

Whose English Is Professional? Gender Representation of Roles, Voice, and Visibility in Indian Tertiary English Textbooks

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Abstract

This study examines how gender is represented in English-language coursebooks prescribed at the tertiary level in India, a context that has received far less scholarly attention than school-level materials. While gender bias in primary and secondary English textbooks across South Asia has been documented extensively, the coursebooks that shape how young adults learn to communicate in professional and academic English remain largely unexamined. The study addresses this gap through a computer-assisted lexical content analysis of the full text of one widely prescribed Indian professional-communication textbook, supplemented by a chapter-level sample of a second, adapting the framework first articulated by Porreca and refined in later scholarship. The analysis codes three dimensions: visibility (the relative frequency of gendered references), ordering (the firstness, or sequence, in which the two genders are named when paired), and roles and titles (occupational and honorific forms, and the qualitative positioning of each gender as the initiator or recipient of professional communication).

The findings complicate the expectation of simple under-representation. In the main corpus of roughly 210,000 words, female references accounted for about 39 per cent of gendered pronouns (381 female to 587 male) and 42 per cent of gendered person-nouns, a far more balanced distribution than the older literature predicts, and the book uses some gender-neutral occupational titles. Yet a pronounced male-as-default pattern persists beneath this surface balance: of 162 ordered gender pairs, 160 (98.8 per cent) name the male term first; the honorific Mr occurs 37 times while Mrs never occurs; the salutation Dear Sir outnumbers Dear Madam; and the masculine chairman (26 occurrences) still outweighs the neutral chairperson (12). The study argues that bias in this material has migrated from gross omission toward the subtler, subliminal default-male framing described by Ansary and Babaii, and that for a professional-communication textbook the ordering, salutation, and honorific asymmetries matter most, because they are the models learners reproduce in their own workplace writing.

Keywords: gender representation; content analysis; English language teaching; tertiary education; India; professional communication; firstness; subliminal sexism

Introduction

Textbooks are never neutral. Alongside the vocabulary, grammar, and communicative functions they are designed to teach, they carry a second, quieter curriculum: implicit lessons about who acts and who is acted upon, whose voice carries authority, and which social roles are imaginable for whom. In the language classroom this hidden curriculum is especially consequential, because learners absorb not only the forms of the target language but also the social world those forms are shown to inhabit. When a coursebook habitually names the man before the woman, models the male as the writer of the letter and the female as its recipient, and reaches for chairman before chairperson, it teaches something about language and gender that no syllabus ever states.

The analysis of gender bias in English-language teaching materials is now a mature field. Since the foundational work of Hartman and Judd and of Porreca, researchers have repeatedly documented the under-representation and stereotyping of women in coursebooks across many national contexts. In South Asia, and in India specifically, this scholarship has concentrated heavily on school textbooks, where studies of primary and secondary English materials have consistently found female characters outnumbered, narrowly typecast, and confined to domestic or subordinate roles.

Comparatively little attention has been paid to the English coursebooks used at the tertiary level. This is a striking omission. Tertiary English and communication-skills courses are precisely where young adults are inducted into professional, workplace, and academic registers. The models of communication these textbooks present are not childhood fables but templates for adult working life: the email to a manager, the minutes of a meeting, the interview, the report. If these materials systematically associate authoritative professional speech with one gender, they shape learners at the threshold of their careers, in the language that functions, in much of India, as the strategic medium of professional advancement. This study turns the established lens of textbook gender analysis upward, onto Indian tertiary professional-communication coursebooks, and asks not simply whether women are present, but whose English the textbook presents as professional.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Textbook as an Ideological Artifact

The premise underlying gender-and-textbook research is that educational materials carry ideology rather than offering transparent windows onto neutral knowledge. Apple argued that curricula encode the assumptions of dominant social groups and naturalise them as common sense, so that what is presented as merely instructional is also, silently, normative. Fairclough made the parallel linguistic case that texts reproduce relations of power through ordinary choices of wording that pass unnoticed precisely because they appear unremarkable. On this view, a language coursebook does ideological work whenever it decides who is named first and which job title is the default, and it does so most effectively when learners do not notice the decision being made.

2.2 Foundational Content-Analysis Studies

The methodological template for this field was established in two early studies in TESOL Quarterly. Hartman and Judd documented pervasive sexism in ESL materials, observing that men appeared more frequently and in a wider range of roles while women were both under-represented and cast in narrow roles (390-91). Porreca then analysed fifteen widely used ESL textbooks and set out the categories that have structured the field ever since: omission, firstness, occupational visibility, the frequency of male and female nouns, masculine generic constructions, and the adjectives attached to each gender (705). Porreca concluded that women were depicted or mentioned only about half as often as men (719). These categories remain the analytic vocabulary of the field, and the present study operationalises several of them directly.

2.3 Subsequent International Scholarship

Later studies refined the framework. Hellinger found comparable patterns in English textbooks used in German schools. Sunderland cautioned that simple frequency counts capture only part of the picture and urged attention to how each gender is positioned in discourse. Lee and Collins, comparing Australian and Hong Kong textbooks, showed that the framework travels across contexts and that progress toward balance has been uneven. Most relevant to the present findings, Ansary and Babaii coined the notion of subliminal sexism to describe bias that survives even where overt stereotyping has been edited out, persisting in defaults, orderings, and generic forms rather than in crude caricature.

2.4 The Indian Context and the Tertiary Gap

Within India and the wider South Asian region, gender-and-textbook research has flourished, but almost entirely at the school level, where studies have repeatedly found female characters under-represented and confined to domestic roles. What this literature does not address is the tertiary coursebook. The transition from school to college English in India is also a transition in purpose, from general literacy toward professional and academic communication. Whether the gendered patterns documented at school level persist, soften, or take new forms in the materials that prepare adults for the workplace is an open empirical question, and it is this gap the present study addresses.

3. Research Questions

The study is guided by three questions. First, visibility: to what extent are male and female referents represented in the text of the sampled Indian tertiary professional-communication materials? Second, ordering and default gender: when the two genders are named together, in what sequence do they appear, and which gender supplies the default forms of address and occupational title? Third, roles and voice: how is each gender positioned, qualitatively, as the initiator or the recipient of professional communication? A fourth, interpretive question frames the discussion: taken together, what model of communicative entitlement do these textbooks present to learners?

4. Theoretical Framework

The study combines two compatible lenses. The first is the content-analysis tradition descending from Porreca, which supplies operational categories for systematic, replicable coding. The second is the concept of the hidden curriculum (Apple), which holds that the patterns surfaced by coding are pedagogically active: they teach learners, below the level of explicit instruction, about the social distribution of communicative authority. Because the corpus consists of professional-communication materials, the analysis treats the forms learners directly imitate, modes of address, ordering, and titles, as the dimensions of greatest interest.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The study employs computer-assisted lexical content analysis, a recognised corpus-based method for the systematic, quantifiable description of gendered language in large texts. Each textbook was converted to plain digital text and analysed with a deterministic counting procedure that tallies gendered linguistic markers; the procedure is fully replicable, since the same script applied to the same text returns identical counts. This quantitative pass was supplemented by close qualitative reading of sample documents and illustrations to interpret how each gender is positioned in modelled professional interactions. The method requires no human participants and draws entirely on published material already in classroom use.

5.2 Corpus

The corpus consists of two prescribed Indian tertiary professional-communication textbooks. The primary text, analysed in full, is the second edition of *Technical Communication: Principles and Practice*; the digitised text yielded approximately 210,000 running words. The second text, *Communication Skills* by Kumar and Lata, was available only in part (its front matter and one full chapter, on effective reading, totalling about 7,000 words) and is therefore treated as a smaller supplementary sample rather than a co-equal corpus. The asymmetry is acknowledged throughout, and the supplementary text's counts are reported separately and read with caution.

No.	Textbook	Author(s)	Scope analysed
1	<i>Technical Communication: Principles and Practice</i>	Meenakshi Raman and Sangeeta Sharma	Full text (~210,000 words)
2	<i>Communication Skills</i>	Sanjay Kumar and Pushp Lata	Front matter + one chapter (~7,000 words)

5.3 Units of Analysis

Four lexical units were counted. Personal pronouns (he, him, his, himself versus she, her, hers, herself) and gendered person-nouns (for example man, father, son versus woman, mother, daughter) index visibility. Honorifics and salutations (Mr, Mrs, Ms, Miss; Sir, Madam) index how named and addressed professional referents are gendered. Masculine generic forms (for example chairman, businessman, manpower) index default-male occupational language, and were compared against their neutral alternatives (for example chairperson, salesperson). Paired constructions (he or she, his or her, men and women, and the like) index firstness, the order in which the genders are named.

5.4 Procedure and Reliability

Each text was tokenised to lowercase word forms, and exact-match counts were taken for the defined sets, avoiding the substring errors that plague naive searching. Paired constructions were located by regular expression and classified as male-first or female-first. Because the counting is deterministic and the script is preserved, the analysis is exactly reproducible by any researcher with the same source files, which substitutes for inter-coder reliability on the quantitative measures. The qualitative reading of sample letters, dialogues, and illustrations was conducted manually to identify representative instances of the positioning of each gender as initiator or recipient.

6. Findings

Findings for the primary corpus (Technical Communication) are reported first and in full; the supplementary sample is reported separately in 6.5.

6.1 Visibility: Frequency of Gendered Reference

Measure	Male	Female	Female share
Personal pronouns	587	381	39.4%
Gendered person-nouns	119	86	42.0%
Combined	706	467	39.8%

Male references outnumber female references, but not overwhelmingly: women account for roughly two-fifths of all gendered references (39.4 per cent of pronouns, 42.0 per cent of person-nouns). This is markedly more balanced than the one-to-two ratio Porreca reported, and indicates that on the crude measure of visibility this textbook has moved a considerable distance toward parity.

6.2 Ordering: Firstness and Default Gender

Paired construction	Male-first	Female-first
he or she / he/she	71	0
his or her / his/her	71	0
him or her / him/her	15	0
Other pairs (men/women, etc.)	3	2
Total	160	2

Here the picture is the reverse of balanced. Of 162 paired constructions in which both genders are named, 160 (98.8 per cent) place the male term first. The two female-first instances are the fixed conventional phrase ladies and gentlemen. The book never once writes she or he or her or his. This near-absolute male-first ordering is the clearest single marker of a male-as-default orientation, and it is invisible to a reader not counting for it.

6.3 Titles, Salutations, and Generic Occupational Forms

Measure	Male form	Female form
Honorific	Mr: 37	Mrs: 0 / Ms: 8 / Miss: 1
Salutation	Sir: 16	Madam: 6
Chair- title	chairman: 26	chairperson: 12 / chairwoman: 0

Three asymmetries stand out. The honorific Mr appears thirty-seven times while Mrs never appears at all; the female forms that do occur are the marital-status-neutral Ms (eight) and a single Miss. The salutation Dear Sir outnumbers Dear Madam by sixteen to six. And although the book has partly modernised its occupational language, using the neutral chairperson twelve times and salesperson three times, the masculine chairman still dominates its role at twenty-six occurrences, and no female-marked form (chairwoman, businesswoman) appears anywhere. Masculine generic forms total forty-six across the corpus. The direction is consistent with the firstness finding: where a default must be chosen, it is male.

6.4 Roles and Voice: Qualitative Observations

Close reading of sample documents reinforces the quantitative pattern. In a model inter-office memorandum, the initiating, authoritative party, a Unit Chief, is male, while the addressee, a college principal greeted as Dear Madam, is female and receives rather than issues the communication; the signatory is again male. The authorities quoted to lend weight to the text, including Francis Bacon, Horace Mann, and Mortimer Adler, are uniformly male. Where women appear in incidental examples they are disproportionately placed in domestic frames, as in the practice sentence about housewives and household work and the aside about mothers finishing kitchen work. The recurring instructional cartoon characters are male. None of these instances is egregious in isolation; their consistency is the point.

6.5 Supplementary Sample (Communication Skills, partial)

The 7,000-word sample is too small to support independent quantitative claims, but its direction is consistent with the primary corpus: male pronouns outnumber female (ten to six), gendered male nouns outnumber female (six to four), the four paired constructions present are all male-first, and the one salutation is Dear Madam addressed to a female recipient. These figures are offered only as corroboration, not as findings in their own right, and the full text of this book should be analysed before any claim is made about it.

7. Discussion

The central interpretive claim is that bias in this material has changed form rather than disappeared. On the measure that earlier scholarship foregrounded, raw visibility, the primary textbook is comparatively balanced: women receive about two-fifths of gendered references, and some occupational language has been deliberately neutralised. A reader checking only for the gross under-representation documented in the school-level literature might conclude that the problem has been solved.

The ordering, salutation, and title data show otherwise. The near-total male-first ordering (98.8 per cent), the complete absence of Mrs against thirty-seven instances of Mr, the preference for Dear Sir over Dear Madam, and the persistence of chairman over the available neutral alternative together describe a textbook in which the male remains the unmarked default even as overt stereotyping recedes. This is precisely the subliminal sexism Ansary and Babaii describe: bias that survives editing because it lives in the grammar of defaults rather than in caricature.

For a professional-communication textbook this matters in a specific and practical way. Firstness, salutations, and honorifics are not background detail; they are the very forms the course teaches students to produce. A learner who copies the modelled letter learns to open with Dear Sir; a learner who absorbs the pronoun ordering learns that he or she is the natural sequence. The textbook thus does not merely under-represent women in the abstract; it transmits a default-male template for the professional English its readers are being trained to write. This is the sense in which the study's guiding question, whose English is professional, is answered by the materials: professional English is modelled, by default, as male.

8. Limitations

Four limitations should be noted. First, the primary corpus is a single textbook; while large, it cannot represent all Indian tertiary materials, and the second book was available only in part. Second, lexical content analysis captures explicit gendered markers in running text but not the gender of every depicted figure, nor the content of illustrations, which a multimodal analysis using the tools of Kress and van Leeuwen would be needed to code. Third, automated counting captures the patterns it is designed to capture and may miss context-dependent cases that careful manual coding would catch; the qualitative pass mitigates but does not eliminate this. Fourth, the study describes what the materials present, not how teachers mediate or learners receive them, which a classroom study would be required to trace. Each limitation indicates a natural extension of the work.

9. Conclusion

Research on gender in Indian English textbooks has concentrated on the school years and overlooked the coursebooks that prepare adults for professional communication. Analysing one such textbook in full, this study finds that the familiar charge of gross under-representation no longer fits: the book is comparatively balanced in visibility and has begun to neutralise its occupational language. Yet beneath that surface it remains organised around a male default, naming men first almost without exception, addressing the professional world as Sir, and reaching for Mr and chairman while their female and neutral counterparts go missing or unused. The contribution of the study is to show that, in tertiary professional-communication materials, the relevant question has shifted from whether women appear to whether the forms of professional English that learners are taught to reproduce are themselves gendered, and to demonstrate a replicable method for answering it.

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