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## Language and Gender: Exploring Power, Identity and Equity in Bangla Language

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### Abstract

Language is not a neutral instrument of communication; it carries with it social hierarchies, cultural norms, and power relations. In Bangladesh, where Bangla serves as both a mother tongue and a symbol of national identity, linguistic practices continue to shape and reflect gendered inequalities. This article explores the complex intersections of language and gender within the Bangladeshi context. It examines how gender norms are reproduced in speech patterns, education, and media representation, and how mother tongue education offers opportunities for empowerment if approached through a gender-sensitive lens. Drawing on sociolinguistic, feminist, and discourse analysis theories, this article analyses existing literature, policies, and practices, with a view to understanding how Bangla as a language both mirrors and sustains patriarchal structures. The paper argues that integrating gender perspectives into language policy, pedagogy, and cultural practices is essential to achieving equity. Finally, recommendations are provided for gender-responsive reforms in education, curriculum, and public discourse.

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## **Introduction**

Language is deeply tied to human identity and culture: it mediates communication, meaning-making, and the negotiation of social roles (Fairclough, 2015; Butler, 1990). Yet language is far from neutral—it both reflects and reproduces existing hierarchies, including gendered relations (Lakoff, 1975; Mills, 2008), and can also become a site of resistance (Butler, 1990; Fairclough, 2015). In Bangladesh, Bangla occupies a distinctive position as the mother tongue of the majority and as a symbol of national struggle and cultural recognition, but everyday language practices and institutional texts reveal entrenched gender inequities (Nahar, 2019; Kabeer, 2000). The relationship between language and gender is therefore central to understanding broader patterns of inequality: linguistic forms encode expectations about women’s and men’s roles, while representation in education and media shapes access to voice and opportunity (UNESCO, 2016; Rudhumbu, 2022). With policy emphasis on mother-tongue instruction for early learning, it is imperative to interrogate whether such approaches redress or inadvertently reproduce gendered norms (Mohanty, 2010; UNESCO, 2016). This paper therefore examines Bangla as both a vehicle of inequality and a potential instrument of empowerment, analysing how linguistic practices in everyday interaction, curricular materials, and media contribute to the construction, contestation, and re-imagining of gendered identities in Bangladesh (Fairclough, 2015).

## **Statement of the problem**

Despite progress in gender equality, patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded in Bangladeshi society, and these are mirrored in language use. Gendered speech patterns often assign authority to men while framing women in familial or subordinate roles. In classrooms and textbooks, women are underrepresented or stereotypically depicted as caregivers, reinforcing narrow social expectations. Public discourse continues to privilege male voices in political, academic, and cultural domains.

While mother tongue education is widely recognised for its role in improving comprehension and literacy (UNESCO, 2016), these

initiatives have not always addressed the gendered dimensions of language. As a result, linguistic practices continue to reproduce inequities. The problem lies in the way language sustains patriarchal structures at multiple levels—individual, institutional, and societal. Unless explicitly addressed, these dynamics risk undermining Bangladesh’s progress in gender equality and inclusive development.

### **Objectives of the research**

This research pursues the following objectives:

- To examine how linguistic practices in Bangla reflect and reinforce gender norms and inequalities.
- To analyse the impact of gendered language use on mother tongue education in Bangladesh.
- To propose recommendations for gender-responsive reforms in language practices, policies, and pedagogy.

### **Literature Review**

The field of language and gender emerged prominently with Lakoff’s *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975), which argued that women’s speech is systematically shaped by social expectations of politeness, hesitation, and deference. Building on this foundation, scholars such as Penelope (1990/2003) and Talbot (1998) contended that gendered linguistic hierarchies are products of patriarchal social structures rather than biological differences. Later work by Cameron (1998) and Holmes and Meyerhoff (2003) further demonstrated that linguistic patterns associated with men and women are socially constructed, context-dependent, and reflective of broader power relations.

Within South Asia, gendered asymmetries in language intersect with deeply rooted patriarchal norms. Empirical studies reveal that Bangla often encodes gendered relationality through the pervasive use of kinship terms for women—such as *maa* (mother), *meiye* (girl), or *bou* (wife)—while men are predominantly referenced through occupational, institutional, or status-bearing titles (Islam, 2023). Such linguistic patterns reinforce the social positioning of women

through relational identity, in contrast to men's alignment with public, professional, and authoritative domains.

Educational scholarship in Bangladesh identifies similar dynamics across curricular materials. Nahar (2019) documented a significant gender imbalance in primary and secondary textbooks, where female characters remain underrepresented and are depicted largely in domestic or subordinate roles. These findings echo global research indicating that textbooks are critical sites where gender ideologies are reproduced (Blumberg, 2008). Content analysis of Bangladeshi educational materials thus reveals how representational biases may shape children's aspirations, cognitive associations, and perceptions of gendered possibility.

The broader literature on mother tongue-based education demonstrates its pedagogical advantages, particularly in comprehension, retention, and identity formation (UNESCO, 2016; Mohanty, 2010). However, scholars also caution that without explicit gender-sensitive frameworks, mother tongue initiatives may inadvertently replicate the inequities embedded in the linguistic and cultural resources they draw from (Genilo et al, 2018). In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Sultana (2011) showed that mother tongue programmes incorporating women as teachers not only improved learning outcomes but also increased girls' participation, illustrating the transformative potential of gender-inclusive approaches.

Critical discourse analysis provides an essential theoretical lens for understanding these dynamics. Fairclough (2015) conceptualised language as a socially embedded practice through which power is enacted and normalized. From this perspective, gender asymmetries in Bangla are not merely descriptive features but discursive mechanisms that reproduce hierarchical social relations. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity further emphasises that gender is enacted through repeated linguistic and social practices, positioning language as a central medium through which gender norms are produced, legitimised, and contested.

## **Research Rationale**

Bangladesh's policy commitments—including SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality)—hinge on transforming the linguistic and discursive environments that shape gendered identities. Yet, the role of Bangla in constructing and reproducing gender norms remains understudied. Investigating how everyday speech, educational materials, and public discourse enact gendered power relations provides critical insights for designing gender-equitable educational reforms. This research therefore contributes to filling an important policy and scholarly gap by examining the linguistic foundations of gender inequality within Bangladeshi society.

## **Research questions**

The research is guided by three interrelated questions that seek to uncover the complex intersections of language and gender within the Bangla linguistic and educational landscape.

### **How do linguistic practices in Bangla reflect and reinforce gender norms?**

This question aims to examine the ways in which everyday Bangla speech, idioms, proverbs, and forms of address reproduce societal expectations of men and women. For instance, Bangla contains numerous gendered expressions that symbolically assign authority, strength, and rationality to men, while associating women with obedience, domesticity, and emotionality (Nahar, 2019). The investigation looks at how conversational styles, classroom interactions, and media portrayals embody patriarchal values, thereby legitimising social hierarchies. By interrogating linguistic practices, this question attempts to highlight the subtle ways through which gender inequality is sustained in cultural discourse.

### **In what ways does gendered language use affect mother tongue education in Bangladesh?**

Bangladesh has invested significantly in mother tongue-based instruction, recognising its importance for learning, identity formation, and cultural continuity. However, language in education

is not only a medium of communication but also a conveyor of social norms. This question probes how gendered narratives in textbooks, the use of male-centric examples in classrooms, and teacher-student interactions either encourage or limit the participation of girls in education. Research has already shown that when girls do not see themselves positively represented in curricular content, their confidence and engagement decrease (UNESCO, 2016). Thus, the focus here is on how gender bias embedded in Bangla educational materials and pedagogy influences learning outcomes and perpetuates inequities in access, achievement, and aspirations.

### **What strategies can make language policy and practice more gender-responsive?**

The final question takes a forward-looking approach, focusing on actionable solutions to address the inequities uncovered. It recognises that language policy is not merely about standardising communication but also about shaping inclusive identities and ensuring equity. The aim here is to explore interventions such as revising textbooks to include balanced gender representation, training teachers in gender-sensitive pedagogical practices, and amplifying women's voices in public discourse. Additionally, the question opens the door to considering how community participation—particularly women's involvement in curriculum design, storytelling, and local knowledge-sharing—can lead to more equitable educational experiences. This inquiry not only addresses immediate classroom practices but also contributes to long-term strategies for integrating gender justice into national language and education policies.

Taken together, these research questions provide a comprehensive framework to examine the interplay of language and gender in the Bangla context, offering both a critical analysis of current practices and pathways towards more equitable futures.

### **Theoretical framework**

This research draws on three interrelated theoretical traditions that provide complementary perspectives for examining the nexus between language and gender in the Bangla context.

***Lakoff's (1975) theory of "women's language"***

Robin Lakoff's seminal work *Language and Woman's Place* introduced the idea that women's speech is marked by certain linguistic features—such as tag questions, hedges, intensifiers, and politeness markers—that reflect and reinforce women's social subordination. Although critiqued and refined over time, Lakoff's framework remains foundational in highlighting the ways in which gendered differences in language are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Applied to Bangla, this framework enables an exploration of how women's speech is shaped by cultural expectations of modesty, deference, and relational identity, often limiting their participation in public or formal discourse. For instance, the frequent use of kinship-based address terms for women (e.g., *maa*, *apa*) versus occupational identifiers for men reflects not only linguistic habits but also entrenched gender hierarchies in Bangladeshi society (Kabeer, 2000).

***Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity***

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity provides a dynamic lens to understand how language does not merely reflect gender identities but actively constructs them. According to Butler, gender is not a fixed attribute but a set of repeated performances, sustained through discourse and social interaction. In the context of Bangla, this theory underscores how everyday speech acts—whether in classrooms, media, or family interactions—reinforce gender binaries and expectations. For example, the linguistic practices that portray women as caregivers and men as decision-makers are not neutral descriptions but repeated discursive acts that construct and naturalise gender roles. Butler's framework helps uncover how these performances can also be disrupted; for instance, when women use assertive or authoritative language in public forums, they challenge and reconfigure traditional gender expectations in Bangladeshi society.

***Fairclough's (2015) critical discourse analysis (CDA)***

Norman Fairclough's approach to CDA provides analytical tools to examine how language operates at the intersection of text, discourse practice, and broader socio-political structures. CDA highlights how power relations are embedded in language and how discourse contributes to the maintenance or transformation of social inequalities.

This framework is particularly useful for analysing Bangla language use in institutional contexts such as schools, textbooks, media, and policy documents. For example, CDA can help reveal how gender stereotypes in educational materials normalise unequal gender roles, or how media discourse amplifies male voices while marginalising women's perspectives. It also enables an analysis of the systemic dimensions of language, showing how institutionalised practices (e.g., curriculum design, teacher training, state policy) reproduce patriarchal norms under the guise of neutrality.

### ***A multi-dimensional approach***

Together, these three frameworks provide a multi-layered understanding of language and gender in Bangladesh. Lakoff's perspective draws attention to micro-level linguistic features that reflect gendered expectations; Butler's theory adds a performative and identity-oriented lens, showing how gender is enacted through language; and Fairclough's CDA situates these practices within broader socio-political and institutional structures. By combining these approaches, this research is able to capture the individual, interactional, and systemic dimensions of how Bangla both reflects and shapes gender relations. This multi-dimensional framework is crucial for understanding not only the reproduction of inequality but also the possibilities for transformation through mother tongue education, media reform, and inclusive policy.

### **Research methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and feminist linguistics to examine how gender is constructed, normalised, and reproduced across everyday language, educational materials, and media discourse in Bangladesh. To ensure methodological rigour, the sampling strategy, sources, analytical procedures, and ethical considerations are described in detail below.

### ***Sampling strategy and data sources***

The study draws on three interconnected corpora of discourse, each selected through purposive sampling to reflect widely circulated forms of language and representation in Bangladesh.

### ***Everyday discourse***

“Conversational Bangla” refers to spontaneous, everyday language used in informal interpersonal communication. For this study, the sample is drawn from three sources:

- a) published sociolinguistic and ethnographic studies documenting natural conversations in households, markets, workplaces, and public transport (Kabeer, 2000);
- b) transcriptions from publicly available recordings and digital content (e.g., YouTube vlogs, street interviews) where colloquial Bangla is used (Sultana, 2011);
- c) anecdotal excerpts from documented oral histories and community interaction studies (Islam, 2023).

These sources were selected because they capture gendered naming practices, honorifics, pronoun use, and role expectations embedded in daily communication.

### ***Textbooks and classroom materials***

A purposive sample of national curriculum textbooks was selected from Grades 1–10 across Bangla, Social Science, Science, and Moral Education subjects. These are published by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) and represent the mandatory learning materials for all government and most non-government schools (NCTB, 2013–2022).

The sample includes 18 textbooks, chosen based on their relevance for analysing character representation, occupational roles, illustrations, and narrative framing (Nahar, 2019; UNESCO, 2016).

In addition, “classroom observation” refers to secondary analysis of existing observational studies (Sultana, 2011). These studies used structured observation tools to document teacher–student interactions, participation patterns, and language used by educators during lessons. Because no primary observational data were collected for this research, no direct ethical approval was required beyond acknowledging the ethical clearance obtained by the original researchers.

### ***Media content***

Media sampling includes print, television, and digital advertising. A total of ten newspapers (five Bangla, five English) were reviewed, covering a two-month period. Television content was sampled from three major national channels, focusing on news, talk shows, and commercials. Digital advertisements and social media campaigns were included based on audience reach and relevance (Nahar, 2019).

The sample captures representations of gender in politics, employment, domestic life, and public narratives, enabling a cross-platform comparison of discursive patterns.

### ***Analytical framework and procedures***

The study applies Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional CDA model—textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice—complemented by feminist linguistic principles (Cameron, 1992; Mills, 2008).

***Textual analysis*** involves identifying lexical choices, metaphors, pronouns, agency structures, and visual representations.

***Discursive practice*** examines how texts are produced, circulated, and consumed—how textbooks, media scripts, and conversational norms are created and reproduced.

***Social practice*** situates these discourses within broader patriarchal power structures in Bangladeshi society (Kabeer, 2000; Sultana, 2011).

Coding was conducted manually, with recurring themes compared across all three corpora to ensure triangulation and analytical robustness.

### **Findings**

This section presents the findings organised around the individual, interactional, and systemic dimensions of gendered discourse, consistent with multi-layered frameworks in feminist linguistics and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2015; Talbot, 1998). Across all datasets—conversational Bangla, textbooks and classroom interactions, and media representations—persistent gender asymmetries emerge that shape identity formation, distribute

symbolic power, and constrain equitable participation in social and educational life.

### **Individual Level: Linguistic Construction of Gendered Identities**

#### ***Gendered naming, erasure, and relational identities in everyday Bangla***

Analysis of conversational Bangla reveals entrenched asymmetries in how women and men are marked, named, and positioned. Women are disproportionately identified through kinship and relational terms—*meyeti, bouma, bhabi, ma*—which foreground dependency, domesticity, and familial identity. These linguistic forms replicate what Talbot (1998) and Penelope (1990/2003) describe as the “relational indexing” of women, where identity is mediated through social roles rather than individual agency. In contrast, men are consistently referred to by occupational, institutional, or status-bearing titles such as *shikhhok, karmokarta, or netā*, reinforcing associations with competence, authority, and public visibility (Kabeer, 2000).

Critical discourse analysis of digital conversational transcripts further reveals asymmetrical patterns of pronoun use. Masculine pronouns (*se, tini*) are used more flexibly and appear in association with respect, status, and individualised agency. Feminine referents, however, frequently appear with diminutive or marked forms—*meyeta, meiyee, bou*—that linguistically diminish agency and reinforce subordinate positioning. Such patterns resonate with Mills’ (2008) and Cameron’s (1992) observations on linguistic diminutives as mechanisms of symbolic marginalisation. Repeated across everyday interactions, these linguistic practices enact what Butler (1990) calls “gender performativity”, reproducing normative gender identities through habitual discourse.

### **Interactional Level: Classroom Talk, Pedagogy, and Representational Patterns**

#### ***Gendered patterns in textbooks: textual and visual asymmetry***

Analysis of Bangladeshi primary and secondary textbooks indicates systemic gender bias across textual narratives and visual illustrations.

In the Grade 4 Social Science textbook, for example, male characters dominate professional, scientific, and public-facing roles, while women are confined to domestic, supportive, or decorative functions (Nahar, 2019). Visual analysis reveals that men appear in dynamic, foregrounded positions performing agentive actions, whereas women are placed in static or background positions. CDA of lexical patterns shows men associated with verbs such as *lead*, *work*, and *decide*, while women are linked to *cook*, *help*, and *care*. These linguistic and visual asymmetries mirror Blumberg’s (2008) finding that textbooks worldwide routinely embed and naturalise patriarchal gender hierarchies.

### ***Classroom discourse and differential participation***

Interactional patterns in classroom talk reveal gendered asymmetries in participation and pedagogical expectations. Teachers disproportionately call on boys for cognitively demanding tasks and reward assertiveness, confidence, and verbal engagement (Sultana, 2011). Girls, by contrast, are praised for compliance and quietness, often instructed to “stay silent” (*chup thako*) at rates significantly higher than boys (Sultana, 2011). CDA of teacher talk shows that directive and evaluative speech acts (e.g., commands, reprimands, praise) are gender-differentiated, reflecting implicit beliefs about who is entitled to voice, agency, and epistemic authority in the classroom.

These gendered interactional norms—layered onto linguistically biased curricula—undermine the potential equity benefits of mother tongue education (Mohanty, 2010; UNESCO, 2016). They shape children’s self-perceptions as learners, limiting girls’ opportunities to develop confidence, assertiveness, and public voice.

## **Systemic Level: Media, Ideology, and the Reproduction of Patriarchal Norms**

### ***Media discourse: symbolic authority and public visibility***

Across media platforms, linguistic patterns strongly associate authority, expertise, and public legitimacy with men. In political and economic news across five major newspapers, 82% of quoted experts were men (Nahar, 2019). Women’s appearances were concentrated in soft-news categories—family, lifestyle, human-interest stories—where their

identities were framed relationally rather than professionally (Nahar, 2019). CDA of headline construction reveals that men are associated with agentive verbs (“announced,” “led,” “addressed”) while women appear in passive or relational constructions (“was present,” “accompanied,” “was seen”), reinforcing symbolic hierarchies of public authority.

Advertising discourse further amplifies these asymmetries: women promote domestic products or fairness creams, while men promote banking services, technology, or leadership roles. These patterns align with Talbot’s (1998) argument that media serves as a central ideological apparatus for reproducing hegemonic gender norms.

### *Signs of discursive shift*

Despite these dominant trends, counter-discourses are emerging. Advertisements portraying women as engineers, entrepreneurs, or scientists, and television dramas showing men as caregivers, challenge traditional gender scripts and broaden identity possibilities. In Fairclough’s (2015) terms, these represent “discoursal rearticulations” that open symbolic space for contesting patriarchal norms. Though limited, such shifts signal potential transformation in public perception.

## **Synthesis of Findings: Gender Asymmetry, Power, Identity, and Equity**

Across individual, interactional, and systemic levels, the findings reveal that Bangla functions as a key mechanism for reproducing patriarchal social order. At the individual level, relational naming and diminutive forms reduce women’s agency. At the interactional level, textbooks and classroom discourse embed and normalise gender hierarchies, shaping children’s cognitive frames and aspirations. At the systemic level, media discourse perpetuates male symbolic dominance while restricting women’s public legitimacy.

Collectively, these linguistic patterns constrain girls’ and women’s access to authority, recognition, and opportunity, thereby limiting progress towards gender equity. However, the identification of counter-discourses—equitable pedagogical practices, gender-

sensitive curricular reforms, and progressive media narratives—indicates openings for transformative change. Leveraging these shifts requires coordinated policy, curriculum, and media reforms aligned with Bangladesh’s commitments under SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality) (UNESCO, 2016; World Bank, 2019).

## **Recommendations**

The findings demonstrate that gendered linguistic practices in Bangladesh operate across individual, interactional, and systemic levels, reinforcing patriarchal norms while simultaneously presenting emerging opportunities for change. In line with feminist linguistic theory (Cameron, 1998; Mills, 2008) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2015), the recommendations below adopt a multi-level approach, recognising that transformation requires coordinated interventions in language policy, pedagogy, media, and community practice.

### **Integrate gender perspectives into national language and education policy**

To prevent Bangla from functioning as a medium that inadvertently reproduces gendered hierarchies, gender considerations must be systematically embedded within national language planning and educational policy (Mohanty, 2010; UNESCO, 2016). This includes incorporating gender analysis into the development of curricula, teacher recruitment criteria, and language policy guidelines. Policy actors should undergo capacity-building to identify linguistic bias and to design interventions that promote equitable representation and agency. Such alignment is consistent with commitments under SDG 4 and SDG 5, which emphasise inclusive education and gender equality (UNESCO, 2016; World Bank, 2019).

### **Reform educational content to eliminate structural bias**

Given the strong evidence that Bangladeshi textbooks reproduce gendered stereotypes (Nahar 2019; Blumberg, 2008), reforming textual and visual content is essential. Textbooks should depict women and

men in a diverse range of social, professional, and leadership roles, challenging the current domestic–public binary. Integrating local female role models—such as Begum Rokeya or Sufia Kamal—can counteract patterns of erasure and inspire broader identity possibilities. Aligning textbook reform with CDA-informed frameworks ensures that not only representation but also narrative structure, verb choice, and character positioning contribute to more equitable discourse (Fairclough, 2015).

### **Advance gender-responsive pedagogy and classroom interaction**

As classroom discourse plays a critical role in shaping children’s epistemic identity and sense of agency (Sultana, 2011), teacher professional development should prioritise gender-responsive pedagogy. Training programmes must equip teachers to recognise implicit bias, balance participation, and use inclusive evaluative and directive speech acts. Evidence from feminist pedagogical scholarship suggests that intentional strategies—such as equitable turn-taking, rotating leadership in group work, and avoidance of gendered directives—reduce asymmetrical participation and promote learner confidence (Cameron, 1992; Mills, 2008). Strengthening mentorship pathways for female educators may further disrupt gendered hierarchies within the teaching profession itself.

### **Promote gender-equitable media representation**

Media discourse remains a significant site of ideological reproduction, with women’s public visibility constrained by symbolic marginalisation (Islam, 2023; Cookson et al, 2023). To address this, media regulatory bodies and professional associations should adopt guidelines that promote gender-equitable representation in news reporting, entertainment, and advertising. This includes increasing the visibility of women as experts and authoritative voices, discouraging narrative frames that depict women exclusively in relational roles, and expanding portrayals of men as caregivers and collaborators. These shifts align with Fairclough’s (2015) concept of “discoursal rearticulation,” enabling broader cultural renegotiation of gender norms.

### **Strengthen community-based initiatives for discursive change**

Local communities play an essential role in transmitting linguistic norms and gendered expectations (Mohanty, 2010). Community-based interventions—such as women-led storytelling circles, participatory theatre, or mother-tongue literacy groups—can create discursive spaces in which alternative gender identities are articulated and normalised. Such initiatives support Penelope’s (2003) call for “unlearning patriarchal linguistic structures” and can be particularly effective in rural or indigenous contexts where oral traditions remain influential.

### **Establish monitoring, research, and accountability mechanisms**

Sustainable transformation requires systematic monitoring of gender representation across educational, media, and policy domains. Independent research institutions, universities, and civil society organisations should collaborate with government agencies to develop national indicators that track linguistic bias in textbooks, classroom discourse, and media content. Annual audits of textbooks—similar to those recommended by Blumberg (2008)—would provide empirical evidence for change, while public reporting frameworks can strengthen accountability and transparency. Longitudinal research should also be supported to document evolving gender discourses and the impact of reforms over time.

### **Conclusion**

Language and gender constitute mutually constitutive dimensions of social life, shaping how identities and hierarchies are produced and maintained (Butler, 1990; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003). In Bangladesh, Bangla operates not only as a symbol of national identity but also as a discursive site in which patriarchal norms are reproduced through everyday interaction (Genilo et al, 2018; Cameron, 1992). Textbooks and curricular materials continue to position men as public actors and women as domestic caregivers, reinforcing gendered social expectations (Blumberg, 2008; NCTB, 2013–2022). Media discourse similarly privileges male authority and marginalizes women’s voices,

thereby narrowing the symbolic possibilities for women's full participation in society (Mohanty, 2010).

At the same time, the findings affirm that language is not merely a mirror of existing inequalities but also a mechanism through which social change can be enacted (Fairclough, 2015; Mills, 2008). Evidence from mother tongue-based education shows that gender-sensitive reforms can expand girls' participation, reshape classroom dynamics, and challenge deep-seated stereotypes (Mohanty, 2010; Sultana, 2011). Emerging media narratives that portray women in leadership roles and men in caregiving positions illustrate that discursive transformation is possible, signalling a gradual reconfiguration of the symbolic order (Nahar, 2019). Such counter-discourses underscore that linguistic practices remain open to contestation and reimagining (Cameron, 1998; Penelope, 2003).

Advancing gender equality in Bangladesh therefore requires sustained attention to language policy, curriculum reform, and cultural production. Integrating diverse gender representations in textbooks, strengthening teacher training to promote inclusive interaction, and amplifying women's voices across media platforms are essential steps toward transforming the gendered meanings embedded in linguistic practices (Kabeer, 2000; World Bank, 2019). When language is strategically leveraged as a tool for empowerment rather than exclusion, it can contribute meaningfully to the nation's pursuit of equity, dignity, and inclusive development in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2016).

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