

## **GENDER REPRESENTATION AND EQUALITY IN CHILDREN'S DIGITAL STORYBOOKS: A QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF LET'S READ ASIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study applies a feminist-informed qualitative content analysis framework combined with a rubric-based gender equality evaluation aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) to examine gender representation in children's stories published on the Let's Read Asia platform. Thirty English-language narratives intended for learners in Grades 2–4 were systematically analyzed with respect to character prominence, gendered roles and occupations, narrative agency, and stereotypical or counter-stereotypical traits. The analytical rubric operationalized gender equality through five indicators: balance of character representation, diversity of social roles, degree of agency, portrayal of character traits, and narrative outcomes, enabling a structured comparison across texts. The findings indicate a measurable shift toward more equitable gender representation, with female characters occupying a slightly higher proportion of protagonist roles (52%) than male characters (45%). Beyond character frequency, the analysis reveals substantive changes in narrative function: contemporary stories increasingly depict female characters as professionals, problem-solvers, and leaders, challenging traditional gender-role associations. However, this pattern is not uniform. Traditional folktales continue to privilege male authority and heroic agency while positioning female characters in passive or domestic roles, indicating the persistence of patriarchal narrative structures. Using the gender equality rubric, 57% of the analyzed stories were classified as actively promoting gender equality, while the remainder were categorized as neutral or inequality-reinforcing. The study's contribution extends beyond descriptive statistics by demonstrating how rubric-based analysis can systematically identify ideological shifts and continuities within digital children's literature. By linking textual patterns to pedagogical implications, this research provides an evaluative framework for selecting and critically using digital storybooks in English language teaching contexts, particularly those seeking to align literacy instruction with inclusive education and gender equity principles.

**Keywords:** Children's Literature; Digital Storybooks; English Language Teaching; Gender Representation; Qualitative Content Analysis

## INTRODUCTION

Children's storybooks are very important in early reading classes. These books let kids get lost in words, fun stories, and different ways of thinking, which helps them learn how to think and feel at the same time (Ahmad and Susanto, 2024b). Prior research and numerous perspectives suggest that stories not only entertain children but also serve as covert educators that influence their comprehension of social norms and the expectations of others (Ahmad and Susanto, 2024). Consider how teachers often choose these books to accelerate the reading process, expand vocabulary, and help children truly understand what they read (Tran and Olshan, 2022). Books are windows to the world for everyone, which is why reading is so important.

Gender roles have emerged as one of the hottest topics in children's stories. As children begin to understand what it means to be a "boy" or a 'girl' in their world, these books provide existing examples, which unfortunately often reinforce same assumptions as usual. Child psychologists explain that children form their own understanding of gender through a process called "self-socialization." They remember what they see in stories and imitate those behaviors, such as boys acting tough or girls being extremely helpful. Think about a story where every boy is a brave leader going into battle and every girl is just waiting or taking care of others. This can make it hard for kids to dream about what they want to do when they grow up. But if books show different roles without making assumptions, this can help kids see things from different points of view and become more open-minded and fair (Dent and Goodman, 2021). So, children's books can either reinforce unfair ideas or start real change toward equality and justice.

All of this is in line with the UN's global education goals. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 focuses on quality education that is accessible to all, ensuring high-quality and equitable teaching and learning processes. SDG 5 focuses on gender equality, seeking to end bias so that boys and girls have equal opportunities. These two goals support each other to create a better and more sustainable world (Qiu and Yoke, 2024). It is not enough to simply open the doors of schools; the contents inside, such as books, must also fight against injustice. The stories of the children who are among us today are never neutral. A book can combat misguided ideas by featuring strong and diverse heroes for everyone, or it can quietly perpetuate discrimination through outdated patterns. That is why studying gender in these stories is not merely an intellectual exercise, but real work toward creating inclusive and equitable classrooms for all children.

Many previous studies suggest that gender bias is still present in children's stories (Shahnaz, Fatima and Qadir, 2020). In 2022, researchers studied 624 fairy tales from seven different countries. They found that there were a lot more male characters than female characters. Men were often shown as strong, brave, and in charge, while women were more often shown as caring, emotional, and doing housework. (Pavithra, 2025). examined picture books utilized in early childhood classrooms in the US and Australia, yielding comparable findings. They discovered that boys predominantly portrayed the principal characters, whereas girls frequently assumed the roles of supporting characters. These studies show that kids' books still have old-fashioned ideas about gender. Most of this research, on the

other hand, is mostly about how texts show gender. People don't talk about how these pictures connect to what happens in the classroom, how reading is taught, or how storybooks for kids are used as learning tools in real life.

There are also similar patterns of gender bias in children's stories from all over Asia, but some new studies show that things are slowly getting better. (Wan *et al.*, 2025) found that most of the main characters in Indian children's books are still men. But some stories now have women in charge, as explorers, or as people who fix things. People in China often call girls "gentle" or "beautiful," which is based on how they look and how they don't do anything. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to be called "brave" and "strong," which makes them seem more active (Yeoh and Cheong, 2025). (Mante-Estacio, Dumalay and Rentillo, 2018) say that research in Indonesia also shows that boys are still the main characters in children's stories. There are more and more stories that show girls as strong, brave, and independent people. Nonetheless, traditional patriarchal values persist, especially in local folktales where female characters are often relegated to domestic roles, such as housekeepers (Stadelmann *et al.*, 2007). These results show that Asian children's books are getting better at showing boys and girls, but there is still a difference between the two.

Most of these studies, on the other hand, are mostly about literary or cultural analysis and don't look at schools very much. They talk about how stories show gender, but they don't talk about how these stories are used to plan lessons or how they change the way things are done in the classroom. Elementary schools often use storybooks to help kids learn how to read and write. But if you don't look closely, kids might get messages about gender that aren't fair without even realizing it. This is especially important in English classes, where teachers often use kids' stories to help them learn. Prior research indicates that storybooks significantly influence students' perceptions of gender and identity in educational settings (Gupta *et al.*, 2025). Bilingual picture books exhibit concealed gender bias within their illustrations and text (Shabbir, Parveen and Ashraf, 2023).

Even "inclusive" digital stories from Southeast Asia still contain hidden power imbalances, through the way characters act or narrators speak (Shabbir, Parveen and Ashraf, 2023). Teachers can help reduce or even eliminate this bias through in depth discussions with children (Hale, 2024). Essentially, analyzing gender in children's books is not just a cultural task, but a fundamental requirement for reading-based English classes! As prospective teachers or teachers, we must eliminate negative views about gender equality in English classes.

People often forget about one of the worst things about free internet sites like Let's Read Asia. The Asia Foundation runs this website, which has hundreds of stories from different cultures in their own Asian languages. This platform is being used by more and more reading programs in the area. Teachers, parents, and kids can easily get to it every day to read for fun because it is so easy to find. But did you know that there hasn't been a full study on how gender affects it, even though more and more schools are using it? We should ask ourselves: does this platform promote diversity or perpetuate inequality? This is especially important because of the SDGs 4 and 5 goals. (Shen, 2019) examined analogous e-books for children aged 4 to 8 and identified a similar issue with the protagonists. This shows

that e-books aren't always better than paper books. Studies conducted in the locality examining elementary school textbooks have not considered digital platforms such as Lets Read Asia (Chung, Paciga and Koss, 2025). An evaluation of SDG 5 rubrics is crucial for the digital reading of Indonesian children (Komba and Nyanda, 2022), given that “popular series feature male problem solvers” (Benzaquen-Gautier, 2018). This study rectifies that deficiency.

## METHODS

The study adopted a qualitative content analysis method that incorporated quantitative features to analyze the representation of gender roles in children's stories posted on the “Let's Read Asia” web platform. The reason for adopting qualitative content analysis was that it allows for the analysis of both textual and visual aspects systematically and therefore can be very effective in analyzing gender trends and patterns in children's stories (Charest et al., 2019). At an English language learning institution, story books are not only learning tools for literacy skills but are also instruments for the socialization of values and gender norms. To enhance the accuracy of analysis, thematic analysis was done quantitatively through the adoption of rubrics for analysis and the determination of trends.

The dataset included 30 children's stories purposefully selected from the Let's Read Asia website. Purposive sampling was used to ensure relevance to research objectives and learning contexts for the English language. Only those stories that were either originally composed in English or were available as translations into English were selected. All selected texts were suitable for learners of Grades 2 to 4 levels of education. The age group of children from Grades 2 to 4 is most receptive to gender socialization through narrative. Moreover, all selected stories included human as well as anthropomorphic characters whose gender could easily be determined either from names, pronouns, or pictures. The selected corpus of stories includes a variety of types of narratives: folktales as well as modern stories from a variety of cultures of Asia. The sample size was judged adequate from a methodological perspective. In qualitative content analysis studies, there is little emphasis upon sample sizes as long as thematic saturation is ensured. A sample of 20 to 40 texts is sufficient for establishing regular patterns without making analysis unmanageable (Khan and Sehrawat, 2025).

The coding framework has been designed using the principles of feminist literary theory and previous gender-centric content analyses of children's literature (Page and Bretherton, 2003; Sergienko, 2021). Characters in the literature were coded in terms of their character status in the storyline (protagonist, secondary, and minor) and gender (male, female, mixed, and unclear). For instance, a female character who played the dominant role in the storyline and solved the main conflict could be coded as the female protagonist character. Characters' roles and occupations were coded in terms of their social roles connected with gender, including leaders, caregivers, learners, professionals, adventurers, and magical beings. This coding system allowed the detection of stereotypes and reverse

stereotypes in the literature. Moreover, character behavior could be coded as relational, intellectual, active, passive, and expressive, while character traits could help in the detection of gender stereotypes in the literature, including the absence of these stereotypes, such as active female characters, active male characters, and so on.

Systematic analysis of gender equality at the story-level was achieved through the use of a rubric that was designed to meet Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality. Five indicators were considered: equality of male and female characters, diversity of characters' roles and occupations, extent of characters' agency, equality of characters' traits and stereotypes, and resolution of stories. A three-point scale was used to determine the results of each indicator, with 1 signifying reinforcement of inequality, 2 signifying a neutral position, and 3 signifying support of gender equality. Stories were then classified as equality-supportive, gender-neutral, or inequality-reinforcing depending on their cumulative results. Frequency tables were utilized to determine data on characters and results of rubric analysis, and thematic analysis was also employed to determine narrative significance of results.

To improve the reliability and generalizability of findings, 20% of the data was coded by two independent coders using a common coding system. Inter-rater reliability was estimated by calculating Cohen's Kappa, with a result of  $\kappa = 0.86$ , signifying a high degree of agreement between the coders. All discrepancies were resolved by discussion until a consensus was achieved, with a common coding system developed prior to carrying out the overall data analysis.

## RESULTS

### *Character Distribution*

This study aims to examine gender representation in children's stories published on the *Let's Read Asia* platform. The first objective focuses on identifying the distribution of characters based on gender. The analysis of thirty selected stories indicates a relatively balanced representation between male and female protagonists.

As presented in Table 1, female protagonists appear slightly more frequently (52.2%) than male protagonists (45.5%), while only a small proportion of characters are classified as neutral or with unspecified gender (2.3%). This distribution suggests that female characters are not marginalised in the selected corpus and are frequently positioned in central narrative roles.

Furthermore, the distribution across protagonist, supporting, and minor characters demonstrates that both genders are consistently present at different narrative levels. Female characters appear not only as protagonists but also as supporting and minor characters, indicating broader visibility within story structures. These findings align with the research objective of identifying whether contemporary children's stories provide balanced gender representation rather than prioritising one gender over the other.



*Table 1. Frequency of male and female characters*

Gender of Protagonist	Protagonist (n)	Supporting (n)	Minor (n)	Total (n)	Percentage
Male	13	20	8	41	45.5%
Famale	15	23	9	47	52.2%
Neutral / Not explicit	2	0	0	2	2.3%
Total (coded)	30	43	17	90	100%

## ***Gender Roles and Occupations***

The second research objective examines how gender roles and occupations are portrayed in the stories. As shown in Table 2, there are noticeable differences in the types of roles commonly assigned to male and female characters.

Male characters are more frequently portrayed in leadership, authority, and adventurous roles, such as kings, village heads, or explorers. These roles reflect traditional masculine stereotypes that associate men with power, independence, and decision-making. In contrast, female characters are more often depicted as caregivers, educators, and domestic figures, which reflects conventional feminine roles related to nurturing and household responsibilities.

However, the data also reveal important counter-stereotypical representations. Female characters increasingly appear in leadership and professional roles, such as Kalpana in *The Defender*, Khaleda in *The Engineer*, and Nina in *Doctor Nina*. These portrayals demonstrate a shift toward more inclusive narratives that challenge traditional gender expectations. This finding directly addresses the research question regarding whether children's stories reinforce or challenge conventional gender roles.

*Table 2. Roles and Occupations by Gender*

Roles / Occupations	Male (n)	Female (n)	Examples (from stories)
Leader / Authority	8	7	King, village head vs. Kalpana ( <i>The Defender</i> )
Explorer / Adventurer	6	8	Boy traveler vs. Tara ( <i>Tara Finds Her Stars</i> )
Caregiver / Nurturer	3	11	Father helping son vs. mothers and teachers ( <i>Great Teacher</i> )
Domestic / Household	2	9	Father fixing roof vs. mother cooking ( <i>What Did Father Say?</i> )
Student / Learner	5	6	Noi ( <i>I Know How to Count</i> ) vs. classroom girls ( <i>The Teacher Asks</i> )

Professional roles	7	9	Male doctor, mechanic vs. female teacher, doctor, engineer
Magical / Supernatural	2	1	Traditional folktale figures

## Equality Indicators and Story Classification

The third research objective evaluates the extent to which the analyzed stories promote gender equality. Using a rubric-based assessment, each story was classified into one of three categories: promoting equality, neutral, or reinforcing inequality.

As summarized in Table 3, more than half of the stories (56.7%) promote gender equality by portraying both male and female characters in diverse and non-stereotypical roles. Stories such as *The Girl and the Drum*, *A Piece of Rainbow*, *I Am Kartini*, *Doctor Nina*, *The Engineer*, and *Tara Finds Her Stars* present female characters as capable, independent, and influential, thereby supporting gender-inclusive values.

Nevertheless, 26.7% of the stories continue to reinforce traditional gender inequality, particularly through rigid role divisions and authority structures, as seen in folktales like *Malin Kundang* and *The King's Secret*. These findings indicate that while progress toward gender equality is evident, traditional gender norms remain present in a significant portion of children's literature.

Table 3. Rubric classification (equality indicators)

Classification Category	Number of Stories (n)	Percentage (%)
Promotes Equality	17	56.7%
Neutral	5	16.6%
Reinforces Inequality	8	26.7%
Total	30	100%

## DISCUSSION

Findings from this research suggest that there is a tendency towards a fairer representation of gender in stories written for children on the Let's Read Asia platform. From a gender socialization approach, children's books can thus be regarded as a cultural tool that plays a role in shaping societal norms, identity, and expectations concerning gender at a very young age. The fairly equal representation of stories featuring males and females, together with gender-neutral characters, points to a new trend that is gradually transcending a fixed gender approach on digital stories for children. This is an indicator that books written for children can play an active role in promoting egalitarian attitudes through alternative models of identity and social engagement (Benzaquen-Gautier, 2018).

Within this academic context, these results fit into and develop existing literature regarding gender representation in children's literature. The studies of Leung literature (2016) and Serratrice literature (2013) also observe an increasing trend towards greater

inclusiveness of both genders in new storybooks, especially in the representation of female characters. Nonetheless, this study contributes to existing literature in that it shows how inclusiveness and tradition coexist in these narratives, rather than one negating or canceling out the other. The inclusion of characters of no specific gender in these narratives also shows an interesting new trend that has not previously been covered in existing literature.

Nevertheless, it has been made clear in this analysis that, in spite of these encouraging changes, the conventional gender hierarchies in the traditional tales of *Malin Kundang* and *The King's Secret* continue to prevail in their present form. In these tales, the dominant gender in terms of power, heroism, and moral righteousness remains the male gender, while the female gender remains relegated to secondary and domestic roles, thus conforming to the findings of Soelistyarini in 1982 about the marginalization of the female gender in classical folklore, where the male gender in Indonesian royal folklore correlates with power and heroism, while the female gender correlates with domesticity (PILTEN UFUK and PILTEN, 2022). In the perspective of feminist literary studies, these tales exemplify the ways in which patriarchal ideologies in literature continue to be reinscribed in the pursuit of gender equity (Chen and Son, 2022).

By contrast, contemporary narratives such as *\*The Engineer\**, *\*Doctor Nina\**, and *\*I Am Kartini\** act as counter-narratives that contest hegemonic gender narratives. These narratives portray women as professionals, leaders, and change-makers, hence subverting conventional gendered understandings of social roles. In line with feminist literary theory, these narratives position children's literature as a location of resistance where hegemonic narratives are problematized and reinscribed. Such trends are also evident in digital story books, where women are increasingly portrayed as intelligent, independent, and strong (Charest et al., 2019). It is pertinent to note that women's representation in STEM fields and leadership positions plays an important part in shaping children's understanding of gendered domains of competence.

Findings from the study have important implications for English language teaching and digital literacy. In the English language classroom, digital storybooks that feature diverse and equal representations of gender roles can function as authentic educational resources that contribute to both language and critical literacy skills. Through the use of class discussions on the roles, identities, and values of characters, educators can facilitate reflective language use and, at the same time, raise awareness on the subject of gender roles and issues. Furthermore, the multimodal quality of digital narratives improves the digital literacy skills of the learners, who are encouraged to critically assess not just the linguistic message but the pictorial and ideological message contained within the text (Charest et al., 2019). In this context, tools such as *Let's Read Asia* are useful resources for the incorporation of inclusive content within the English language classroom. Scholarly contribution

In terms of its contribution to knowledge, this study is methodologically relevant as it clearly shows the efficiency of a rubric-based evaluation procedure for the identification of explicit and implicit messages about gender contained and conveyed through children's



stories. The classification of stories into equality-supporting, neutral, and inequality-reinforcing texts is a model for future research related to gender-sensitive educational texts and can also serve as a guide for educational personnel and developers of storybooks for socially just educational directions (Benzaquen-Gautier, 2018)

Overall, while the traditional storylines presented in the Let's Read Asia platform remain a reflection of the issue of gender inequality, it is clear from the data presented in the study that the vast number of these storylines show a level of progress in the direction of achieving equity in the representation of gender in the platform.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper contributes to the growing literature on the representation of gender within children's literature, providing an empirical examination of the representation of gender within digital storytelling on the Let's Read Asia website. Through the analysis of character representation, the roles of characters, and the representation of occupations within the first thirty stories, the paper illustrates that the current state of children's storytelling on the website is moving towards a more balanced representation of both genders. The equal representation of male and female characters, the slight overrepresentation of female leads, and the representation of gender-neutral characters all suggest that the website is making a conscious effort to shift from the traditional male and female dichotomies and instead focus on the human experience that is shared across all genders.

In addition to the representation aspect, the findings of the study show an important shift in gender roles and representation in the stories. Although the conventional narratives continue to present the male gender as the leader and the female gender in domestic roles, many of the newer narratives present the female gender as professionals, problem solvers, and leaders in their respective communities. This goes against the conventional gender stereotypes and represents the commitment of the platform towards gender-sensitive narratives in children's stories. The rubric analysis further reveals that more than half of the narratives promote gender equity, thus reaffirming the commitment of the platform towards the global educational standards and the SDGs, specifically SDGs 4 and 5, in terms of "Quality Education" and "Gender Equality." In this respect, the "Let's Read Asia" platform not only represents an e-library but also a culturally responsive educational platform that promotes gender equity in children's reading perspectives.

However, it must be noted that this study has some limitations. First, this study has analyzed just thirty stories, which might not be an adequate representation of all the stories accessible on this platform. Second, this study has just analyzed the content of these stories without taking into consideration how these representations of gender might be interpreted by children. Thus, this study has not been able to determine empirically how these stories might affect learners' perceptions of gender. Future studies can be done by focusing on classroom-based research that will help in understanding how children react to gender representation in these stories. Observational studies or experimental studies focusing on narrative-based teaching can be done to gain a deeper understanding on how gender-inclusive stories can affect the attitude and awareness of gender among students. These

studies can help in strengthening the teaching implications of this study and in understanding the role of children's stories in promoting gender equity in the classroom.

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