A Literature Review of Gender Equity in National Textbooks across the MENA Region and the Implications for CEDAW

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, girls' education across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has made notable gains. The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) treaty agreement has successfully facilitated the improvement of girls' access in many countries. However, there is growing concern about the quality of classroom content and how it continues to marginalize females. This review examines ten studies from seven countries across the region and highlights how discriminatory patterns continue to exist in national textbooks. It then looks at how policy and political settlements address gender equity in national curricula and discusses the implications for women and girls in relation to CEDAW.

KEYWORDS

girls' education, textbooks, CEDAW, MENA, gender discrimination

1. Introduction

In recent decades, girls' education across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has made notable gains. Access in some places has even created reverse gender gaps, (UNICEF, 2015). Despite these advances, inequities still plague the region and continue to disempower girls. Though much attention has been paid to improving enrollment for girls, there is growing concern about the quality of content being used in the classroom and how it marginalizes females. While access to education is certainly crucial, this article will focus specifically on gender equity in national curricula across the MENA region to examine how countries are addressing discrimination with respect to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) treaty. I argue that flaws inherent within the treaty's structure undermine its targets and enforceability concerning curricular reform. I begin by defining the scope and region of the articles selected for this review, placing the CEDAW treaty within this context. The next sections introduce the ways in which gender bias has been identified in MENA textbooks according to the literature and then examine gendered curricula from various policy perspectives. Finally, my findings are placed within the framework of CEDAW to highlight how states are failing to meet their commitments to create gender-sensitive education environments, possible reasons for missing targets and the impacts this has on women and girls in the region.

1.1 Scope and criteria for inclusion

The MENA territory is dynamic and often contested. Even United Nations agency definitions sometimes contradict each other while others do not define the region at all. After considering different

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interpretations, I relied on the World Bank's list of twenty-one Arab countries for this review (World Bank Data, n.d.). I chose this definition because it is expansive yet not entirely encompassing of every state included by other agencies. This decision is based on the time constraints of this project wherein a broader definition would make a review impossible for an individual researcher. From these states, I only considered literature written in English. While additional studies may exist in other languages, my own language limitations prevented those studies from being part of the review. Only the articles that specifically analyzed textbooks from a gender perspective were considered. Just ten articles were identified that followed these criteria. Based on these ten, the following MENA countries are represented in this review: Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Palestine, and United Arab Emirates. Turkey and Afghanistan are part of the greater MENA region and are also included, Turkey due to its close geographical, historical and religious links, and Afghanistan additionally because it provides a clear example of how textbooks and political strategy can be closely linked. I acknowledge that all these countries vary significantly with regard to resources and political contexts but, like Afghanistan and Turkey, they also share many associations. Only articles published between the period 2010 and 2021 are included so as to remain current. Collectively, the studies identified represent education between primary to secondary grade levels though no singular article encompassed this entire range. I also acknowledge that a deeper comparative analysis may have been possible by focusing, for example, on a narrower age or grade range, however, again the limited availability of articles dedicated to the topic was prohibitive. Due to the limitations discussed above, this review is not intended to be entirely comprehensive for each country, but instead to point to possible trends across the region and gaps in the literature worth future investigation.

1.2 Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

This paper uses the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women treaty (CEDAW) as grounds for analyzing textbooks in the region (UN General Assembly, 1979). CEDAW, commonly considered an international bill of rights for women, brings into focus the fundamental human rights, dignity, and equality of women with men (UN Women, 2009). With the acceptance of the treaty, signatory states commit themselves to undertake a series of measures that eliminate discrimination against women and girls and to undergo monitoring by the UN treaty Committee. Each of the seven states included in this review has ratified CEDAW (UN Human Rights Office, n.d.). Key to this examination are two provisions that specifically focus on education. The first is the 1987 Recommendation three outlining that states adopt "education and public information programs, which will help eliminate prejudices and current practices that hinder the full operation of the principle of the social equality of women" (United Nations CEDAW, 1987). Second is the 2017 Recommendation 36 that states women and girls are entitled to educational environments free from discrimination and stereotyping within curricula (UN Committee, 2017). It is through CEDAW in general, and these two recommendations specifically, that this article is framed. Education free of discrimination is considered crucial to women leading healthy and fulfilling lives.

1.3 Key terms from the literature

The terms curriculum and gender are embedded in the literature on this topic. There is no singly recognized definition for the term curriculum, thus this paper will follow UNESCO's broad definition meaning "a description of what, why, how and how well students should learn in a systematic and intentional way" (UNESCO, 2011). Curricula could include course learning outcomes and assessments; teacher professional development; teaching methods; content and textbooks to name a few features. In this review, textbooks will be understood as part of the curriculum but not synonymous with it. I make this distinction because some researchers use the terms interchangeably though there

are distinct differences. Gender is defined by UNESCO in part as the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of men and women as created by multi-leveled societal structures (UNESCO, 2015). The themes of gender-sensitive and gender-responsive are also woven throughout the literature. Gender-sensitive indicates how gender issues are understood or addressed, for example within the classroom, whereas gender-responsive focuses on approaches at the policy, planning, or programming levels. Finally, this article discusses themes surrounding equality and equity. Equality is understood as equivalence concerning representation, value, benefits, or opportunities, while equity relates to fairness of treatment with respect to and consideration for an individual or group's different needs (Breda et al., 2000). It is understood that equity may encompass equality.

2. Textbooks: the multitude of ways to marginalize females

Gender Socialization Theory asserts that gender roles are internalized through family, friendships, and educational institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). This makes the educational environment a powerful space for shaping the ideas young learners will adopt about gender. Within this space, textbooks form the backbone of educational content. They guide teacher instruction and students spend as much as 80% of their time engaged with them (Blumberg, 2008). Textbooks reflect cultural norms and reinforce the accepted attitudes and behaviors of a society often through implicit messaging, commonly thought of as the "hidden curriculum". Textbook analysis is thus crucial to understanding gendered curricula. Their content can be used to encourage gender inclusivity or perpetuate patriarchal norms and gendered stereotypes.

2.1 Discriminatory patterns in representation and language

Across the ten primary articles reviewed for this paper (see table 1), common patterns emerged about gendered content in textbooks and curricula. The most prominent themes included: unequal ratios between male and female representation; stereotypical characteristics and occupations assigned by gender; and sexism in the language used to represent each gender. All studies discussed inequities in gender representation in at least one of these areas and typically in more (Alayan & Al-Khalidi, 2010; Al-Qatawneh & Al Rawashdeh, 2019; Cin & Walker, 2016; Jaber, 2014; Kalayci & Hayirsever, 2014; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020; Otoom, 2014; Sarvarzade & Wotipka, 2017; Şahin & Açikalin, 2021; Wafa, 2021). Studies that discussed ratios of male-female representation in imagery noted distinct differences with females consistently and often markedly being underrepresented with the greatest disparity being 7% female to 70% male representation, (Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020). Where researchers have analyzed characteristics and occupations assigned by gender, strong stereotyping emerged with females commonly given qualities of being nurturing, emotional, passive, and modest while males typically exhibited characteristics of strength, bravery, independence, and leadership. Females were primarily represented as wives, mothers and in childcare, then as nurses, and teachers. Males were given much broader ranges of occupations and were commonly assigned more active or intellectual roles such as doctors, scientists, lawyers, judges, or police officers, (Alayan & Al-Khalidi, 2010; Al-Qatawneh & Al Rawashdeh, 2019; Cin & Walker, 2016; Jaber, 2014; Kalayci & Hayirsever, 2014; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020; Otoom, 2014; Sarvarzade & Wotipka, 2017; Şahin & Açikalin, 2021). Males were sometimes given the role of parent (father) and teacher, overlapping with female assigned roles.

Gender-biased language was also persistent in the textbooks according to six studies. The instances of bias ranged from the use of male pronouns for female achievements; discriminatory or stereotypical language, for example, to denote profession; the use of male grammatical forms as the default; and a predominant use of the male-centered language in general (Alayan & Al-Khalidi, 2010;

Al-Qatawneh & Al Rawashdeh, 2019; Jaber, 2014; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020; Şahin & Açikalin, 2021; Wafa, 2021). It is notable that only two articles pointed out that Arabic is a heavily gendered language and difficult to neutralize (Jaber, 2014; Wafa, 2021). This makes divorcing gender from textual content practically impossible for content writers due to the language's inherent structure. Though language structure was not the focus of most studies reviewed, the failure to comment on this point by most authors may be significant. For instance, languages in which nouns are assigned a gender could subtly influence gender associations in their speakers. In turn, this could influence textbook authors' choices about how and how often they represent males and females in content. Broadly speaking, the implications of naturally gendered languages are important to consider when studying gender issues in textbooks. There may be tendencies to draw conclusions by making like-for-like comparisons where researchers may attempt to swap out syntax from one language to the next without considering the rules of that particular language's structure.

The major emergent theme from the literature reviewed is that females are represented in textbooks as less present; having less agency; and confined to fewer roles beyond the home. In a later section, I highlight how these discriminatory patterns affect girls' prospects and well-being.

Country/Source	Year of Study	Research Method	Textbook Publication Year	Number of Textbooks Included	Textbook Subject	Grade Level
Turkey (Şahin & Açikalin, 2021)	2021	Quantitative (Visual content analysis)	2018	9	Social Studies	Grades 1-8
Egypt (Wafa, 2021)	2021	Mixed methods: Qualitative (Critical Discourse Analysis) Quantitative (Visual content analysis)	not provided	6	Arabic Language	Grades 1 - 3
Iran (Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020)	2020	Mixed methods: Qualitative (Critical Discourse Analysis) Quantitative (Visual content analysis)	2013, 2014, 2015	3	English for School (Series)	Grades 7-9
U.A.E. (Al-Qatawneh & Al Rawashdeh, 2019)	2019	Mixed methods: Qualitative (Critical Discourse Analysis) Quantitative (Visual content analysis)	2016	1	Arabic Language	Grade 9
Afghanistan (Sarvarzade & Wotipka, 2017)	2017	Qualitative (Content analysis)	1980, 1987, 2010	6 (2 per each year)	Dari Language	Primary
Turkey (Cin & Walker, 2016)	2016	Interviews (Open-ended, semi-structured)	n/a	20 students 5 teachers	n/a	Ages 11 - 14
Turkey (Kalayci & Hayirsever, 2014)	2014	Mixed methods: Quantitative and qualitative content analysis	2011	1	Citizenship and Democracy	Grade 8
Jordan (Otoom, 2014)	2014	Mixed methods: Qualitative (Critical Discourse Analysis) Quantitative (Content analysis)	2006	1	Arabic Language	Grade 2
Jordan (Jaber, 2014)	2014	Interdisciplinary mapping method	not provided	38 student books 12 teacher's guides	Social Studies, Civics, Geography, Vocational Education	Grades 4 - 10
Jordan, Palestine (Alayan & Al-Khalidi, 2010)	2010	Critical Discourse Analysis, Content analysis	Jordan: 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, Palestine: 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008	Jordan: 10 Palestine: 6	History, Civics, Social Studies	Grades 7 - 12

Table 1: *List of research methods and textbook details of journal articles reviewed*

2.2 What was missing from textbooks

Another way to consider female marginalization in textbooks is by their contributions. Contributions are discussed here in two ways: by female authorship and by historical or cultural achievement. Looking at female authorship, one review of 38 textbooks in Jordan found that female authors contributed just 38 percent of textbook content as compared to authorship by males at 61 percent (Jaber, 2014). Similar ratios of female-to-male content writers were also found in a review of six Egyptian textbooks (Wafa, 2021). Only two of the articles noted this underrepresentation, thus assumptions cannot be made as to what extent this disparity persists across the region. Disappointingly, both studies also found that female authorship did not necessarily result in reduced gender-biased content. Again, there is not enough evidence based on these articles alone to make sweeping claims, however, the relationship between the gender composition of content writers and the nature of textbook content is a theme worth future investigation in the region.

Regarding historical and cultural achievements, four of the studies also found women's contributions were largely missing or limited from textbooks. The above study of six Egyptian textbooks included twelve poems written by male authors, while no female poets were represented at all (Wafa, 2021). Both female and male authors contributed to the content. In Jordan, history textbooks failed to adequately mention women in the fields of science and philosophy (Otoom, 2014), while a Palestinian history book referred to the physicist Marie Curie only as "Pierre Curie's Polish wife" (Alayan & Al-Khalidi, 2010). Turkish women were nearly nonexistent in history lessons on nomadic Turkic life despite their important role in wars, trade, and survival during that period (Şahin & Açikalin, 2021). Possible explanations given by researchers for minimizing women's achievements are cultural imbalances that value or diminish female contributions or the gendered-nature of what has been historically selected for inclusion or exclusion in historical archives (Jaber, 2014; Wafa, 2021). These affect content writers, both male and female, by impacting what they have themselves been exposed to.

3. Governments and curricula

Countries across the region typically follow a national curriculum (Sika, 2011). Textbook content in the region is also commonly designed to deliver knowledge rather than invoke critical thinking (Cin & Walker, 2016; Jaber, 2014; Wafa, 2021). These two points are noteworthy because a singular set of textbooks has the potential to influence the beliefs and values of students across an entire nation or even limit the possibility of political opposition born of critical discussion and analysis. The following section will explore the politics and policies of textbooks from a gender perspective.

3.1 Textbooks as a political tool

Governments are prone to wielding national curricula as a mechanism to shape public perceptions for political gain. According to the Arab Human Development Report, curricula are commonly used as a political tool for shaping values and knowledge and framing beliefs about national identity, citizenship, and political legitimacy (Abdellatif et al., 2019). This makes textbooks highly politicized and ground zero on gender issues. A clear instance is outlined in a 2017 study of gender representation in textbooks in Afghanistan.

Portrayals of gender norms in language textbooks were altered as political power struggles played out across Afghanistan in three regime periods over several decades (Sarvarzade & Wotipka, 2017). In the first period, textbooks published in 1980 and widely used across the country represented females with high frequency, agency, and participation in the labor force. The period is marked by the Soviet's presence from 1979 to 1989 where men and women were expected to fully participate in education

and the labor force under the communist regime. It also illustrates an example of how textbooks were used to align the Afghanis to the communist ideology and, more specifically, to define women's places in upholding Soviet society.

Following the 1989 withdrawal of the Soviet presence and subsequent period of rule by Taliban factions, textbooks used in Afghanistan began depicting gender in ways that demonstrated strong political and religious motivations. Under the Jihad ideology, (the struggle against non-Muslims), endorsed by the Taliban, male representations became more militant and glorified as religious freedom fighters (Sarvarzade & Wotipka, 2017). The authors describe the regime's singular focus on boys as imperative to gaining military strength and maintaining political power. Notably, most discussion, debate, or critical analysis activities were also removed from textbooks, as the doctrine of Jihad became the only accepted belief system. In contrast to the depiction of men, the authors describe that the Taliban regarded females as militarily insignificant and naturally subordinate, thus beginning a period of undermining their agency and identity. Girls were rarely allowed to go to school under the regime and female representation was almost entirely removed from textbooks. Where they appeared, they were depicted as obedient and bound to family roles in relation to male relatives. These measures were considered extreme when compared to other MENA countries like Saudi Arabia (El-Sanabary, 1994). Sarvarzade and Wotipka's research makes links between the Taliban's rulership, which was precarious, fractured, and primarily concerned with establishing political legitimacy, and the increasingly militant and gendered nature of textbooks. The authors also suggest the Taliban's attempts to unify the people under the patriarchal, Jihadist ideology were a strategy used to distract from the general fragility of the state. The example again demonstrates how textbooks were used to shape beliefs about gender to leverage support for a regime.

The third period begins after the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States. Leaders of the newly established Islamic Republic of Afghanistan understood they needed to transform the image of Afghani women as participants in public life if they were to establish global political legitimacy (Abirafeh, 2009). Thus, females once again reappeared in textbooks. Curricular reforms took place under the guidance of various international organizations like USAID, UNICEF, and UNESCO (Georgescu, 2007). However, while females became more present in textbooks, they received less representation than under Soviet rule, according to Sarvarzade and Wotipka (2017). The authors also infer the nature of women's representation as an attempt to align the new government with the West without antagonizing the locals long under Taliban rule. For instance, while some space was devoted to religious and cultural references, like females wearing the traditional hijab head covering, a few representations depicted girls without hijabs. The authors account these reforms as a gesture to the international community to secure support, thereby strengthening the Republic's legitimacy. The reforms also mark a third example of how gender was used in textbooks in political maneuvering, by the West to gain trust among the people and by the newly established Republic to establish its own political legitimacy.

The case of Afghanistan demonstrates how perceptions of gender are manipulated as regimes moved in and out of power. It provides evidence of how political players attempt to align local values, identity, and government legitimacy with their political aspirations through educational content. Importantly for this review, the case provides a clear illustration of the relationship between gender and the curriculum and how these can become caught within power struggles. The larger implication here is the politicized nature of the curriculum and how vulnerable girls and women can become within these struggles.

3.2 Exploring government responses to eliminating gendered curricula

In less extreme cases than Afghanistan, governments may not always fully realize their commitments to creating gender-sensitive classroom materials. In 2015, for example, the U.A.E. Ministry of Education (MoE) implemented gender-responsive programs to develop a new curriculum and textbooks (Al-Qatawneh & Al Rawashdeh, 2019). Women experts also participated in the program, though there was no data as to in what quantity or capacity. The Ministry's efforts were apparent. For instance, the books used the generalized "Ms." as an attempt to delink the importance of marital status from females. However, the overall analysis of one recent textbook iteration revealed strong male-first content prevalence, while females remained underrepresented and in secondary status (Al-Qatawneh & Al Rawashdeh, 2019).

The Turkish government also committed to developing more gender-responsive education reforms beyond accessibility (Cin & Walker, 2016). In addition to building better schoolhouses, the MoE created the Gender Equality in Education Project initiative. However, the project organizers failed to qualify how to frame gender-sensitive education and were vague about how to implement gender-responsive policies. This ambiguity resulted in limited progress in removing inequities in textbooks. For example, ninth-grade textbooks used in 2016 tended toward gender-sensitization, while the following year's textbooks showed a lapse in equity (Şahin & Açikalin, 2021). Thus, while Turkey has made gains in terms of access, the problem of bias within textbooks is still pervasive. Further, these losses remain hidden by enrollment data (Cin & Walker, 2016), drawing attention to achievements in accessibility but potentially undermining or delaying progress towards gender-sensitive education by providing an incomplete picture of existing discrimination within educational content.

In Jordan, the MoE developed gender-responsive strategies at the policy level and appointed a special committee tasked with addressing biases throughout the education system (Jaber, 2014). The committee recommended hiring and promoting more women within the Ministry, such as employing more female content writers and promoting women into leadership roles. Employees also participated in gender-sensitization training. However, Jaber notes that the policies only translated into moderate changes. The Ministry did not achieve parity in its staffing structure and curriculum content remained biased against females. The author presents possible explanations for these shortcomings. One is the poor implementation of committee recommendations at the policy level. Another explanation is the additional four layers of review by committee members and Ministry staff that textbook reforms must undergo before content is approved. I propose the gender socialization theory may be an appropriate lens for unpacking some of these points and I discuss these in the next section.

4. The implications for CEDAW across the region

Recall that the CEDAW treaty requires that governments take measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against females including within educational spaces. Specifically, children are entitled to curricula free from stereotyping under the treaty. Every state discussed in this review has ratified the CEDAW treaty thus, in principle at least, has agreed to take meaningful steps toward eliminating biases within the learning environment including in textbook content. The following section looks at some possible reasons states fail to fully realize this commitment and highlights some impacts these failings have on women and girls.

4.1 Government policy and understanding gender bias: barriers that prevent progress

Some of the evidence presented so far suggests that, even when governments have clear intentions to adopt gender-responsive policies in their education systems, they often fall short of eliminating bias

entirely. I describe some of these shortcomings in the following paragraphs and propose some possible explanations.

Many of the unrealized aims described so far could be explained, at least in part, by the gender socialization theory whereby socialized gender-norms are so deeply internalized that they influence decision-making (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). This can occur even when beliefs are in opposition to institutional policies because biases are not necessarily conscious but rather arise from the habitual beliefs set within a cultural context. When taken from this position, it is easy to understand how internalized gender-norms could easily enter content. As in the example of the Jordanian MoE, the content undergoes multiple layers of review before being approved, at each step subject to the biases of the reviewers. Interestingly, Jaber (2014) states that the most positive influence on gender-responsive reforms was seen when the expertise of NGOs and specialists was enlisted, though improvements were not always consistent. Still, collaborations with external experts could be considered one valuable strategy among many.

Given the ubiquitous nature of gendered-beliefs as explained by the theory, it is not surprising that gender bias in textbooks is near universal and uniform (Blumberg, 2008). Cultural norms that reinforce stereotypes exist in plain sight making discrimination difficult to identify and weed out of educational material. Thus, it can be presumed that if a definition of gender equity is not clearly outlined, for instance by ministries of education, there likely will be difficulty in consistently addressing the issue. In the cases discussed in Turkey and the U.A.E., both ministries implemented programs to create equitable textbook content. Though they each made some positive advancements, they both failed to fully achieve this aim (Al-Qatawneh & Al Rawashdeh, 2019; Cin & Walker, 2016). While the U.A.E. introduced some changes, like using the neutral title "Ms.", females remained underrepresented and in secondary status overall. In the case of Turkey, the MoE failed to set clear goals for enacting programs that tackle gendered curricula or indeed define how they recognized gender bias at all. This could explain why progress in textbook reforms fluctuated from one iteration to the next. Each case alludes to the importance of clarity in defining gender-responsive initiatives. Without well-defined targets, real change will be difficult to fully achieve.

As discussed, in Jordan, the MoE also committed to tackling biases within the entire education sector's structure but ultimately could not fully achieve its aims (Jaber, 2014). The Jordanian Ministry did not follow its own committee recommendations to address gender inequities in its own staffing structure. In addition, their gender-sensitization training programs were also unsuccessful in fully eliminating many inequities both within the organization and the content, according to the author. Jaber notes this example points to structural breakdowns where, for instance, the lack of accountability structures in Ministry policies could have provided incentives to implement committee recommendations. Other possible explanations are failing to make links between gender-responsive education and their own structural biases within the organization or the possibility of a lack of qualified women to work at the Ministry. Each explanation, however, suggests that initiatives alone are insufficient at eliminating gendered curricula. They also point back to gender socialization's theory and the ubiquity of deep-seated cultural gender bias. The implication is that initiatives must address biases at various levels with diligence and oversight.

Teachers are a powerful resource for eliminating classroom bias but may not be fully engaged at the policy or practical levels (UNESCO, 2015). In Jordan, though teachers participate in content development at the MoE, they are considered lowest in the organizational hierarchy and hold little

authority in final decision-making (Jaber, 2014). Furthermore, the study found females are greatly underrepresented in policymaking where the gender distribution becomes increasingly disparate at senior levels in the ministry. As of 2014, no female had held the highest-ranking roles of either Minister of Education or Secretary General and only 2.38 percent of Field Directors of the Ministry were women. The result is missed opportunities for women and teaching practitioners to engage and influence policy at every level of the Jordanian Ministry.

Teaching practitioners also experience barriers to addressing gender bias in their practice. Teachers in Turkey described girls' empowerment as valuable to their educational development, however, they were not given support systems, like training or materials, to improve gender-sensitivity in the classroom (Cin & Walker, 2016). For instance, the teachers' textbook guides failed to address gender bias and were believed to even reinforce stereotypes in some instances (Kalayci & Hayirsever, 2014). Similar limitations were also observed in Jordan (Jaber, 2014). Teachers may genuinely wish to deliver gender-sensitive lessons, but lack the knowledge, support, and resources to achieve this. Failing to engage teachers as local change-agents raises questions about whether policymaking is grounded in the local realities of teachers. Teachers can be an important resource for reframing content, particularly because reforming textbooks can be extremely costly and time-consuming. On the other hand, with appropriate support, teachers can transform biased classroom material into more gender-sensitive lessons through their daily practice (UNESCO, 2015). With training on gender-sensitive best practices, they have the potential to improve learning outcomes and overall student achievement.

4.2 Power, politics, and the strength of CEDAW

While governments may inadvertently fail to remove gendered content in textbooks, it is also worth considering the plausibility of state political maneuvering in relation to CEDAW commitments. As in the case of Afghanistan, different regimes had clear political aims for controlling the female image through textbooks. Curricula were employed as a tool for consolidating power and aligning the populace under changing ideologies, each with its own distinct vision of how gender could be used for those aims (Sarvarzade & Wotipka, 2017). Even in less extreme cases, textbooks may still be used for political maneuvering. I discuss some examples below.

Modernity has been closely linked to development and women's empowerment (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Indeed, throughout the MENA region, women's status has been used as a gauge to indicate a country's advancement and for "symbolic declarations of cultural change that has taken place" (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 60). Given that, currently, 189 states have ratified CEDAW (UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, n.d.), it is reasonable to assume states are eager to appear committed to advancing women's rights in the international community. Unfortunately, this makes the treaty vulnerable to manipulation and useful for managing a polished international image. One author describes the U.A.E. as merely making surface changes to promote women's rights, using women as a tool for crafting an image of the Emirates as a modern state (Dhaheri, 2009). Dhaheri notes the paradox of placing women in highly empowered and visible positions, like the media broadcasters and high-level ministers, while laws and curricula continue to reflect deeply patriarchal norms. The author characterizes the nation during its emergence as one cultivating a modern national identity so as to secure international legitimacy in an otherwise volatile region. The U.A.E.'s singular focus on modernity may indicate a prioritizing of a glossy national image over making grassroots changes to modernize.

Some critics protest CEDAW's weak enforceability (El-Masri, 2012). Though ratifying states are

bound by the law under the treaty, states commonly abstain from treaty provisions. This point is particularly contentious because it is seen as incompatible with the object and purpose of the treaty which is to hold those states accountable in the first place (Monforte, 2017). For example, Article 2 of the convention requires that states take immediate action against laws, policies, or practices that discriminate against women (1979), however, it is common for states in the MENA region to make reservations to this article when complying with the treaty conflicts with Islamic Shari'a (Amnesty International, 2004). This raises the wider question of international human rights treaties and their lack of enforceability, a subject of much debate and criticism. In fact, CEDAW has been subject to more exceptions than any other human rights treaty with more reservations made citing conflicts with religion (Fazaeli & Hanisek, 2021). It is easy to imagine how such reservations undermine the strength of CEDAW and could translate to, for instance, a lack of motivation, ambiguous targets, or conflicting national policies of signatory states. Unfortunately, limited literature about CEDAW and its direct impact on textbook content in the region could be identified.

4.3 The long-term impacts of gendered-curricula

Education teaches children about the spaces where they are welcomed – or considered illegitimate – within their communities (United Nations: Beijing Declaration, 1995). As I discussed previously, students spend significant time with textbooks, making them a key material for delivering that message (Blumberg, 2008). They frame young learners' understanding of the world and their place within it and can shape the beliefs they adopt about themselves. As demonstrated in this article, there are still many examples of textbooks across the region which diminish or degrade females' positions in society through imagery, stereotyping, language, and reduced cultural and historical contribution. That messaging has a lasting impact.

Overlooking or undervaluing females leads to negative self-perceptions (Subrahmanian, 2005). An educational climate wherein girls are limited in the narrative will foster lower aspirations, painting a picture that, even when they enter societal spaces, their options remain limited. According to the United Nations Beijing report (1995), excluding girls reduces their potential for leading healthy and fulfilling lives by eroding their self-esteem. Moreover, stereotypical depictions disempower girls by hindering their prospects. Though more women today are entering the labor force across the region (World Bank, 2019), messaging which restricts job options, for instance, to nurse or teacher, can still cause girls to doubt their ability to enter professional spheres outside stereotypical roles. Additionally, if content focuses on preparing girls for marriage rather than for a vocation, girls receive messages that they are ill-equipped to contribute to society outside the home (Jaber, 2014). Further, when girls are presented first as mother and wife, they are taught their reproductive ability is valued more than any other contribution. The Beijing report (1995) notes discriminatory messages in education can lead to lifelong patterns of hindered prospects and missed opportunities. The pattern reverberates throughout the region where, in 2019, women participated in the labor force at a rate of just 19% (World Bank, 2019). A 2021 report also noted discriminatory norms in the region rated among the worst globally; even as education rates continue to rise, many men still believe women should not be employed outside the home (Georgetown University, 2021).

5. Final reflections on CEDAW's impact on textbooks across the MENA region

Gender equitability in textbooks can help increase women's and girls' empowerment in the MENA region, but realizing this target is enormously challenging and complex. The literature reviewed in this paper points to several multi-level breakdowns that create barriers to achieving this aim. The findings show how gender-sensitive curricula are not always well understood, agreed upon, or even

necessarily desired. Still, much progress has been made and is ongoing, probably due, in part, to the guidance of CEDAW and its oversight Committee. However, this review also makes it clear that progress has not always been reliable or uniform. Weak mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing the CEDAW treaty are well-documented and just one possible explanation. In truth, it seems likely many CEDAW achievements may be the result of encouragement rather than any substantive pressures. Changing political motivations add an additional layer of complexity to enforcing CEDAW and ensuring sustainable progress.

Each of the ten primary studies reviewed discussed the need to reform national curricula to be more gender-sensitive, but the literature on this subject is limited in the region relative to CEDAW. I suggest more research is needed on the direct relationship between CEDAW and its impact on school curricula that can inform both the Committee and ministries of education across the MENA territory.

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