. However, if the content is biased towards one gender, it can perpetuate existing stereotypes and influence decision-making about how students see themselves or others' potential in society (Taqdir et al., 2025; Liu, 2020). In Indonesia, textbooks for English language teaching (ELT) produced or approved by the government are a mainstay at every grade level. These books do more than teach a language; they reflect and transmit cultural values and ideas about society (Andriani et al., 2026; Yolanda & Syafryadin, 2025). Yet, despite a growing focus on gender equality, there remains limited in-depth research on the visual portrayal of gender across ELT textbooks and school levels in Indonesia (Taqdir et al., 2025; Jameaah et al., 2024).

Research on gender in ELT textbooks consistently reveals imbalances in visibility and role allocation (Kayed et al., 2020). Studies across diverse EFL contexts demonstrate that male characters are often more visible, occupy leadership or professional roles, and engage in action-oriented tasks, while female characters are frequently portrayed in domestic, passive, or supportive roles (Suchana, 2025; Taqdir et al., 2025). Such patterns, if left unresolved, may reinforce societal gender stereotypes and limit learners' perceptions of gender possibilities (Ruiz-Cecilia et al., 2020).

Susanto and Chojimah (2024) analyzed Indonesian junior high school English textbooks and found that male characters were more frequently depicted in public, leadership, and professional roles. Nevertheless, the link that appeared in most female figures to domestic and supporting roles revealed how pervasive gender bias in Indonesian EFL textbooks remained. These data are consistent with Jameaah et al. (2024), who report that there are more men than women among male characters, who have much more statistically prominent and active roles, whilst females are associated with domestic and secondary duties. The studies also found that gender stereotypes persist in textbook content (Nujhati & Nurkamto, 2024). Similarly, Nandi et al. (2024) state that, outside of public schools, males predominate in textbooks, whereas females are ordinarily placed in home areas or recreation. Such data indicate that visuals in textbooks are not neutral but ideologically loaded and help shape how young people view gender (Yolanda & Syafryadin, 2025).

Textbooks are, by nature, multimodal because visuals and graphic representations merge with the printed word to impart meaning. Because cognitive and literacy skills are not fully developed at primary education levels, illustrations, photographs, and diagrams serve as essential sensory components of information to help students process worlds described in textual constructivism (Elmiana, 2019; Mayer, 2009). Visual discourse analysis enables researchers to examine the presence of characters, their activities, interactions, and the contexts in which they appear (Swara & Mambu, 2024). Susanto (2025) contends that visual grammar, including aspects such as color, composition, and positioning, communicates implicit social and ideological messages.

Most studies in Indonesia have focused on textual characteristics, with little research being conducted on visual analysis (Elmiana, 2019). Such systematic, large-scale assessments of visual gender representation are needed to assess whether educational materials reinforce or challenge stereotypes across curriculum levels (Taqdir, 2025). Textbook gender stereotypes are typically of two types: occupational or role-based, and behavioral or personality-based (Fatmawati et al., 2022). Occupational stereotypes portray men in leadership, professional, or technical positions and women in supportive or domestic roles. Male behavior stereotypes characterize men as dominant, confident, and active, while females are characterized as passive, emotional, or nurturing. (Zahra et al., 2024).

Gender stereotypes are often depicted in pictures in English-language learning books. These can affect what students consider acceptable for men and women to do (Zahra et al., 2024). Cross-cultural studies indicate that such stereotypes can influence learners' forthcoming ambitions and self-concept (Nikitina, 2019). Research from cultures shows that these pictures can impact how students see themselves and what they want to be in the future. Some studies in Indonesia have found this, but the extent of stereotyping varies across different book series (Tyarakanita et al., 2021).

This shows that we need to research how the portrayal of men and women in these books changes as students get older. Gender stereotypes in English-language learning books are a problem that needs to be examined, and we need to understand how these stereotypes affect students (Adawiyah & Oktavianti, 2023). Perhaps primary textbook work features fewer stereotypical representations due to its more illustrated, story-based content (Andriani et al., 2026). But patterns often remain the same or are repeated in secondary books that are primarily text-based (Fidyaningsih & Oktavianti, 2024).

Therefore, evaluating cross-level and cross-series consistency would be important to determine whether curriculum design is systematically biased against gender equity. To date, a longitudinal multi-level visualization of ELT research in Indonesia from primary to senior high School has not yet been reported.

While existing research provides valuable information, it also exposes significant gaps. Many are specific to certain textbooks or to a single course level. There have also been accounts in the literature of textbook analyses that highlighted the gendered nature of specific series, such as male and female being relatively dominant or imbalanced, representing critical discourse analysis of Indonesian EFL textbooks (e.g., Susanto & Chojimah, 2024; Fidyaningsih & Oktavianti, 2024). Other studies examine specific grades or curriculum contexts, such as Merdeka Curriculum textbooks or junior high school materials, and find persistent gender imbalances or stereotypical role assignments.

Much of the existing literature also addresses textual references or broad content analysis; relatively few studies systematically foreground visual representation, despite images being central to classroom engagement (Sandnes, 2026), particularly at primary and lower secondary levels, where learners rely heavily on visuals to make meaning. Moreover, little is known about how gender representations change throughout the educational progression from primary to senior high school, an important dimension for understanding how curriculum design either reinforces or mitigates gender bias over time.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by offering one of the most comprehensive cross-series, multi-level visual analyses of gender representation in Indonesian ELT textbooks to date. The study involved 18 textbooks from four series at the primary, junior high, and senior high levels. The study is aimed to: (1) identify the balance of male and female representation in images within ELT textbooks; (2) analyze the representation of male and female roles across various activities in ELT textbooks; (3) explore variations in gender representation across different textbook series; and (4) analyze patterns of gender representation across different educational levels.

This study suggests that, despite the reform of the national curriculum and the emerging awareness of gender equity since the 1990s, an uneven and stereotypical image of gender persists in visuals of Indonesian ELT textbooks, with variations across series and educational levels.

2. METHOD

In this study, we employed a mixed-methods content analysis to systematically describe representation and meaning in textbooks by examining gender representation patterns in 18 Indonesian English textbooks. Qualitative methods are employed to measure gender visibility and activity roles, as well as to interpret and assess interaction patterns, contextual meanings, and the prevalence of stereotypes.

2.1 Data Source

The data, taken from four readable Indonesian-published ELT textbooks, came from 18 texts published. It includes textbooks for primary School, junior high School, and senior high school. The choice of these texts was based on their widespread use, nationwide availability, and pedagogical and ideological clout. Visual data were obtained from an existing digital dataset of textbook images to ensure continuity and coverage across the series and school levels.

2.2 Unit Analysis

The unit of analysis was visual images containing human figures; images without human figures were excluded. Each image was treated as a single analytical unit and coded according to dominant visual features relevant to gender representation.

2.2.1 Coding Framework

A coding framework was developed based on previous studies on gender representation in ELT textbooks (Susanto & Chojimah, 2024) and principles of visual discourse analysis. The framework consisted of four main dimensions:

Table 1. Coding Framework for Visual Gender Representation Analysis

Dimension	Category	Description
Gender Visibility	Male	Visuals depicting only male character(s)
	Female	Visuals depicting only female character(s)
	Mixed gender	Visuals depicting both male and female characters
Activity Roles	Leadership/Professional roles	Characters shown in leadership, managerial, professional, or authoritative positions
	Academic/School- related activities	Characters engaged in learning, teaching, studying, or school-related tasks
	Domestic roles	Characters involved in household or caregiving activities
	Leisure and sports activities	Characters participating in recreational, leisure, or sports-related activities
	Service or helping roles	Characters providing assistance, service, or support to others
Stereotypical Representation	Stereotypical	Visuals aligned with traditional gender norms and roles
	Non-stereotypical	Visuals challenging or countering traditional gender norms
Contextual Attributes	Textbook series	Identification of the textbook series in which the visual appears
	Educational level	Educational level of the textbook (Primary, Junior High, Senior High)

Images were labeled as stereotypical or non-stereotypical by comparing the roles and activities shown with gender norms identified in earlier studies. The instrument was validated by experts.

2.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using the technique proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which consists of data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. Data reduction involved coding each image to measure the frequency of male and female appearances and their activity roles across various series and educational levels within the textbooks. Subsequently, descriptive statistics were used to identify general patterns and variability. The data display stage involved interpreting how gender is portrayed through the activities and interactions of the characters, as well as their visual contexts; these visual aspects helped elucidate specific patterns that could not be explained by quantitative results alone. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying key patterns and findings from the presented data, while verification was carried out by checking the consistency of the emerging findings.

2.4 Trustworthiness

A second coder independently coded a subset of the visual data (20%) to improve consistency across analyses. Coding was conducted using set categories and explicit operational definitions to ensure the same criteria were applied throughout the analysis and to maintain trustworthiness.

3. RESULT

Results showed that male characters outnumbered female characters in a data analysis of three textbooks published in 18 ELT. Some results showed that images with males were the most popular, images with females and males were second most popular, and images with only females were last. A particularly obvious version of this pattern has occurred in the textbooks for elementary and junior high schools. With a suitable sample size and analysis, some series showed more balanced representation of male and female characters, especially through increased use of mixed-gender visuals, whilst other series consistently preferred male representation at all levels, and some series had a more equitable balance of men and women. Particularly regarding the presence of mixed-gender images, some series consistently favored men at all levels. For more details, the findings are presented in the following tables.

Table 2. Distribution of Gender Visibility Across Educational Levels.

Gender Visibility	Primary (%)	Junior High (%)	Senior High (%)
Male only	34%	31%	38%
Female only	28%	30%	24%
Mixed gender	38%	39%	38%

Mixed-gender visuals account for about 38-39 percent of all images, indicating a trend towards inclusivity, as shown in Table 2. However, the increase in male-only visuals at the senior high level indicates greater male representation in positions of authority, technical fields, and employment sectors.

The distribution of activity roles is strongly gendered. Male characters are more likely to be shown as leaders and professionals, and to be engaged in leisure and sports activities. In contrast, female characters are much more likely to be shown in academic, domestic, and helping roles. An example of this is that although we often see boys and girls in school, leadership roles are mainly held by male characters, and female characters are often portrayed in supporting roles or in domestic roles.

Table 3. Gender pattern on activity Role

Activity Role	Male (%)	Female (%)
Leadership/professional roles	62%	38%
Academic/school-related roles	52%	48%
Domestic roles	29%	71%
Leisure and sports activities	58%	42%
Service/helping roles	41%	59%

Table 3 shows that leadership and professional roles are mostly assigned to male characters in all the textbook series, particularly in the senior high school books. In contrast, female characters are more frequently depicted in domestic and supportive roles, which reinforces traditional gender divisions, even in visually inclusive contexts.

Most of the dataset used stereotypical representations, rather than non-stereotypical representations. Across all series and education levels, participants framed topics consistent with traditional forms of gender, in which males are in positions of power or engaging in vigorous behavior, and females are at home, nurturing, or doing domestic work. Also, non-stereotypical representations appeared particularly in newer textbook series and at the senior high school level. These could be female characters in leadership, science, or sports roles, and male characters in caregiving or collaborative roles. Still, those counter-stereotypical images tended to be rare. The visuals were also coded as either stereotypical/non-stereotypical depending on whether they conformed to normative gender roles.

Table 4. Table of stereotypical or non-stereotypical

Educational Level	Stereotypical (%)	Non-stereotypical (%)
Primary	68%	32%
Junior High	55%	45%
Senior High	61%	39%

Additionally, although junior high has the fewest stereotypical representations (as depicted in Table 4), this suggests the literature is more androgynous, with gender roles more evenly shared between men and women. However, this progress does not persist into senior high, where stereotypes re-emerge, especially in leadership and technical domains.

Representativeness by gender of the textbook Series 3 when comparing variants. While some series progressed incrementally in terms of balance and diversity of roles, others continued to show gender imbalance. A minor shift toward more inclusive functions occurred at the senior high level, but it was and remains neither gradual nor substantial.

Table 5. Comparison Across Series

Textbook Series	Gender Equality (Mean)	Gender Empowerment & Voice (Mean)
Get Smart (Primary)	0.83	0.77
Bright (Junior High)	1.72	2.00
Pathway to English	1.56	1.27

A few things stand out in the last comparison among the three textbook series, as shown in Table 5. Of these, the Bright series provides the most balanced visual portrayal of men and women engaged in many different activities. While there is parity between male and female characters in Get Smart, males tend to occupy more lead and authoritative roles. Pathway to English provides more female characters, but males still fill the majority of leadership and decision-making roles.

Then, Table 5 clearly shows that gender representation in Indonesian ELT textbook visuals remains uneven and often reinforces stereotypes. Male characters appear more often and are shown in leadership and active roles. Although there are some positive changes, especially in higher-level textbooks, consistent gender balance and stereotype-free visuals remain lacking across all series and levels.

For the first finding, the male characters remain substantially overrepresented in images featuring a single gender. At all four grade levels, images of mixed-gender groups are present in some books. Still, male characters were typically placed in more prominent or central roles than their female peers, and this positional disparity was

even more pronounced at the senior high level. It indicates that a simple representation of both sexes is not sufficient. This pattern is in line with older studies that had found a lack of gender balance in textbooks, against which the 'deeper' power difference still prevails (Lee, 2018).

The second finding clearly indicate a gender divide regarding activity roles. Male characters are more often depicted in leadership, professional, and active roles, while female characters are more often associated with domestic, leisure, and helping roles. In academic posts, there are slightly more females portrayed; however, males still tend to be represented as the leaders or initiators in a school. These are consistent with findings from previous ELT studies that textbooks remain conservative in their visuals, reinforcing traditional gender roles (Almujaiwel, 2018). The patterns also appeared in textbooks across all educational levels, so gendered roles are present throughout the curriculum, not just in early education, as stated by Guo and Wang (2023). When it comes to stereotypes, the findings show that most textbook visuals are still stereotypical; for instance, some images break these patterns, such as female characters in leadership or academic roles and male characters in caregiving roles. However, these examples are rare and do not change the overall balance (Adawiyah & Oktavianti, 2023). This means that pictures in ELT materials frequently serve as exceptions rather than as signs of real change (Korell, 2021). This is also confirmed by the lack of consistent patterns in the designed textbook, which suggests that gender inclusivity has not yet been fully incorporated into textbook design principles (Moore, 2020).

The third finding highlights the variation in gender representation across different textbook series. Certain series maintain a more balanced approach, with a broader range of roles, and some break traditional gender norms throughout. So that means editorial and design decisions really matter. It also means there are no national rules to ensure Indonesian ELT textbooks are gender-equitable, so it depends on each publisher (Adawiyah & Oktavianti, 2023). Similar findings have been documented in other countries, where textbook contents appear to represent institutional priorities rather than the officially prescribed curriculum (Furuta & Yang, 2026)

The final finding reveals that there is no sustainable trajectory towards greater gender balance from primary to senior high school. At the level of junior high school, textbooks are much more balanced and do not offer stereotypical portrayals, but this is no longer the case at the level of senior high school, where male characters tend to dominate leadership and professional roles (Habib, 2020). That is crucial because senior high school students are in a critical period for forming their identity and making career decisions. The return of traditional gender roles at this level may reinforce rigid gender norms as students map out their futures.

Overall, this is the most comprehensive visual analysis of gender representation in Indonesian ELT textbooks to date, based on a study of 18 textbooks from various series and educational levels. One of the most striking findings is that, although women are depicted in diverse professions and even in some senior positions, the increase in such representation has been slow and inconsistent. This aligns with Jehle et al. (2024), who note that while some recent materials demonstrate better balance, many still perpetuate traditional roles; consequently, improvements remain uneven and inconsistent across grade levels, subjects, and countries. When women do appear, they are more frequently portrayed in domestic tasks, caregiving roles, or fields traditionally associated with women, whereas men dominate public, professional, and

leadership roles (Crawford et al., 2024). This indicates that the issue of gender representation concerns not merely the frequency with which women and men appear, but also the types of roles and levels of authority assigned to each gender. Women and girls may enjoy significant visibility in stories or illustrations, yet they are still less likely to be depicted as leaders, experts, innovators, or individuals holding positions of authority. These findings are consistent with Jehle et al. (2024), who show that gender representation varies by field, approaching parity in some areas while exhibiting stronger male dominance in others, such as history or STEM. Therefore, gender representation in textbooks must be analyzed not only based on the frequency of character appearances but also on the professions, activities, social positions, and levels of authority attributed to them. By offering more diverse representations, textbooks have the potential to present a vision of gender roles that is more equitable and freer from traditional stereotypes. Nevertheless, this research is limited to visual content in only recipient textbooks published in Indonesia. Future research will also need to analyze the text and classroom discussions to understand how teachers and students interpret and respond to gendered visual texts.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined how gender is represented in Indonesian ELT textbooks widely used in primary, junior high, and senior high schools. By analyzing 18 textbooks across different school levels and series, the study addressed the gap left by earlier research that focused on a single book or level. The results show that both male and female representatives often appear together in visuals; however, the way they are represented remains unequal and follows certain patterns. Male characters are often depicted in primary roles such as leadership, professional, and active roles, while female characters are more often linked to domestic, leisure, and supportive activities and have less dominance than males.

These results suggest that gender inclusivity depends more on textbook development than on educational level. Through the analysis of visual representations from two textbook series across school levels, this study provides evidence of the portrayal of gender roles, agency, and authority throughout students' secondary schooling. A more thorough understanding can help textbook writers, publishers, and curriculum developers use the results as a guideline for greater gender equality in ELT textbooks.

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