

Overlooked, Underrepresented, Stereotyped: The Representation of Women in History Textbooks and Its Impact on Historical Narratives

The representation of women in history textbooks is not simply a question of visibility; it is deeply tied to structural power relations and plays a significant role in shaping historical consciousness and identity formation. In my master's thesis titled, "Overlooked, Underrepresented, Stereotyped: A Critical Analysis of the Representation of Women in Upper Secondary History Textbooks", I undertake a systematic examination of how women are portrayed in textbooks and the role of gender as an analytical category in shaping historical narratives.

In this research, I conduct both qualitative and quantitative analyses of selected upper secondary history textbooks to reveal three key issues that significantly affect the representation of women in historical narratives:

1. **The Reduction of Women to Stereotypical Roles:** History textbooks frequently reduce women to traditional and simplistic roles—often focusing on their domestic responsibilities or their relationship to men, while overlooking their contributions to broader societal developments. This issue perpetuates gender stereotypes, limiting the scope of female historical agency and reinforcing rigid, binary gender expectations. The representation of women in such reductive roles not only skews the historical narrative but also undermines the complexity of women's experiences across different historical periods and cultural contexts.
2. **The Systematic Invisibilization of Women from Marginalized Groups:** A second critical finding is the invisibility of women from marginalized groups, particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPoC) women. These women are either entirely absent from historical narratives or are marginalized to the periphery, reinforcing a Eurocentric and largely homogenous perspective of history. This absence contributes to the silencing of intersectional experiences of gender, race, and class, leaving out crucial perspectives that could provide a more inclusive and diverse understanding of historical events. The lack of visibility for BIPoC women also reflects broader societal power dynamics, where historically dominant groups (often white, male) have shaped the educational media and, by extension, the collective memory of history.
3. **The Lack of an Intersectional Perspective:** Thirdly, my study demonstrates the absence of an intersectional approach that adequately captures the complexity of historical gender relations. Gender in textbooks is often presented as a static category, without

accounting for how gender intersects with other axes of identity such as race, class, sexuality, and ability. This limited lens simplifies historical narratives and neglects the ways in which different women experienced oppression and resistance in varied and context-specific ways. An intersectional perspective is necessary to understand the multifaceted nature of historical gender relations, as well as to acknowledge the diversity of women's lived experiences.

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

This research directly aligns with the conference theme, “Complexity and its Consequences”, by demonstrating how historical educational media both shape and reinforce societal structures and hierarchies. Textbooks, as a form of educational media, are not neutral; they play an active role in constructing knowledge and shaping the way history is taught and understood. My study draws on feminist theory, critical pedagogy, and intersectionality as theoretical frameworks, which allow for a more nuanced understanding of how textbooks reflect and perpetuate gendered inequalities. The methodological approach combines both qualitative and quantitative methods, including content analysis and a critical discourse analysis of selected history textbooks. The qualitative aspect of the analysis focuses on identifying the narratives and stereotypes embedded in the textbooks, while the quantitative element examines the frequency and distribution of gendered representations of women across different time periods and historical events.

Implications and Contributions

The findings of this study have far-reaching implications for history didactics, educational research, and gender studies. By highlighting the pervasive nature of gender stereotypes and the invisibility of marginalized women in textbooks, the study underscores the need for a critical reflection on the content and pedagogy of history education. It also calls for a diversity-conscious approach to history education—one that actively incorporates multiple perspectives and voices into the historical narrative. This approach not only makes past inequalities visible but also contributes to the deconstruction of normative historical narratives that have perpetuated gendered and racialized injustices.

The study challenges us to think critically about the role of textbooks in shaping students' perceptions of history and their sense of identity. Textbooks are not just tools for conveying factual knowledge; they are powerful instruments of socialization that shape how we understand ourselves, our history, and our place in the world. Thus, educational media should be seen as

an essential site for intervention, where efforts to promote gender equity can have a lasting impact on both students' understanding of the past and their sense of agency in the present.

Contributions to the Conference Theme: Complexity and its Consequences

In the context of “Complexity and its Consequences”, this research brings attention to the complex relationship between history textbooks, gender representation, and societal power structures. By revealing how textbooks simplify and marginalize women's historical experiences, the study underscores the need for educational media that reflect the complexity of gender relations and historical realities. This is crucial for fostering a more equitable and accurate understanding of the past, which in turn can inform contemporary struggles for gender justice. Moreover, the study engages with the intersectional complexity of gendered historical narratives. It emphasizes that the representation of women in textbooks cannot be understood in isolation but must be considered within the broader socio-political context of race, class, and colonialism. An intersectional approach allows us to appreciate the diversity of women's experiences and ensures that the histories of marginalized groups are included in educational materials.

Conclusion: Moving Toward a More Inclusive History Education

In conclusion, this research highlights the need for a more inclusive, diverse, and gender-conscious approach to history education. By addressing the gaps in the representation of women in history textbooks, particularly those from marginalized groups, the study calls for a fundamental shift in how history is taught and understood. Moving forward, it is imperative that history education does not only reflect the past but also actively contributes to a more just and equitable present and future. As we strive for more inclusive educational practices, textbooks should not merely be sites of transmission but active spaces of critical engagement. The findings of this research suggest that educational media, when used effectively, can be powerful tools for social change, capable of deconstructing normative historical narratives and promoting a more inclusive and gender-equitable society. The study proposes several key questions for future exploration: How can history textbooks contribute to the deconstruction of hegemonic historical narratives? What theoretical and methodological approaches are needed to adequately address the complexities of gender, race, and historical experience in educational media? These questions form the basis for ongoing research that aims to transform history education into a more inclusive and socially responsible field. In summary, this research urges us to reconsider how history is written, taught, and learned, and calls for a more inclusive,

critical, and gender-conscious approach to history education that actively engages with the complexities of historical narratives and the diverse experiences of women across time and space.