

EXPLORING THE MANIFESTATION OF LINGUISTICS SEXISM IN THE LANGUAGE OF PAKISTANI YOUTH

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Abstract

Language shows societal shifts and continuously evolving itself. Adopting non-sexist language is part of this language transformation, however the persistent use of sex-biased words signifies that gender neutral language has not been accomplished thoroughly. Patriarchal values are still mirrored by contemporary language. This study analyzes how the language used by Pakistani youth manifests gender bias, highlighting how everyday language reinforce social norms. The key goal is to detect gender-biased pronouns in students' writing. The research by combining quantitative analysis of student writing with qualitative data from focus group discussions, employs a mixed-methods approach. The theoretical framework is deduced by Study of Anne Pauwels on Australian educators and academics and modified to a Pakistani context. Data has been collected from 167 BS and MPhil English students. Their use of pronouns like "he," "she," and "he/she" has been examined to assess their knowledge and usage of gender neutral language. The results demonstrates that linguistic sexism is present in students' language, and knowledge of Feminist Linguistic Reforms is limited. The research shows that many students have unconsciously accepted the male dominated language norms that prevails in society, proposing enhanced education on gender neutral language.

Key Words: Linguistic sexism, Gender inclusive language, Feminist Linguistic Reform, Gender bias

Introduction

Pakistan is a developing country, but across various facets of life it keeps on lagging in gender partiality. The most important element that is hampering the development of our country is the inequality between the two genders. Obstacles put by culture and society in the way of women, make a significant section of the population unable to play part in the progress of the country. Education is a common illustration of this case. In textbooks, women are degraded and depreciated. Generally female characters face maltreatment, controlled by men, inhibited to their home as mothers, wives or housemaids. In textbooks, on multiple occasions, females have been given no professional character. They have been given the tasks of home maids,

guardianship and serving their husband or family members when it comes to social responsibilities. Altogether, females have been given notably less authority than men. Men have the power to resolve family and social issues (Hussain, Afsar, 2010). Women have less registration ratio as compared to men in academic institutes due to their restricted approach to education. Women's opportunities for career growth and improvement in educational environments are obstructed by numerous societal elements in an autocratic system because too many limitations are charged on women. Women's participation in early education is small because of gender differences (Abbas and Muhammad, 2021). According to the reports of Batool et al. (2013), women enrollment in higher education, in 2003-2004, was 47.6% which was less than men that is 52.3%. Another study, that employs data from the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM) and Pakistan Education Statistics reports, spotlights major gender inequalities in school enrollment and completion, as female enrollment constantly lower than that of males, especially in Balochistan province and rural areas (Rehman et al., 2023). There is bias for men and women in health, academia and vocation. Partiality is faced by women who are seeking professional degrees for prominent positions. A conspicuous gender gap is noticed in universities both in enrollment and administrative post. Inequity against women is caused by a number of obstacles like intimate, organizational, societal (Batool et al., 2013). In society men are paid higher than women, and women are often stereotyped to small salary jobs (Burfat et al., 2019). The social framework of Pakistan is stemming from multiple components like partiality, ethnic inflexibility, autocratic system, conservativeness, traditional laws, strict rituals and principles, internment of women to house's fences. These elements make women unable to take part in different areas of life (Iqbal et al., 2023).

In the education sector of the country, men become the policy makers and language regulators in this intimidating state of gender gap that results in multiple forms of societal inequality. The linguistic facets of this case are particularly analyzed in this study, which are the consequences of male dominance in the educational system. There are many studies on feminist linguistics that have addressed issue of linguistic sexism but most of them either centered on textbooks or materials that are created by men or affected by autocratic society. Linguistic biases present in the language used by the students has been inadequate consideration. Aim of this study is to fill this gap by examining the language used by the students and sexist terms used in it. Moreover, in prior studies of linguistic sexism the standpoints of the participants have generally been overlooked because the method used for data analysis is quantitative. On the contrary, to assess the ongoing condition of linguistic sexism in Pakistan, the study has utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods. The study is centered on feminist linguistic reform. Feminist linguistic reform proposes the use of gender neutral language.

1.1 Background of the study

The means through which humans can build their interpersonal relations, show their societal beliefs and convey ideas is language. Language is not only a medium to communicate our thoughts but it also shapes our thoughts (Cameron, 2012). Individuals' perception and interaction with the world is influenced by language. Societal stratifications, especially those associated with gender are manifested by language, so language is not neutral. Cultural principles are supported or questioned by language, basically the way language is used by us shows our societal values and this determines which ideas are prevailing in public conversation (Cameron, 2012). Cameron also used a phrase "word magic" which means that usage of specific words has an influential effect on our thoughts and behavior. Many languages have been criticized for innate sexism in their structure. "Traditional gender roles and gender disproportion is encouraged by language, this is called linguistic sexism. For example, a term like "mothering" is used as it is presumed that men are not keen to look after their children" (Cameron &

Cameron, 1992). Masculine words are used as default forms for generic references while women are characterized as sensual entity, fewer words are present to represent female roles in comparison to words for male roles, and the words for females which had neutral or positive meaning become negative with time in language (Pauwels, 2003).

It is important to study linguistic sexism to understand its effect on societal thoughts and actions. Semantic and linguistic rules are influenced by cultural actions and are not innate. These language rules demonstrate the invisibility of women (Niedzwiecki, 1993). To address this issue feminist linguistic reform arises as a movement in which the use of traditional generic masculine is refused by feminists and the use of feminine and gender neutral terms are proposed in the reform (Cameron, 2012). The aim of feminist scholars is that language should encourage gender impartiality.

1.1.1 Feminist Linguistic Reform:

In language usage, men are viewed as influential speakers of language while women are stereotyped as uneducated, imprudent and outspoken (Pauwels, 2003). Contemporary academic writing brought legitimacy to this stereotyping. All of this made ways for men to become the language regulators and norm makers. Men play a major role in producing dictionaries, writing grammar books and establishing language academies hence maintaining their power in such ways. The urge to regulate women's speech and standardize their roles as speakers is triggered by this approval (Cameron, 2012). The rules that are mandatory for the regulation of women's language behavior have been suggested by Cameron. He stated that the speaking style of women should be understandable and direct, women should not use excessively forceful language, women should use gender-neutral language, and women should be polite in their way of speaking. Women as language regulators have been rarely seen. Women as language regulators, worked mostly as teachers or mothers implementing the rules set by men in language (Pauwels, 2003). Male dominance in language regulation was challenged when the women's movement started in 1970's. Language rules were begun to be challenged by women. Sexism in dictionaries was disclosed by women. For instance in ancient dictionaries, for definitions, the works of male authors were preferred while female authors' works were overlooked, as the generic pronoun "he" was used which was a showcase of male dominance, female terms were formed as derivatives of male terms in dictionaries depicting women as marked while men as default type (Pauwels, 2003). Women put stress on gender bias in language use taking into account that their rapport is undermined by it. For example at that time many grammar rules favored using gender exclusive pronouns like "he", when mentioning to both men and women, over the use of gender inclusive pronouns like "they" (Alkenäs, 2022).

Women challenged this male dominance in language and started to break the language rules. For example "she" was suggested as a generic pronoun alternative. In the case of language, the extremely potent issue faced by male dominance was that women were striving to become norm makers by suggesting their own gender-neutral language. Language organizations under the authority of men absolutely withstood this movement. According to their point of view, female language planners lacked skills and knowledge to suggest new language norms (Pauwels, 2003). Feminist linguistic reform aims to challenge and focus on language that has gender bias in it. The reform includes, gender-neutralization technique; use of gender-neutral terms to prevent gender bias in language and gender-specification; use of male as along with female terms in order to make females noticeable in language. The purpose of these techniques is to encourage the use of gender inclusive language and to oppose sexism in language (Von Flotow & Kamal, 2020). The research questions are as follows:

- To what degree does Pakistani youth notice linguistic sexism in the pronouns and nouns usage in their writing?

- Does Pakistani youth have knowledge of the proposals put forward by feminist linguistic reforms?
- Is language used by Pakistani youth influenced by gender stereotypes?
- What are the perceptions of Pakistani youth regarding the instructions given to them on using non-biased or non-sexist language?

The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine linguistic sexism in the language of Pakistani youth. The significance of the study lies in its awareness of how Pakistani youth's language use and notions are impacted by linguistic sexism. Instead of only investigating linguistic sexism in textbooks and other institutionalized stuff, the study examined linguistic sexism in the language of youth to unveil how gender biases and cultural stereotypes can be supported by language. For advancement of gender equality this study is reasonably significant. This study analyzes the opinions of youth about gender inclusive language and their knowledge about feminist linguist reform thus emphasizing whether youth's perception of gender roles is influenced by language change or not. Briefly, this study gives an insight into how gender beliefs are influenced by language.

Literature Review

Linguistic sexism refers to the bias or discrimination in language based on gender, which manifests in the way language is used to reinforce gender stereotypes and inequalities (Erzincan, 2023; Holmes, 2000). It is a form of verbal expression that systematically devalues one gender, most commonly women and privileges another, typically men. The term is often used to describe the subtle and overt forms of gender bias embedded in the structure and use of language. Sexist language perpetuates harmful stereotypes and often reflects power imbalances between genders making it an essential aspect of sociolinguistics to explore especially in diverse cultural backgrounds (De Marco, 2012). Umera-Okeke (2012) describe "linguistic sexism" as encompassing various verbal practices. This includes how women are labelled and addressed as well as how language strategies in mixed gender interactions might marginalize or undervalue women (Ikaria-Maina, 2015) further clarify that if sexism pertains to attitudes and behaviours that demean one gender in favour of another, then sexist language reflects those attitudes and behaviours in verbal communication. Sexist language is used to hurt someone on purpose. While some people might use these words without realizing they are being hurtful, others might use them to try to make someone feel bad. Whether it's done on purpose or not, sexist language can be a form of bullying. The stereotype is that women are always seen in a negative light, while men are always seen as noble, even in the same situation. This shows how language can make women seem less important. Many feminists have looked into how language talks about women and found that it is often unfair and based on outdated ideas about men and women (Ikaria-Maina, 2015). This means that language shows the values of a culture, which can be sexist. Cameron explains: Language can show how sexist culture is, or it can carry ideas that, when repeated often, become so normal that we don't notice their impact. Sexism is not just shown in language but also acted out and kept going in everyday conversations (Menegatti & Rubini, 2017).

Linguistic sexism exists in multiple cultures and reinforce gender stereotypes through everyday language (Pauwels, 2003). Language often treats men and women differently, thus reflects and influences how people perceive gender roles (Garnica, 2020; Pappas & Karras, 2021). Cameron (2023) states that everyday language patterns uphold gender disparities and language has a significant contribution in reflecting and reinforcing misogyny and sexism. Approaches to use gender-neutral terms like "firefighter" in preference to "fireman" have been made in western countries (Mills and Mullany, 2011). But in South Asian societies, because of inherent cultural norms, sexist language still dominates. In languages, like Urdu, Punjabi and Hindi comprise of

gendered words that confine women to household roles (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000) men are usually represented as strong beings while women are portrayed as weak figures in proverbs and media (Goel et al., 2024). This sort of bias in language influence children's perception, teaching that men are the controllers or leaders while women are suitable in supporting roles, this reinforces cultural stereotypes and limit career choices (Willis and Jozkowski, 2018). In addition to promoting gender stereotypes, language also influence how people perceive and express their gender identity. From childhood, a person acquires the way of speaking that correspond gender expectations of society (Willis and Jozkowski, 2018). The use of 'he,' 'she,' 'husband,' 'wife,' or 'mother' reinforces male/female binary which limits an individual to choose only a male or female gender. This also influence in what ways society suppose girls and boys to act, where strength and leadership roles are associated with boys and girls are linked with beauty and caregiving roles (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013). Nevertheless, these norms can be challenged also by language. The latest study by Arnold, Venkatesh and Vig (2024) emphasizes that using gender-inclusive pronouns such as singular "they" can help defy traditional gender norms and encourage unbiased communication. Language not only influences gender identity but also plays a key role in formatting youth identity. Youth through language express their individual identity, integrate with peers and respond to social norms about class, race and gender (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Digital platforms, particularly social media, give them freedom to use different language styles like dialects, slangs and unique forms to express their identities, interact with others and challenge traditional language norms (Androutopoulos, 2015). Language use is influenced by cultural factors such as race, class and gender which can either reinforce or challenge traditional stereotypes and social biases (Bucholtz, 2010). Expanding the functions of language in forming youth and gender identities, linguistic sexism mirrors ingrained patriarchal norms in Pakistan. Everyday language use plays a vital role in shaping gender roles by promoting the idea that males are dominant and females are submissive (Lackoff, 1975; Spender, 1980). Women are frequently represented in terms of their relationship with others, generally as daughters, wives or mothers, suggesting that their importance is defined more by these associations, especially with men, than by their own individuality (Ullah & Skelton, 2013). Proverbs in Punjabi and Urdu language function as potent cultural tools that reinforce conventional gender roles by supporting a patriarchal ideology, portraying men as dominant providers and women as submissive figures whose obedience is seen as vital for maintaining a stable society (Mahnoor, Haroon, Simral, 2025). This highlights that local languages of Pakistan also manifest sexism as they contribute in reinforcing traditional gender norms. This biased language use goes beyond being a cultural matter as it is an intentional effort to reinforce traditional gender roles and hierarchy. Men are perceived as authoritative and rational whereas voice of women is usually silenced or dismissed. The study of Rasul (2015) highlights how women are portrayed as dumb, inferior and weak in both Urdu and English proverbs, for example, the Urdu proverb "biwi baydamon ki londi" (a wife is like a slave to her in-laws) and the English saying "A women is the weaker vessel" strengthening the perception of women as inferior and dependent, supporting patriarchal ideologies. Similarly, the English proverb "A woman is flax, man is fire, the devil comes and blows the bellows" depicts woman as fragile, while man is illustrated as one dominating her. This type of language use can influence perception and confine participation of women in society portraying them as silent observer instead of active, vocal participant. Eventually, a broader cultural system is reflected by these linguistic patterns which minimizes opportunities for women and promotes gender bias (Zaidi & Zaki, 2017). One of the most understated but common types of gender bias seen across various societies is sexism in everyday language. Men are usually portrayed as dominant figures whereas women are assign to lower positions through the speech pattern of

people, like their word choices, use of slangs and common expressions. Language is not only a tool of communication, but it also contributes in influencing and promoting social norms, including those associated with gender roles. All over the world, studies found that everyday language commonly mirrors and supports gender discrimination. Specifically, sexist language such as slurs and stereotypical expressions contributes to reinforce gender roles and support the marginalization of women (Mills, 2008). This type of sexist language is strongly ingrained in educational system of Pakistan as well, especially in school textbooks. Research has found that female characters are represented in domestic or secondary roles frequently, whereas male characters are more prevalent and associated with power and professional positions (Hussain and Asfar, 2010; Khalid, 2016). Studies across various grades verifies this inequality, where women are described as emotional or passive, and men as skilled and brave (Mahmood, 2021; Rasool et al., 2019). Generic use of male pronoun strengthens the view that male viewpoints represent standard. These partial representations can influence perception of students like boys may grow with a sense of superiority whereas feelings of inferiority may have ingrained in girls (Saeed, Nasir and Siddique, 2023). However, textbooks continue to follow obsolete pattern, and educational institutes often fail to challenge these stereotypes. As Kizilaslan (2010) says that teachers play a vital role in challenging gender bias by assisting students to identify and assess descriptions. Expanding on the issue of linguistic sexism in education, research reveals that although youth is exposed to gender-inclusive language by means of social media, English films, educational material but they still use language influenced by traditional gender roles. Males are more aware of and use gender-neutral language more often, while some females, although knowledgeable about inclusive language, try to avoid using it (Sarfraz, et al., 2021). Likewise, Ahmed et al. (2022) noted that both students and teachers in Pakistani universities exhibit insufficient knowledge and inconsistent use of gender inclusive language. The findings of Sarfraz et al. (2021) show that even though gender-inclusive language is becoming prominent, its regular use still demands societal awareness and efforts. This emphasizes that gendered language practices are deeply ingrained and difficult to shift, even in grammatically gendered languages like Arabic where proficient learners still struggle with accurately assigning and matching gender forms (Alkohlani, 2016). Altogether, the literature indicates that in spite of the increasing awareness about gender-inclusive language, strongly ingrained sexist language practices continue to influence language usage and are hard to change.

Linguistic sexism is formed by various factors including culture, society, etc. and is a prevalent issue. Conventional linguistic patterns continue to dominate, particularly in academic and cultural context, although there have been progress towards language reform. Many research conducted on linguistic sexism following feminist linguistic reform analyzed gender bias mostly in textbooks which are the products of male language regulators. Students' language use has been mostly ignored that whether they reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes with their language use. This study strives to fill this gap by analyzing the language use of students, exploring whether they use more gender inclusive words or are more inclined towards gender exclusive language.

Methodology

The theoretical framework of this research is based on Anne Pauwel's research on Australian educators and academics. She studied which particular group of language users play a major role in adopting and encouraging the use of non-sexist pronouns in communication. She conducted study on 187 men and 167 women and found seven distinct patterns in pronoun usage when referring to gender-neutral roles. These include:

1. Prevalent use of generic he
2. Prevalent use of generic she

3. Prevalent use of he/she
4. Prevalent use of singular they
5. Variable use of generic he and singular they
6. Variable use of he/she or singular they
7. Variable use of he or he/she

In contrast, the present study will exclude the use of singular “they” because students appear unfamiliar with its function as a singular (gender-neutral) pronoun. Wherever “they” appeared, it was clearly used in the plural senses. Therefore, singular “they” will not be analyzed as a separate category, unlike in Pauwels’ framework. To examine linguistic sexism in educational context the study utilizes quantitative as well as qualitative research method, a mixed method approach. The blend of these methods gives not only numerical data on linguistic practices but also thorough understanding about participants’ views and attitudes, enabling a better understanding. To recognize the frequency of linguistic sexism in the written language of the students, a quantitative approach is employed. A qualitative approach is employed which entails focus group discussion, to examine students’ viewpoint on linguistic sexism and feminist linguistic reform.

Data Collection

Data collection includes collecting written answers of questions from students as well as conducting focused group discussion to assemble an extensive collection of viewpoints and attitudes. Students of BS English and MPhil English are asked to answer the questions, given to them, in written form. Questionnaire depends on following questions:

1. Describe a typical day for work for a doctor or engineer.
2. Describe a typical day at home for a caregiver.
3. How would you describe a leader of a company?
4. Write a paragraph about teacher helping students.
5. Describe an athlete achieving great success in support.
6. What kind of words or phrases would you use to describe man vs women in authority or power?
7. Write a small dialogue between two business professionals discussing a project.
8. How would you describe a person who is both a parent and a CEO?
9. What qualities do you think a good nurse should have?
10. What do you think are the main responsibilities of parent taking care of the household?

These questions themselves include gender-inclusive nouns i.e. doctor/engineer, caregiver, leader, teacher, athlete, parent, CEO, business professionals, nurse, man vs woman in authority. In order to examine the understanding, attitudes and views of students about linguistic sexism, focus group discussion is conducted with 15 representative students.

The data is collected from the students of BS and MPhil English. Both male and female students are included in the sample with a higher number of female participants. The reason for the higher number of female students in sample size is because of more female students enrolled as compared to male students in the department. In the written question/answer session, data was gathered from 164 students out of which 35 were males and 132 were females. Quantitative analysis has been done on this data. In focus group discussion 15 representative students were involved out of which 6 were males and 9 were females. Qualitative analysis has been done on data gathered from focus group discussion.

Data Analysis

A linguistic sexism analysis was done on the data collected from 167 students of English department that is centered on their use of nouns and pronouns. The students were given a questionnaire to answer, the question have sex-inclusive terms in them. Since the questions

themselves comprised of gender-inclusive nouns so students had four potential ways to mention them:

1. Repetition of the nouns(mentioned in questions)
2. He or She
3. Generic she
4. Generic he

The study particularly examined students' preferences among these options, emphasizing the pronouns used in subject position. As stated earlier, singular "they" was excluded from the analysis because the students in this study used "they" clearly in plural sense. Analysis was done manually, on the linguistic selections made by the students that lead to following results:

1. Recurrence of gender-inclusive nouns:

The task allocated to the students, as previously mentioned, included nouns that are gender-inclusive. The 167 papers, on which analysis for linguistic sexism was done, demonstrated a pattern in which the students, rather than substituting gender-inclusive nouns with a pronoun, frequently used the nouns (mentioned in questions). The possible reasons for this pattern might be:

- The students had not been familiar with appropriate pronoun usage.
- The students intentionally avoided using gendered pronouns to avoid gender bias and using a sexist word.

A significant observation was made to decide whether the second possibility is the reason behind the pattern. Out of 167 students, both male and female students showed almost equal tendency to reiterate the gender-neutral nouns rather than use a pronoun, with only a slight difference in percentage. This indicates that their peculiar writing style was probably because of their confusion about which pronoun to use rather than knowledge deficiency. They may have deliberately attempt to make their writing gender-neutral by avoiding using pronouns, even if it resulted in unusual or recurrent structure. According to the quantitative analysis this was the second most recurrent pattern that is used by the students but it was still considerably less common than the use of generic *he*, a gender-exclusive term.

2. Frequent Usage of male-biased pronoun *he*:

Male-biased pronoun or generic *he* is the most frequently used pronoun for the sex-inclusive terms (mentioned in the questions) by the students of English department, as indicated in tables 1 and 2. Among 132 female students, 485 pronouns were used with 284 being generic *he*. Similarly 35 male students used 137 pronouns of which 103 were generic *he*. The overall percentage of generic *he* used by male and female students was 62%. These numbers emphasize on the dominant presence of linguistic sexism in the usage of pronoun of English department of University of Education. The notion of male-as-default remains deeply ingrained across both genders.

3. Rare occurrence of the female-biased pronoun "*she*":

The usage of generic "*she*" rare among the participants, according to the analysis of data, which indicates a general lack of awareness or preferences for the female-biased pronoun. Among 132 female students, only a very small number incorporated generic *she* in their answers while a vast majority is still adhered to male-biased linguistic norms. Male students followed the similar pattern. The infrequent use of this pronoun suggests that male dominance in language remains deeply ingrained, with little recognition or adoption of female- biased pronoun.

4. Minimal use of "*He/She*"

This combined pronoun form was the least used overall. Female students used it in 53 responses (7%). Male students used it in only 8 responses (4%). Students are less comfortable using combined forms. They may find it awkward or less natural in sentence flow.

Table 1. Pronoun & Noun Usage

on/noun	Usage	Female Students' of ts' ises (out of	Male Students' of ts' ises (out of
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Used Nouns

The female students used more male-biased pronoun but they also show tendency towards gender-neutral pronoun, “he/she” more than male students who strongly preferred gender-specific language.

■ He
 ■ Repeated Nouns
 ■ She
 ■ He/ She

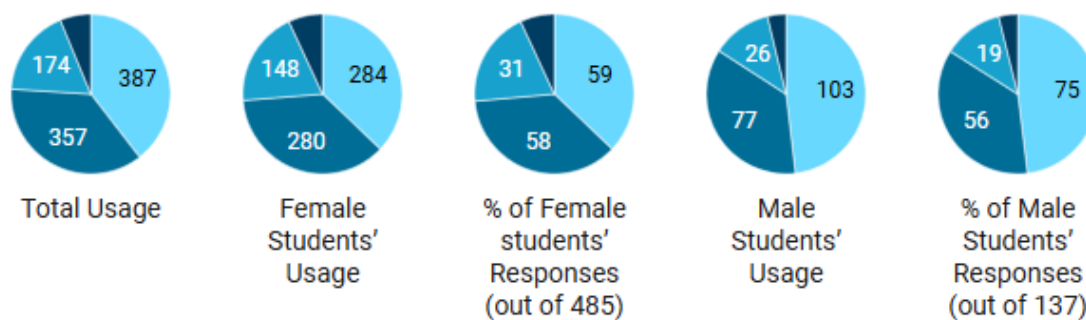


Chart 1. Pronoun and Noun Usage by Males and Females

Table 2. Pronoun Usage for Each Question by Gender

on	Used Pronoun by Students	Used Pronoun by Students	Repeated Noun
Describe a typical day of for a doctor or	times)	times)	Engineer (49 times)
Describe a typical day at a hospital or a caregiver.	times)	times), She (9 times)	Teacher (39 times)

ow would you	times)	times)	(53 times)
ie a leader of a			
ny			
rite a paragraph	times)	times)	r (72 times)
a teacher helping			
ts.			
scribe an athlete	times)	times)	(36 times)
ng great success in			
ow would you	times)	times)	CEO (36 times)
ie a person who is			
parent and a CEO?			
at qualities do you	times)	. times)	54 times)
a good nurse should			
at do you think are	times)	imes)	taking care of
ain responsibilities			old (18 times)
arent taking care of			
sehold?			

Male and female students pronoun usage shows clear gender bias, as male students using “he” for gender-neutral roles and female students used “he” and “she” pronouns for the roles that are stereotyped to men and women. Female students used “he/she” pronoun more than male students but their pronoun usage for specific roles shows cultural stereotypes.

Table 3. % of Men vs. Women Description

ry	Men Description	Women Descriptions
h, Power and Dominance		
ship and Innovation		
ional Identity		
ve and Problem-Solving		
tive, Caring and Emotional		
sive or Lack of authority		
re Traits		

In the analysis, it is seen that students reinforce traditional gender stereotypes where men are depicted as strong and dominant figures but women are described as submissive and emotional beings.

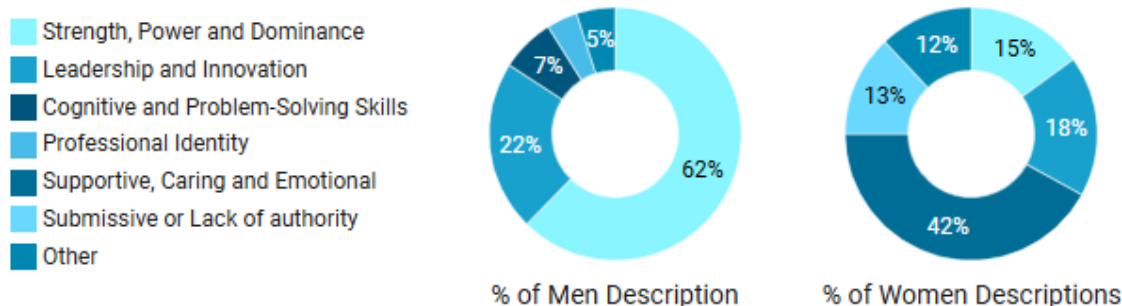


Chart 2: % description of men vs. women in authority

Analysis of Question 7

In answer to question No. 7 students assign names to business professionals.

- 68 students (41%) used male names for business professionals.
- 19 students (11%) used female names for business professionals.
- 38 students (23%) used names of both male and female for business professionals.
- 42 students (25%) did not use any name rather they write Person 1, 2 or A, B.

It can be seen that majority of the students perceived males as business professionals, this reflects that they consider males suitable for such roles, reinforcing cultural stereotypes.

Used male names only Used neutral placeholders (e.g., Person 1, A & B) Used both male and female names Used female names only

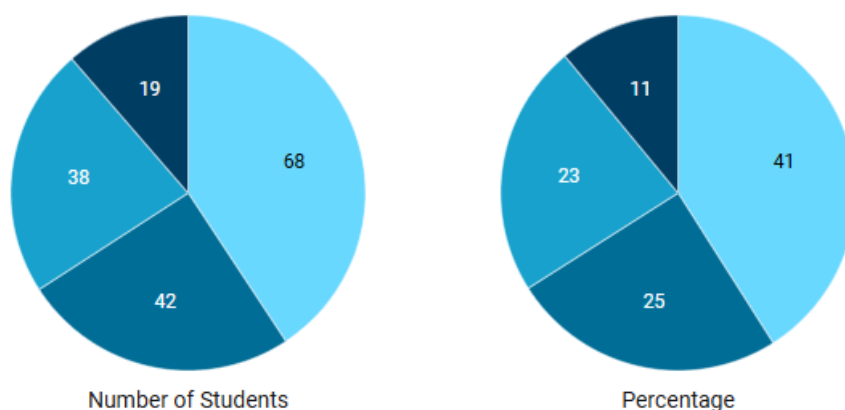


Chart 3. Gendered Naming Patterns Used by Students for Business Professionals

Focus Group Discussion

Q.1 Can you give some examples of sex biased terms commonly used in written language?

Ans. Most of the students gave example of male exclusive nouns such as “chairman”, “fighter man”, “policeman” but no student give example of female exclusive nouns. Some students said that some professions are only perceived for females like “nurse” and some for males like “doctor”, “teacher”, etc. These all were the examples of nouns. So, the second question was on the basis of given answers.

Q.2 Can you give examples of other terms or other parts of speech other than noun that are sex biased?

Ans. Most of the students gave example of “he” pronoun. Some students gave example of adjectives like “emotional”, “fragile”, “polite”, “kind”, “frightened”, “sensitive”, “expressive” for women and “strong”, “brave”, “courageous”, “authoritative” for man, etc. Students give example of sex biasness in language but in their writing, they themselves have demonstrated the same biasness, especially female students. This shows that the students have theoretical knowledge only, they have not brought it into practice.

Q.3 Are you familiar with the concept of linguistic sexism in language?

Ans. A few students were somewhat familiar with the concept and even provided examples however, most students were completely unfamiliar with the term. After I defined it and gave examples, many were able to identify similar examples such as “chairman”, “policeman”, “fireman”, etc. This means that the students may recognize and use sexist language, but are not aware of the concept or terminology associated with it.

Q.4 Do you think language affects how we perceive gender roles in society OR our perception about gender roles effects our language use?

Ans. All the students agreed with the statement. When asked for examples they mentioned words like “chairman”, explaining that since they grew up hearing this word, they subconsciously associate the profession with men. Similarly, “nurse” is typically perceived as a female profession. When someone says “doctor”, many students shared that they first imagine a man. Words like “housewife” suggest that house chores are associated with women, while terms like “manpower” imply that only men are capable of providing labor.

Q.5 What are your thoughts about gender neutral language? Do you think that using gender neutral language promote equality? Are you comfortable to use it or hesitant to use it?

Ans. Most of the students said that gender-neutral language promotes equality because it helps eliminate bias. They believed that it reinforces the idea that roles are not fixed for any gender, promotes equality, and builds confidence in women. Female students gave examples like “biker” and “police officer”, explaining that these words now include women and help challenge the stereotype that women are weak or confined to the home. While some students say that using gender-neutral language does not significantly impact real-life equality. For example, they stated that in our society, whether we say “chairman” or “chairperson”, it does not change how roles are perceived or how men and women are treated. This view was more commonly expressed by female students. Regarding comfort with using gender-neutral language, some students said that they were comfortable, while others admitted that they were hesitant. They said that hesitancy was mostly because of the fact that in our society gender neutral language is not widely accepted or commonly used due to general lack of knowledge and awareness, which prevents them from challenging traditional language norms. Most of the students who expressed hesitancy were females.

Q.6 How do you refer to an indefinite addressee in your writing?

Ans. Almost all the students said that they use male-exclusive pronouns. Only two female students mentioned using “he/she”. This indicates that despite having some knowledge of gender-neutral language and linguistic sexism, students still widely use male-exclusive terms. It suggests that while they may have theoretical knowledge of gender inclusive language, they lack the confidence or motivation to put it into practice. Moreover, the language choices of female students reflect a level of acceptance of male dominance in language regulation.

Q.7 Why has the male norms become standard in language?

Ans. All the students responded that this is how they were taught in school. Their early education promoted male-centered language, for example using “he” as generic pronoun. They observed male-exclusive terms being used by teachers and in textbooks, which influenced their own language use. Although, they have recently been introduced to gender-neutral language, it is still uncommon in society. As a result, they continue to use male-dominant language out of habit and social conditioning.

Q.8 Are you aware of feminist linguistic reforms?

Ans. Only a few students had limited knowledge of feminist linguistic reforms. While most students were familiar with gender-neutral terms, they were unaware of the feminist efforts behind their development. This shows that students may use gender-neutral language but lack understanding of the theoretical foundation and historical context of feminist linguistic reforms. Their awareness likely comes from educational materials rather than from exposure to feminist scholarship. Therefore, I explained the concept and provided examples to help familiarize them with it.

Q.9 What do you think that why people still use male- exclusive language even when gender-neutral terms have been introduced?

Ans. Most students said that the continuous use of male-exclusive language is due to a lack of awareness, many people simply do not know about gender-neutral alternatives. Some students

mentioned habit and tradition as reasons, explaining that people tend to use the language they were taught, and changing such habits can be difficult. Others suggested that hesitation plays a role, as gender-neutral terms are still uncommon in society, and people may feel that using them sounds unusual or awkward.

Discussion shows that students occasionally use gender-neutral terms in practice, although they recognize examples of sexist language. This reflects the ingrained norms in their language use and a gap is seen between their theoretical knowledge and practical usage of gender-neutral language. In the opinion of students, language influence gender roles but limited awareness about gender neutral language, cultural habits and hesitance obstructs change in language.

Result and Discussion

The results demonstrate that majority of the students are familiar with gender-biased terms and sexist language but at the same time they use gendered-terms in their language, especially male-biased terms. “He/She” pronoun is used by the students rarely, less than “he”, and “she”. This highlights that students have theoretical knowledge about gender-neutral language but practical execution of it is absent. The students believe that language influence people’s perception about gender roles, as examples they stated words like nurse, housewife, manpower that reinforce stereotypical roles. Most of the students say that gender equality can be promoted by using gender-neutral language but the students, in their writings, show linguistic sexism as male biased pronoun “he” is mostly used overall and they, through the usage of pronoun for gender neutral roles, show traditional language norms ingrained in them. The students said that they are hesitant to use gender-neutral language because it is not commonly used in our society yet. These findings accord with Ratanaphithayaporn & Rodrigo (2020), who stated that although many individuals support the use of gender-inclusive language, but status quo bias and social norms lead many to revert to traditional expressions, making both personal and societal attitude shifts complicated. This aligns with the findings of the study where most of the students still maintain the use of the male or female pronouns for gender-neutral roles even with the availability of gender-neutral terms. Mañoso-Pacheco & Sánchez-Cabrero (2024) noted that academic settings show strong support for the use of gender-inclusive language which contrasts with the results of the present study that shows hesitance in the acceptance of gender-neutral language. Liddicoat (2011) described feminist linguistic reforms as a form of social planning, exploring how institutions and individuals work together to reshape language norms. He emphasized that understanding the foundations of these reforms is necessary for the effective use of gender-neutral language. However, in this study only a few students know about these reforms suggesting that students do not have knowledge of the background and purposes of using gender-neutral language. The students may replace the gendered terms with neutral ones as soon as they are instructed to do so, but they do not understand the reason behind it. Salsabila et al., (2024) found out that language plays a central role in both reinforcing and reflecting gender stereotypes, as it shapes and supports socially defined gender roles through everyday language use, supports the idea of present study. The results of the present study that the students associate the profession of “nurse” and “athlete” to female and male respectively, reflecting gender stereotypes, strengthens this statement. Pfalzgraf (2024) observes that although people generally support the idea of using gender-inclusive language, they are often reluctant to use it in public because of unfamiliarity, social pressure, or fear of being criticized. This align with the result of present study that some students are doubtful about using gender neutral language because they are scared of negative response of society. Montano, Opena & Miranda (2024) noted that although awareness of gendered language is growing, but efforts to reduce gender bias in language use are still inconsistent, with media and education both playing influential roles in shaping language norms and attitudes. This favors the present study’s observation that

the students, influenced by their earlier education, are still using male-centric language. Lastly, Jean (2023) stated that language plays a key role in reflecting and shaping cultural norms, social structures, and identities, and also reinforces gender roles and social hierarchies. This supports the current study's observation where the use of words like "manpower" and "housewife" show the gendered division of labor, revealing that such biasness is still common in everyday language. Briefly, this study revealed awareness about gendered language among students but they are facing difficulties in putting this theoretical knowledge into practical use. Social norms, lack of awareness about feminist linguistic reforms, language habits are making it complicated for the students to completely adopt gender-neutral language. This study, like previous research, demonstrates that a major shift in language use takes time and need educational, cultural and media support.

Conclusion

The study examined the awareness of university students about gender neutral language and to what extent they use it in their everyday writing and speech. The findings revealed that although many students recognize gender-biased terms such as "policeman" or "chairman" but sexism can still be seen frequently in their language. The reasons are educational system, societal norms and cultural language habits. A vital implication of this study is that language not only reflects people thinking but also influence their beliefs. Most of the students say that they think using gender-neutral language promote equality yet they still used terms that show gender bias, such as, they associated the word "doctor" with males and "nurse" with females, indicating that stereotypes in language influence their views. Although many students acknowledged the importance of using non-sexist language but they do not use it in real life because of cultural influence and limited practice in institutions. The study also highlighted that educational institutes teaches gender neutral language theoretically but its practical use is very limited in these institutions. Many students are unaware of feminist linguistic reforms, this means even if they use the gender-neutral language they do not understand the deeper motive behind using it. Given students' limited awareness of singular "they" and gender-inclusive language, it is necessary to integrate such concepts into academic settings. First, gender-neutral language should be taught in all university courses, comprising writing courses and communication. Teachers and educational institutes should also promote gender-neutral language by using it frequently. Second, in order to normalize gender-neutral language in informal conversations, there should be awareness campaigns through media and social platforms. Third, language policies should be developed and implemented by policymakers in which the use of non-sexist language should be claimed mandatory in academic materials, official communication and work place documents. The limitations of the study include it focuses on a single group of university students, so the findings cannot be applied to groups of other ages or people of other states. Also, the research is carried out in a particular time span, so results obtained may only depict cultural perceptions and language patterns of that particular time, not over a longer period. Future research can investigate how gender-neutral language influences both speech and perceptions of people towards gender equality to identify broader linguistic and social changes. Briefly, awareness about linguistic sexism has been increased but there are challenges in achieving practical change. Educational institutions, media, society must all collaborate support and promote gender-neutral language. Promoting gender-neutral language is challenging but it is an approach towards a fair society.

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