

The Influence of Gender Stereotypes in Children's Literature on Career Aspirations

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Abstract. Gender stereotypes in children's books have been a central topic of concern, but they exist and have been influencing children's career categories. This paper discusses gender roles as depicted in children's books and how these affect children's outlooks toward career options. The results show that children's literature is often one source of reinforcing postulate gender roles such that male characters are presented as solid and career-oriented. In contrast, female characters are usually said to be naturally inclined to be virtual beings. Consequently, they stereotype an already limiting career choice for each gender. Boys are pushed into male-dominated career fields, while girls are discouraged from opting to take careers in STEM. Out of these findings, the article will propose the development of more neutral and inclusive children's literature that contradicts the existing stereotypes. The writers, the educators, and the policymakers are thus advised to run a balanced narrative that includes various gender representations, therefore enabling children to think beyond limitations. Creating gender-neutral children's books that depict women in empowered roles is a necessary step to reduce the long-term effects of stereotypes on workforce gender inequality.

Keywords: Children's literature; gender stereotype; career aspiration.

1. Introduction

Children's literature often serves as the basis upon which the early literacy skills of a child are constructed and exists as a significant part of the mental and social development of ever-young readers. These kinds of books, the very first structured story-going through which children may be exposed, act like the world's window that offers itself as an exposure and affects or even creates a child's worldview towards himself and his surroundings. However, like books in general, children's literature is not free from societal bias and gender stereotypes, despite an increasing body of research that sells the concept that children's writing also includes those societal tendencies. These often unnoticed yet widespread biases often have a strong impact on the way children associate gender roles with career aspirations.

The main components of children's literature are related to the cultural and social background where the process of their know-how takes place. Over the years, male characters in children's literature have generally been depicted as adventurous, assertive, and career-goals-oriented, while female characters have been portrayed as only relegated to passive, nurturing, and domestic roles. Another example can be found in the work done by Casey, Novick, and Lourenco in 2021, which shows how the masculine centrality in the past 60 years was so pronounced that conclusions have been made that men occupy positions of power. The same is also echoed by Lewis et al., who state that these divarications are not simply accidental but manifestations of age-old gender beliefs permeating the social fabric that molds the narratives for children [1,2].

The role of gender representation in children's books is not to be overlooked. Children, earlier than they are teens, become sensitive and lifelong believers in the fundamentals conveyed in the fiction they read or hear. In the end, when boys are portrayed as strong, powerful, and ambitious while girls are loyal, considerate, and obedient, the way children see themselves in the stories they read or are told becomes influenced, and so are the personalities they dream of having in their future. Such social environments may lead to the shrinking of possibilities for aspirations, where boys may have pressure to choose from employment processes traditionally meant for men (masculine), and girls may have such a situation where they may not like to go further to the fields like science, technology,

engineering, or math (STEM). Pownall and Heflick have traced the early impact of gender stereotypes, which last for a long time and, after all, cause gender disparities among women and men in professions [3].

The study question pursued in this research paper focuses on identifying the link between gender stereotypes in children's literature and the career choices of children. This study intends to examine different types of what constitutes gender representation in children's literature and how this representation shapes the children's understanding of gender roles as well as their chances of becoming particular professions. Furthermore, this study will highlight the undesirable impact of gender imbalance in children's literature and present ways of counteracting it to base gender representation on fairness.

2. Characteristics of Children's Literature and Gender Orientation

2.1. Gender Representation in Protagonists

Children's literature of the past and even the current context, in which the majority of the stories are written from the "man-biased" perspective, shows that most of the characters are male, occupying the key roles. Casey, Novick, and Lourenco documented this disparity, noting that in 60 years, male figures in children's storybooks have been constantly overrepresented. Such roles usually create the image of courageous yet career-dominant male protagonists that represent ideal masculine attributes, such as independence, power, and being in charge. Also, female characters frequently take on roles that are caring and submissive, the type of roles that conform to certain societal stereotypes of women. Such huge skewed representation indicates that boys are given leadership roles, while girls are made followers or subordinates. This gender version nourishes a hierarchical scheme in which male superiority and female subservience are expressed through the literature, and this literature thus shapes the children's perceptions of their future roles in society [1, 2].

2.2. Gender Roles in Narratives

The tense of a book often outlines a character's gender while depicting the events through the years. Evans moved on to an argument that male characters were identified as action-prone and problem-solving, while female counterparts were described as submissive or fearful. The improbable formulation of gender is not limited to the key characters but also touches on the roles of the supporting ones. Anderson and Hamilton both reveal the picture of family relations in the children's storybooks, pointing out that the role of fathers is frequently eclipsed, while they are often shown as distant and unconnected. Opposite to this, mothers are represented as the homekeepers who take care of the families, resulting in the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Such an atmosphere with a lack of activities involving various characters in general, especially girls, not only cuts down the opportunities for free play for children but also makes the children less exposed to a variety of experiences. The gender hierarchy of parental roles, as the status quo, establishes the gendered division of responsibilities and should help children instead become more familiar with different gendered family dynamics, gender democracy, etc. [4, 5].

2.3. Illustrations and Visual Stereotypes

In the case of illustrated children's literature, drawings also make for vital tools in constructing the stereotypes children tend to be aware of. Pictures regularly contribute to inequality of the sexes because girls are shown in household or dormitory-like surroundings, whereas boys are featured engaged in pursuits often reserved for men, like adventure or work. Such signs can be extremely effective since, to children, words often exist as images that are key to comprehending the story. Pownall and Heflick discussed that these images and written texts, as a combination, can create an atmosphere where traditional gender roles are just a standard. This visual aid further reinforces childhood beliefs about the different roles they are expected to play based on their gender. The

influence of the traditional gender roles is tremendous as it makes them wish to behave as prescribed [2, 3].

The gender orientation in children's literature, which is well-seen through the presence of protagonists, deals with gender roles, as well as visual gender stereotyping, and has long supported the traditional female-to-masculine hierarchies. Male characters are the ones who tightly hold the storyline and take the role of leaders and other real adventurers, while female ones are positioned as followers and caregivers. That being said, what kids see on screens and in books regarding their self-esteem and gender roles truly lays out a ground on which their future perception of their place in society will be built.

3. Impact of Gender Stereotypes on Children's Career Aspirations

The following section will analyze the impact of gender stereotypes on children's career aspirations from three angles: gender impressions, career choices, and long-term development.

3.1. Internalization of Gender Roles

3.1.1. Influence on self-perception

Children are rather impressionable. Therefore, for them to be exposed to different gender representations in literature early on has a dramatic impact on how they perceive themselves. Schuster and Martiny talked of girls who have known gender stereotypes in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) areas become less motivated and feel that the jobs are not meant for them. It dims down their aspirations to be in STEM. Gender role handling starts at a young age when children behave based on the reflections of society's expectations that they are taught through stories. Boys may underline being dominant and a leader as valid options since they feel compelled to do so, while girls may shun jobs that are related to the traditions of women in pursuit of feminine skills [6,7].

3.1.2. Early socialization

Children develop their gender role concepts widely from gendered portrayals in children's literature, which act as a means to socialize them on gender norms and expectations the society sets for them. Hadjar and Aeschlimann, through their study, uncovered issues that affect children about gendered narratives in their schooling, inputting a variable as part of their career choices. The study observed that girls were less attracted to learning how to choose the male-dominated areas of STEM, which are typically authored for men and boys, such as books and women in real life because these girls see them as more relatable. Such premature conditioning not only affects individuals' adulthood careers but is also significant in the long run with people's self-confidence and ability to recognize their strengths [8].

3.2. Gendered Career Aspirations

Children's literature provides the gender roles of boys and girls in a stereotypical way, which can eventually become the basis for their job options in their formative years. Brown and Weinberger proved that kids use fictional messages in science-fiction books or stories to investigate what might be inclined to particular occupations they want to be in. For instance, boys may harbor ambitions of becoming engineers or bosses, whereas girls will be attracted to nursing or teaching careers. Dunlap and Barth, however, looked at these gendered expectations and how women mistakenly overrate them concerning their career pursuits, especially in STEM fields, which are undervalued [9,10].

Through an experiment that they conducted, Vervecken and Hannover found that using gender-neutral language when imparting information about careers would make girls look for jobs in fields that have been previously seen as male jobs. This argument demonstrates that literature and media can be great sources of visible representation of women in jobs that have been traditionally male-dominated as they provide stories about women in jobs that are completely new to them [6].

3.3. Long-term Effects of Stereotypical Representation

The influence of gender stereotypes in literature goes beyond career choices and deeply affects individuals' long-term personal and professional development, limiting opportunities for leadership and growth for women. Not only do these insights form career aspirations, but they also actively contribute to the existing gender hierarchy, where women are sidelined from the top leadership roles and, often, they have only peripheral positions that are mostly caregiving or administrative [7].

One of the most important consequences of this is that there is certainly a big gap in terms of gender inequality in the world of work. Dunlap and Barth posited that such approaches could be beneficial in controlling the male-female pay gap in the STEM fields, the same fields that have been heavily dominated by men. The way literature shows different characters with opposing career outlooks and the way it defines different roles according to gender patterns can be the key instrument in the development of women as equal coworkers without the partiality that comes from adhering to traditional gender roles [10].

Gender roles in children's literature generate an immense impact on children's educational and career visions. This happens as these stereotypes turn into norms through which both boys and girls will be screened, resulting in workforce gender inequality. This requires the collective efforts of many stakeholders to develop more inclusive children's literature, thereby producing the expected levels of gender equality.

4. Recommendations and Implications

4.1. Creating Balanced and Inclusive Literature

To overcome the problems that gender stereotypes create in children's literature, authors and publishers should put their focus on balanced and inclusive narratives. Vervecken and Hannover urge people to realize that gender-neutral job labels and the inclusion of various career fields may allow children to picture themselves in a more diverse and wider range of opportunities. The writers' main task is to create non-stereotypical characters who do not obey gender rules; this will allow girls and boys to envision themselves not only in traditional but also in untypical professions such as leadership and caregiving [6].

Contemporary works of children's books literature have shown the viability of this model of storytelling. Brown and Weinberger provided samples of books that challenge traditional gender roles by presenting female leads in STEM professions and male characters acting as caretakers. Additionally, these books provide not only a wide variety of representations but can also be processes for parents and teachers to talk about gender roles with children in a way that is helpful and empowering. Therefore, the creators and the publishing industry need to target books that revolve around diverse characters and have gender mismatches related to professional roles in society and the workplace to offer consumers a more creative and varied gender representation [9].

4.2. Role of Educators and Parents

Educators and parents show resilience and persistence if they are meant to guide, nurture, and shape children's perspectives regarding gender roles. By joining children to read stories that involve diverse characters and breaking gender clichés, adults can do away with this prejudice. Pownall and Heflick noted that it was so important to introduce pupils to times when the protagonist was playing a non-stereotypically gender role, giving them the possibility to dream in bigger colors and have more chances when pursuing their own personal or career plans [3].

Besides offering children gender-centered reading materials, caregivers should also involve social talks about gender roles within children. Anderson and Hamilton contend that these discussions are vital in helping children identify the gender messages they are exposed to through literature and media while at the same time learning to criticize them. Through the implementation of an atmosphere that promotes inclusivity and reasoning, parents and teachers can filter out the notions of gender roles that

children consider balanced. In summary, the gender-inclusive learning process and conscientious conversations about gender shape the environment where children can understand gender roles better and more accurately [5].

4.3. Policy Implications

It is crucial that the guidelines for publishing are well articulated, and they should only promote equality of gender and avoid the reinforcement of patriarchal roles. Dunlap and Barth underlined that policy matters play a great role in children's literature, and it should offer an inclusive portrayal of varied gender images. The press should face consequences for partaking in misleading content in which gender has been assigned negative roles, for instance, in cartoons and storybooks geared toward the child. Otherwise, the distorted concepts of gender continue [10].

Gender equality can be achieved through both literature and media that emphasize the subject matter, and as such, these programs can go a long way in shaping the mindset of the children today, who are the leaders of tomorrow. Schuster and Martiny stated that educational institutions should consider lessons on gender equality to be an integral part of the teaching curriculum, where kids will have a platform to summarize and analyze the portrayals of men and women around them. Such programs can allow children to select future specialties due to their interests and abilities, not due to what society imposes. Moreover, teaching programs would include researching how gender is reflected in literature and media to encourage kids to reflect and disagree with the stereotypes [7].

The development of equitable and gender-neutral literature for children by authors, publishers, educators, and policymakers is the way to go in this quest to end gender stereotypes and promote gender equity in science classes and employment. Writers, publishers, educators, and policymakers should coordinate efforts to allow children to see a range of portraits, including the employment of women in non-traditional areas, allowing them to choose a wider range of careers. Addressing and analyzing these problems, in the beginning, will help foster discussions on gender roles and prevent future reinforcement of stereotypes so that a fairer future for all children can be established.

5. Conclusion

This research ultimately has revealed the substantive effect of masculine and feminine stereotypes in the children's literature on the development of children's career aspirations. The results indicated that typical portrayals of male and female characters. i.e., males as daring, career-driven persons and females as mild, homemaking ones, after all these years, have affected how children view their roles as beings in society. These stereotypes reinforce the pathways to a stereotypical career, where leadership positions and STEM fields are considered "male" domains, and girls are discouraged from going that way.

The function of children's literature in the creation of those stereotypes is the reason for putting an effort into composing gender-neutral and inclusive writings. The comprehensive work of authors, educators, and legislators is imperative in changing these representations to endow children with a broad alternate picture of occupational identities devoid of gender-based restrictions.

Moreover, future research can delve into the impact of specific children's literature interventions, such as the presence of diverse gender roles, on the long-term career and social goal choices of children. In addition, the importance of mass media platforms, together with the books, can be considered to contextualize the role of the media in the formation of gender perceptions in their audience.

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