

Feminist Perspectives on Gender Representation in Children's Books

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ABSTRACT

Gender representation in children's books is a primary vehicle for shaping early perceptions of social roles and identities. While existing studies often employ linguistic discourse analysis, this research offers a unique scholarly contribution by synthesizing a feminist philosophical framework with a mixed-methods design. By analyzing the ten most-read non-fable children's books from the Buku Digital Kemdikbud 'Ministry of Education and Culture Republic of Indonesia Digital Book' portal, this study identifies both narrative patterns and visual frequencies. The results show that there are traditional gender narrative patterns that associate women with domestic work and men with work outside the home. However, gender narrative efforts that promote gender equality are also seen in 3 of the 10 children's books. In addition, the accumulation of character illustrations in the 10 children's books is dominated by male characters with a percentage of 52%, while the percentage of female character illustrations occurrence is 48%. These findings provide a critical evidence base for children's book writers and illustrators to move beyond traditional stereotypes and support the development of inclusive identities and gender equality values from an early age.

Keywords: Children Book, Domination, Gender Representation, Percentage

INTRODUCTION

Gender representation in children's books is important in shaping children's perceptions of societal gender roles. Unfortunately, research on gender representation in children's books has not been widely developed; scientific publications related to this matter are still limited.

The previous relevant research to this study was found in three articles. The three studies have the same research focus, namely representing gender in children's stories or children's literature, but using the theory of Critical Discourse Analysis and Feminism Literary Criticism. Therefore, the novelty of this research is in the type of study used, namely Philosophy studies. In addition, the novelty of the research is to identify the percentage of female and male characters illustrations or image occurrences in children's

books. The novelty of this research is that it aims to examine patterns and differences in gender representation through narrative analysis and quantitative analysis that identifies the percentage of female and male characters illustrations occurring in children's books with a philosophical approach to feminism.

One of the gender ideologies is the formation of a patriarchal cultural structure is one of the gender ideologies (Murniati, 2004: 5). Patriarchal culture is a system that places men as having superior power in decision-making (Zulmi & Lisytani, 2017). The qualities of masculinity and rationality of men are seen as superior to the emotional and feminine qualities associated with women. As a result, patriarchal societies are accustomed to normalizing when men have superior, dominant positions and enjoy various other advantages over women. In family life, mothers still often assign service work to daughters, while fathers are represented as authoritarian leaders, always being served, and mothers obey fathers. These stereotypes lead to a gendered division of labor within the family. Males and females are educated according to traditions and customs based on social constructs, not personal abilities. Children then grow up in stereotypical boxes that hinder the discovery of their identities. Social construction also establishes the husband as the head of the family.

The gender division of labor also places the wife at home (cooking, washing, caring for children, grooming) while the husband works outside the house. If these roles are swapped, they would be considered to be against nature, which is a reflection of social construction in a patriarchal culture. The adoption of this reality into children's books can lead to various interpretations, such as a form of reflecting the reality of patriarchal culture, a form of resistance and struggle against patriarchal culture, or even as a form of perpetuating patriarchy.

Being a woman is a social construction that places women in adverse social situations, such as the deep-rooted myth that women are irrational, complex, and difficult to understand. The status of the other is attached to women through the institution of marriage and the concept of motherhood (Vintges, 1999). Marriage transforms previously sincere feelings into demanding and even coercive obligations and rights. If the role of the wife limits women's self-development, the role of the mother limits it even more. In this living situation, women feel subordinated as subjects because they are limited in their opportunities to define themselves.

Gender representation in media and children's literature is an important topic in feminist studies. Literature not only reflects social reality but also shapes it (Gilbert & Gubar, 2020). Therefore, research was conducted to answer the representation of gender in children's books, so this research uses the concept of feminism philosophy.

Feminism in philosophical study assumes that the understanding of truth is dominated by a male perspective. The things that are understood as facts and values constructed and maintained are based on unequal power relations between women and men (Steans, et al, 2018). Feminist philosophy is a branch of philosophy that analyzes women's life experiences, rights, and roles in various areas of life. The focus is on gender equality, social justice, and women's empowerment. In this study, feminist philosophy functioned as a theoretical framework to understand the narratives and illustrations found in children's books.

An empirical study involving statistical analysis of the percentage of occurrence of female and male characters in children's book illustrations is also used in the research to provide concrete data on gender representation contained in the ten most-read non-fable children's books on Buku Digital Kemdikbud 'Ministry of Education and Culture Republic of Indonesia Digital Book' page.

The children's books used as the source of this research come from the Buku Digital Kemdikbud 'Ministry of Education and Culture Republic of Indonesia Digital Book' page. On this page, there are more than 700 reading books from preschool to high school levels with various themes, namely the theme of nature and the environment, Indonesian children, architecture, language, folklore, creative economy, animals and plants, disaster, diversity, health, culinary, adventure, arts and culture, solar system, and Indonesian figures, and the available languages consist of Indonesian, English, and local languages.

Given the large number of books contained in the Buku Digital Kemdikbud 'Ministry of Education and Culture Republic of Indonesia Digital Book' page, the scope of this research data source is limited by applying certain provisions and screening, namely the level of elementary school, the theme of Indonesian children, and the language used is Indonesian. The results of screening with these criteria show that there are 105 children's books with two types of reading books, namely fables and non-fables. Then, from these results, only the 10 most read non-fable books were used as the source of this research, namely *Aku Sayang Ayah* 'I Love Dad' (read 3.970 times), *Daun-Daun Istimewa* 'Special Leaves' (read 2.162 times), *Lihat Kebunku* 'Look at My Garden' (read 1.906 times), *Warna-warni Kemah Sains* 'Colorful Sains Camp' (read 1.877 times), *Adik Kecil dan Kucing* 'Little Sister and Cat' (read 1.594 times), *Hijau Kampungku di Tengah Kota* 'My Green Village in the Middle of the City' (read 1.513 times), *Dongeng untuk Santi* 'A Fairy Tale for Santi' (read 1.324 kali), *Menunggu Ibu* 'Waiting for Mom' (read 589 times), *Mengusir Monster Gelitik* 'Exorcising Tickle Monster' (read 499 times), and *Sreet* (read 488 times).

The main questions underlying this research are: (1) how are the roles of mothers and fathers narrated in children's books? (2) what is the percentage of female and male characters illustrations that occur in children's books?

This research addresses that gap by employing a feminist philosophical framework that shifts the analytical focus from what is represented to how representation produces ontological claims about gender. Rather than merely identifying stereotypes, this approach examines how children's books naturalize gender roles as essential, inevitable, and socially "true," thereby positioning women as the "other" and reinforcing patriarchal structures at the level of being and knowledge. In this sense, the analysis goes beyond discourse to uncover how narrative structures, character functions, and visual hierarchies work together to construct gender as an ontological condition rather than a social construct.

By integrating this philosophical lens with empirical analysis, the study offers a conceptual contribution that complements existing discourse-based approaches. It demonstrates that Indonesian children's literature does not simply reflect gender norms but actively participates in producing and stabilizing them as taken-for-granted realities for young readers.

Therefore, narratives of gender roles in children's books play a crucial role in shaping children's perceptions of social identity. The findings of this study are expected to provide a critical foundation for authors and illustrators to move beyond traditional stereotypes, particularly in representing parental roles, and to support the development of more inclusive and egalitarian narratives from an early age.

METHOD

This research uses mixed-method design. The qualitative descriptive method is used to analyze the narrative and represent gender in children's books. Meanwhile, the quantitative method is used to analyze the percentage of female and male characters illustrations occurring in children's books. The research data is in the form of written text – both narration and dialog – and pictures or illustrations. The source of the research data came from the ten most-read non-fable children's books found on the Buku Digital Kemdikbud 'Ministry of Education and Culture Republic of Indonesia Digital Book' page by applying certain provisions and filters, namely elementary school level, Indonesian children's themes, and the language used is Indonesian.

Table 1. Sources of Research Data

No.	Title	Author	Illustrator
1	<i>Daun-Daun Istimewa</i> 'Special Leaves'	Saptorini	Happy Rose
2	<i>Adik Kecil dan Kucing</i> Little Sister and Cat'	Wulanita Kuswotanti	Awa
3	<i>Dongeng untuk Santi</i> 'A Fairy Tale for Santi'	Indah Darmastuti	Vera Safitri

Table 1 (Continued)

No.	Title	Author	Illustrator
4	<i>Warna-Warni Kemah Sains 'Colorful Science Camp'</i>	Ana Falesthein T. A.	InnerChild
5	<i>Menunggu Ibu 'Waiting for Mom'</i>	Ary Nilandri	Airarumi
6	<i>Sreet</i>	Erna Fitrini	InnerChild
7	<i>Mengusir Monster Gelitik 'Exorcising Tickle Monster'</i>	Heryianna Artha	Karnadi
8	<i>Hijau Kampungku di Tengah Kota 'My Green Village in the Middle of the City'</i>	Tyas K. W.	Pingki Ayako Saputro
9	<i>Aku Sayang Ayah 'I Love Dad'</i>	Nurani Widaningsih	Dina Amalia
10	<i>Lihat Kebunku 'Look at My Garden'</i>	Flora Maharani	Marius Santo

Data collection was accomplished by reading all children's storybooks thoroughly, understanding the book's contents, and recording relevant data to the focus of this study. The next step was to collect and analyze the data. The data were analyzed based on their needs, namely qualitative analysis to describe gender representation and quantitative analysis to get the percentage of female and male characters illustrations occurrence. The following is a qualitative analysis scheme conducted in this study.

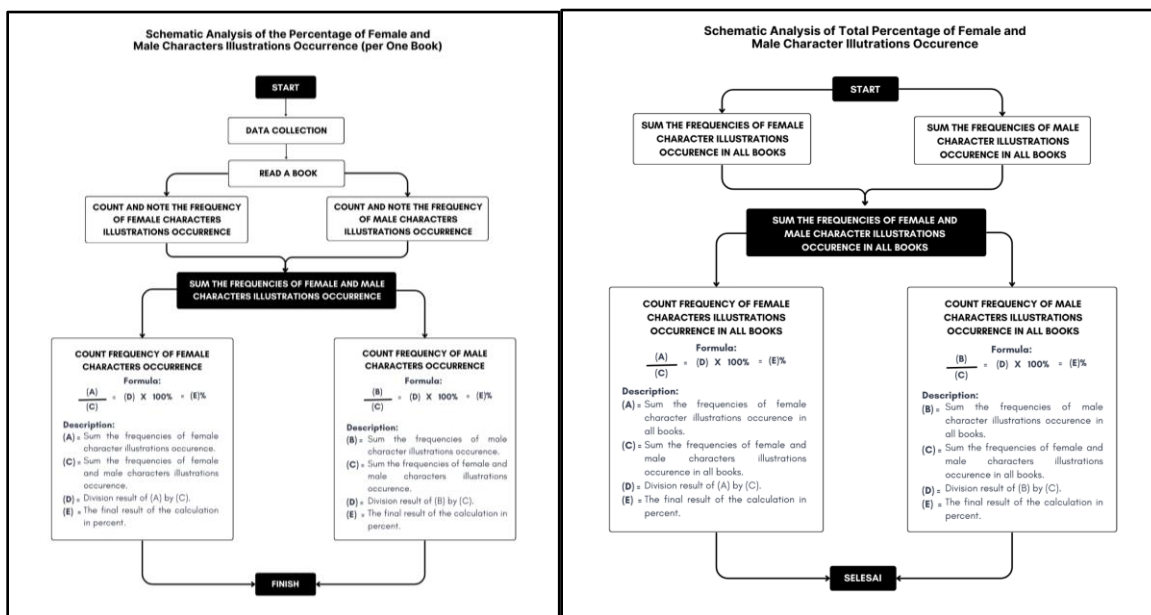


Figure 1. Schematic analysis of the percentage of female and male characters illustrations occurrence per one book (left) and schematic analysis of total percentage of female and male character illustrations occurrence in all books (right).

The analysis of character illustration frequency was conducted through a systematic coding procedure designed to ensure consistency and transparency. Each book was first read in full, and all visual appearances of human characters were identified and recorded. A "single occurrence" was defined as one identifiable character appearing in a single illustration panel, regardless of size or prominence. Repeated appearances of the same character across different illustrations were counted as separate occurrences, as the analysis focuses on visibility frequency rather than character identity.

Characters were coded into three categories: female, male, and ambiguous or undetermined. Gender classification was based on explicit textual markers (e.g., pronouns, names, narrative descriptions) and visual cues (e.g., clothing, hairstyle, contextual roles). In cases where gender could not be confidently determined due to lack of clear markers or androgynous representation, the character was classified as "ambiguous" and excluded from percentage calculations to avoid forced categorization.

To maintain interpretive consistency, a coding protocol was developed prior to analysis, outlining criteria for gender identification and counting procedures. The coding process was conducted iteratively, with repeated cross-checking of entries to ensure accuracy. Any uncertain cases were revisited and resolved through reference to both textual and visual context within the same book.

Quantitative analysis was then carried out by calculating the frequency and percentage of female and male character occurrences in each book. The percentage of each category was obtained by dividing the total number of occurrences within that category by the total number of all clearly classified (female and male) occurrences, multiplied by 100%. This procedure was applied consistently across all ten books.

To obtain aggregate findings, the total frequency of female and male character occurrences across the ten books was summed and converted into overall percentages using the same formula.

Following the quantitative analysis, the results were interpreted qualitatively to examine how patterns of visual representation align with or reinforce narrative constructions of gender roles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

After analyzing the data found in the ten most read non-fable children's books on the Buku Digital Kemdikbud 'Ministry of Education and Culture Republic of Indonesia Digital Book' page, patterns were found in narrating the roles of fathers and mothers and

differences in the frequency of occurrence of female and male characters, including children, adolescents, and adults.

Percentage of Female and Male Characters Illustration Occurrence

The research result shows the contrast between the frequency of female and male characters' illustration occurrence in ten non-fable children's books that become the data source of this research.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Female and Male Characters Illustrations Occurrence

Book Title	Read (Times)	Frequency of Appearance (times)		Percentage of Appearance (%)	
		Female Character	Male Characters	Female Character	Male Character
<i>Daun-Daun Istimewa</i> 'Special Leaves'	2.162	39	0	100,0	0,0
<i>Adik Kecil dan Kucing</i> 'Little Sister and Cat'	1.594	23	0	100,0	0,0
<i>Dongeng untuk Santi</i> 'A Fairy Tale for Santi'	1.324	48	4	92,3	7,7
<i>Warna-Warni Kemah Sains</i> 'Colorful Science Camp'	1.877	40	10	80,0	20,0
<i>Menunggu Ibu</i> 'Waiting for Mom'	589	26	34	43,4	56,6
<i>Sreeet</i>	488	8	22	26,7	
<i>Mengusir Monster Gelitik</i> 'Exorcising Tickle Monster'	499	21	63	25,0	75,0
<i>Hijau Kampungku di Tengah Kota</i> 'My Green Village in the Middle of the City'	1.513	1	9	10,0	90,0
<i>Aku Sayang Ayah</i> 'I Love Dad'	3.970	1	27	3,6	96,4
<i>Lihat Kebunku</i> 'Look at My Garden'	1.906	0	13	0,0	100,0

Based on the analysis result of the frequency of occurrence of female and male characters in the ten non-fable children's books, there was more dominance of the frequency of occurrence of male characters than female characters. The dominance of the frequency of occurrence of male characters is found in 6 children's books: one of them has a percentage of 100%, the remaining five children's books contain the dominance of the frequency of occurrence of female characters with two of them having 100%

occurrence of female characters. In addition, none of the ten children's books contained equal numbers or percentages of female and male characters occurrence.

Overall, from the ten non-fable children's books that became the source of research data, the percentage of male characters occurrence was 52%. Meanwhile, the percentage of female characters occurrence was 48%. This shows the dominance of the frequency of occurrence of male characters over female characters in the children's books that are the source of this research.

This imbalance becomes more analytically significant when read in conjunction with narrative function and characterization. Male characters are not only slightly more visible but are also more frequently positioned as agents of action, such as decision-makers, explorers, or problem-solvers, while female characters are more often embedded within relational or supportive roles. This indicates that representation operates not merely at the level of frequency but through a layered structure in which visibility, agency, and narrative centrality intersect. In this sense, the quantitative difference (52% vs. 48%) should not be interpreted as a simple numerical gap, but as part of a broader representational logic that privileges masculine-coded forms of action and authority.

From a feminist analytical perspective, this pattern can be understood as a process of normalization rather than explicit bias. The texts do not overtly exclude female characters; instead, they subtly organize narrative worlds in which masculine presence appears more central, active, and consequential. This aligns with broader discussions in gender studies that emphasize how inequality is often reproduced through everyday representational practices that appear natural or unmarked. In children's literature, such patterns are particularly significant because they contribute to what can be described as the early construction of "common sense" gender roles—where certain forms of behavior and positioning become thinkable, expected, and legitimate.

At the same time, the presence of books with dominant or exclusive female representation complicates a purely one-directional reading of gender bias. Rather than indicating a complete reversal of norms, these instances suggest that children's literature operates within a transitional representational field, where traditional and alternative gender configurations coexist. However, even in texts with strong female presence, the analysis shows that shifts in visibility do not always correspond to shifts in narrative authority or role diversification. This highlights an important distinction between representational inclusion (the presence of female characters) and representational transformation (the reconfiguration of what those characters are allowed to do and be).

Thus, the findings suggest that gender representation in these children's books is structured through a combination of numerical visibility, narrative positioning, and ideological normalization. Rather than simply reflecting social reality, the texts participate in producing and stabilizing particular understandings of gender by

repeatedly associating masculinity with action and centrality, and femininity with relationality or support. In this way, children's literature functions as a site where gender is not only depicted but also epistemologically and culturally organized.

Gender Representation

The results of this research analysis found that women are often portrayed as being responsible for household chores such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and caring for children. This reflects and reinforces traditional gender stereotypes that domestic tasks are the primary responsibility of women.

In the book *Daun-Daun Istimewa* 'Special Leaves', two female characters and a female character make cloth. There are no male characters involved in making cloth in the book, which is interpreted as a form of strong stereotypes of women being responsible for domestic tasks. Furthermore, the book *Adik Kecil dan Kucing* 'Little Sister and Cat' contains a depiction of a female character who likes and takes care of cats. In contrast, the book *Lihat Kebunku* 'Look at My Garden' shows the dominance of men in work outside the home, such as exploring nature and playing in the garden.

In the book *Warna-warni Kemah Sains* 'Colorful Sains Camp', there is a depiction of the mother's role as a person who takes care of children. The mother takes care of and prepares all the needs of Ida or the child character who will go to camp. In this book, there is no depiction of the father's role. In addition, in the cooking class attended by Ida, there is no depiction of male characters there. The same thing is found in the book *Mengusir Monster Gelitik* 'Exorcising Tickle Monster', which contains narratives about the work done by fathers and mothers.

"Ayah sedang memancing bersama teman-temannya," kataku kepada Paman Tik. 'Dad is fishing with his friends, I said to Uncle Tik.' (Artha, 2022: 8)

At a descriptive level, this excerpt presents a seemingly ordinary activity. However, its analytical significance emerges when this scene is read in relation to other narrative and visual elements within the same text, particularly the depiction of the mother as responsible for shopping for kitchen necessities. Taken together, these scenes construct a patterned distribution of roles rather than isolated character actions.

The father's activity, fishing with friends, operates within a social and recreational sphere that is spatially and symbolically located outside the home. It is not only an individual hobby but also a form of homosocial interaction that reinforces masculine affiliation and leisure. In contrast, the mother's activity is framed through domestic responsibility, tied to provisioning and the maintenance of household needs. This juxtaposition is significant because it does not explicitly state a division of labor; instead,

it naturalizes it through narrative sequencing and visual pairing. The reader encounters these roles as self-evident and unproblematic, which is precisely how gender norms are subtly reproduced.

Such a contrast is also found in the *Kampungku Hijau di Tengah Kota* 'My Green Village in the Middle of the City'. There is a depiction of a mother who cooks and takes care of her child. Meanwhile, the father is narrated doing work such as cleaning his motorcycle and accompanying his son to plant trees. There is also a figure of a boy depicted playing futsal.

Ibu hendak pergi mencari makan. Ibu menyuruhku menunggu saja. Aku menurut, karena aku sayang Ibu. 'Mom was going out to get something to eat. She told me to wait. I obeyed, because I love Mom.' (Nilandari, 2022: 1)

Aku lapar. Ibu belum pulang juga. 'I am hungry. Mom has not come home yet.' (Nilandari, 2022: 6)

The data is obtained from the book *Menunggu Ibu* 'Waiting for Mom'. There are illustrations of father and mother figures. At the level of textual frequency, the repeated invocation of mother establishes her as the primary figure through whom the child's needs, emotions, and actions are mediated. The father, although visually present in some illustrations, is entirely absent from the narrative voice, neither speaks nor is referred to in the child's account. This discrepancy between visual presence and narrative absence is analytically significant.

Rather than interpreting this pattern solely as a reflection of maternal closeness, it is more productive to examine how the text organizes parental roles through narrative focalization. The story is structured around waiting, dependency, and emotional attachment, all of which are directed exclusively toward the mother. The mother's act of "going out to get food" situates her within a caregiving economy, where her movement outside the home is still tied to fulfilling domestic needs. Meanwhile, the father's narrative silence effectively removes him from this economy of care, not by explicit exclusion, but through omission.

From a representational standpoint, this produces a gendered asymmetry in narrative relevance: the mother is constructed as indispensable to the child's survival and emotional world, while the father becomes narratively peripheral, even when visually present. This aligns with broader patterns identified in children's literature, where caregiving is not only assigned to female characters but also becomes the primary lens through which relational meaning is structured. Importantly, the issue here is not simply that the mother appears more frequently, but that the text limits caregiving, authority, and emotional centrality to a single gendered figure.

This pattern can be understood as a form of normalization through narrative economy. By consistently directing attention, dialogue, and emotional stakes toward the mother, the text implicitly defines caregiving as a maternal function, while rendering paternal involvement unnecessary or secondary. In gender studies, such representational strategies are often seen as mechanisms through which social roles are stabilized, not through explicit ideological statements, but through the repetition of who is made visible, who speaks, and who matters within the narrative.

In the book *Dongeng untuk Santi 'A Fairy Tale for Santi'*, there is a depiction of the role of female household assistants who take care of the house. This is interpreted as a form of reflection of social reality in which household assistants who do domestic work are dominated by women.

Atika sudah selesai ganti baju. Mereka siap berjalan-jalan.

"Rumahmu sepi sekali, Atika."

"Iya. Bapakku masih mengajar di SD dekat sini, Ibuku masih di puskesmas, dia bidan."

"Oh, begitu."

'Atika had finished changing. They were ready to go for a walk.

"Your house is so quiet, Atika."

"Yes, it is. My father still teaches at the elementary school near here, my mother is still at the health center, she's a midwife."

"Oh, I see."

(Darmastuti, 2019: 5)

However, there is present narrative configurations that complicate dominant gender constructions by positioning fathers and mothers within shared domains of care. This is not merely a matter of equal "participation," but a reconfiguration of the symbolic boundaries that traditionally separate domestic and public roles. In these instances, fathers are not depicted as auxiliary or exceptional caregivers; rather, they are narratively normalized as active agents in children's emotional and developmental lives. For example, scenes in which fathers accompany children to play function not only as representational inclusions but as discursive shifts that relocate paternal identity from economic provider to affective presence.

At the level of narrative logic, this redistribution of roles challenges the patriarchal assumption that caregiving is an inherently maternal and "natural" responsibility. Instead, the texts construct caregiving as a relational and shared practice, thereby destabilizing the gendered division of labor embedded in conventional storytelling. Visually, the co-presence of fathers and mothers within the same caregiving space further

reinforces this shift, as it produces an image of parental roles that is collaborative rather than hierarchical.

From a feminist philosophical perspective, these representations can be read as a form of ontological resistance: they disrupt the essentialist framing of women as the primary caregivers and men as peripheral figures in the domestic sphere. In doing so, the texts open up alternative possibilities for understanding gender roles, where caregiving is no longer tied to biological or cultural determinism but is constructed as a flexible and shared human capacity. Thus, rather than simply countering the “fatherless” phenomenon at the level of visibility, these narratives actively rearticulate the conditions through which paternal involvement becomes thinkable, legitimate, and normalized within children's early conceptual frameworks.

Efforts that show resistance to the patriarchal culture rooted in society are also seen in the books *Sreet* and *Aku Sayang Ayah 'I Love Dad'*. In the book *Sreet*, the effort is shown by the narrative of how a boy participates in repairing his torn blanket with his grandmother. Meanwhile, in *Aku Sayang Ayah 'I Love Dad'* there is a depiction of how a father does domestic work, such as cooking and caring for his child.

Children's books play an important role in shaping children's understanding of gender roles in society. When male characters appear more often than female characters, this can reinforce the stereotype that men have a more dominant and important role in society than women. From a feminist perspective, this is a form of unfair representation and reinforces patriarchy.

Children learn through observation and imitation (Bandura & Walters, 1977). If children constantly see women portrayed in domestic roles, they are likely to internalize the view that household tasks are women's obligations. This may limit their understanding of more flexible and equal gender roles.

The philosophy of feminism emphasizes the importance of balanced and equal representation of both genders. Children's books that show gender equality will help teach gender equality values early on.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the analysis and discussion demonstrates that gender representation in the ten most-read non-fable children's books on the Buku Digital Kemdikbud platform remains marked by a subtle yet persistent imbalance. Quantitatively, male characters appear slightly more frequently (52%) than female characters (48%), indicating a continued prioritization of male visibility in visual storytelling. Qualitatively, this imbalance is reinforced by dominant narrative patterns that associate women with domestic roles and men with public or economic activities,

revealing the endurance of traditional gender ideologies. However, new narrative patterns in narrating gender by promoting gender equality have also begun to appear in several books, namely the narrative of women having a career found in the book *Dongeng Untuk Santi* 'A Fairy Tale for Santi' and the narrative of men doing housework found in the books *Aku Sayang Ayah* 'I Love Dad' and *Sreet*. In that texts reconfigure gender roles by depicting women in professional spheres and men in caregiving or domestic roles. These instances are not merely additive representations but function as disruptions to the conventional gender order, suggesting a transitional landscape in which traditional and egalitarian constructions coexist.

Thus, this research highlights that children's literature does not simply reflect social norms but actively participates in shaping early ontological understandings of gender, naturalizing certain roles while rendering others as alternative possibilities. This underscores the importance of critically evaluating both narrative structures and visual distributions in assessing gender representation. However, efforts to ensure fairer and more equal representations in children's literature need to be taken seriously and enhanced to support the development of a more inclusive identity that respects the values of gender equality from an early age.

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