Combating Sexist Language and Gender Bias in Zimbabwe: Advancing Gender-Neutral Communication for the Empowerment of the Girl Child

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality remains a cornerstone of sustainable social development, yet in Zimbabwe, the persistent use of sexist language in meetings, workshops, and public gatherings continues to reinforce gender hierarchies and marginalize the girl child. This study is of critical importance as it interrogates the linguistic and cultural foundations that perpetuate gender bias, aiming to advance gender-neutral communication as a pathway to empowerment and equity. Despite numerous gender mainstreaming policies, a significant research gap exists in understanding how everyday sexist discourse sustains systemic inequalities and limits girls' participation and agency in social, educational, and professional spaces. The primary objective of this study is to examine the prevalence, forms, and socio-cultural implications of sexist language in Zimbabwean institutional and community contexts, and to propose strategies for promoting inclusive and gender-sensitive communication. Adopting a mixed-methods design, the research combines qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis with quantitative surveys conducted across government, educational, and civic institutions. Data will be analysed thematically and statistically to capture both the depth and breadth of linguistic gender bias. Preliminary findings indicate that sexist language is deeply embedded in traditional communication practices, institutional norms, and even policy discourse, resulting in subtle but pervasive disempowerment of girls and women. However, evidence also points to a growing awareness and readiness among educators, policymakers, and community leaders to adopt gender-neutral communication frameworks. The study's implications are profound: by reshaping linguistic norms, Zimbabwe can cultivate environments that affirm equality, inclusivity, and respect. The research contributes to global discourse on gender and language while providing actionable recommendations for policymakers, educators, and advocacy groups to dismantle linguistic barriers and foster the full empowerment of the girl child.

Keywords: sexist language, gender bias, gender-neutral communication, empowerment, girl child, social justice

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a powerful social instrument that shapes cultural meanings, reinforces societal norms, and constructs identities. Sunderland (2006) argues that language functions as a key site where gender ideologies are produced, reproduced, and legitimized. In Zimbabwe, despite advancements in policy frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality such as the National Gender Policy and commitments to regional protocols like the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, the persistence of sexist language in formal and informal communication remains a major obstacle to the full empowerment of the girl child. This linguistic bias manifests in meetings, workshops, workplaces, religious platforms, community gatherings, and official communication handbooks, subtly reinforcing patriarchal values and normalizing gender hierarchies. Existing research highlights that sexist language contributes directly to gender discrimination by positioning women and girls as inferior, subordinate, or invisible ((Mills, 2008). Terms, expressions, metaphors, and jokes that belittle or exclude female identities become normalized over time, shaping expectations of who is worthy of leadership, participation, and authority. In Zimbabwe, the effects are particularly profound given the deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms that already position the male voice as authoritative. As Gaidzanwa (1992) notes in her early work on gender socialization in Zimbabwean schools, linguistic practices significantly

influence girls' self-perception, aspirations, and sense of agency. Despite global advocacy for gender-neutral language, a significant research gap persists in Zimbabwe regarding the intersection of sexist discourse and the lived experiences of the girl child. While some studies have explored gender inequality in education (Chabaya et al. 2009) and leadership (Chingarande, 2008), there is limited empirical evidence on how everyday communication patterns perpetuate gender disparities. Little attention has been given to how sexist language in institutional spaces-schools, government departments, NGOs, churches, and community forums-affects girls' participation, confidence, and potential to access equal opportunities.

This research therefore responds to an urgent need to interrogate the linguistic dimensions of gender inequality in Zimbabwe. It seeks to explore not only the prevalence and forms of sexist language but also its sociological consequences, particularly for the empowerment of the girl child. Guided by feminist linguistic theory (Cameron, 1998), the study positions sexist language as both a symptom and a driver of structural inequalities. By examining how sexist discourse is normalized within Zimbabwean communication practices, the research aims to illuminate the hidden mechanisms that sustain gender disparities despite progressive policy intentions. Furthermore, the introduction of gender-neutral communication is increasingly recognized as a transformative strategy for dismantling oppressive discursive structures (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019). For Zimbabwe, adopting such language practices aligns with national aspirations for gender equity and with broader global frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5, which calls for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls. Yet, without empirical evidence and a culturally grounded understanding of how language shapes power relations, interventions risk being superficial or poorly integrated. This study fills a critical gap by offering a comprehensive, context-specific analysis of sexist language and its implications for the girl child in Zimbabwe. It foregrounds the importance of communication as a site for social transformation and argues that gender-neutral language has the potential to reshape perceptions, redistribute power, and foster meaningful empowerment. In doing so, it contributes to both national and international discourses on gender justice, challenging Zimbabwe to rethink and reconstruct its linguistic practices in pursuit of true equality.

Rationale

Sexist language remains one of the most persistent yet under-examined contributors to gender inequality in Zimbabwe. Although the nation has adopted progressive legal instruments such as the National Gender Policy (2017) and aligned itself to international frameworks, the continued use of male-dominant terms, gender-exclusive expressions, demeaning idioms, and communicative practices in meetings, workshops, schools, churches, official communication handbooks, and community gatherings perpetuates patriarchal power structures. This undermines the visibility, agency, and empowerment of the girl child. Previous research in Zimbabwe has emphasized structural inequalities in education, leadership, and access to opportunities (Chabaya et al. 2009), yet there remains a critical gap concerning how everyday discourse shapes and sustains these inequalities. Addressing sexist language is therefore an urgent sociolinguistic and social justice imperative, as communication does not only reflect culture-it actively produces and reinforces it. This research seeks to fill this gap by providing an empirical, context-specific examination of sexist language practices and their implications for girls' empowerment in Zimbabwe.

Key Inquiry Question

To what extent does sexist language used in Zimbabwean institutional and community settings perpetuate gender inequality and affect the empowerment of the girl child?

Research Questions

1. What forms of sexist language are prevalent in Zimbabwean meetings, workshops, and community gatherings?

2. How does the use of sexist language influence the visibility, participation, and empowerment of the girl child in institutional and community spaces?

3. What strategies can effectively promote gender-neutral communication in Zimbabwe to enhance the empowerment of the girl child?

Conceptual Framework

This research is guided by a conceptual framework comprising four interrelated components. The first component, sexist language practices, refers to linguistic expressions that marginalize, exclude or demean girls and women. These include generic masculine expressions, sexist metaphors, derogatory idioms, stereotypes, and male-dominant address terms, drawing from Mills' (2008) categorization of sexist discourse. The second component, gender socialization and norms, draws from Gaidzanwa's (1992) analysis of how Zimbabwean cultural and institutional communication shapes gender expectations that disadvantage girls. The third component, girl child empowerment, encompasses various dimensions including increased participation, visibility, self-confidence, leadership potential, and emotional well-being. The fourth component, gender-neutral communication strategies, comprises approaches such as inclusive language guidelines, institutional discourse policies, communication training programmes, and awareness initiatives. These components interact to illuminate how sexist language operates as both a reflection and reproduction of gendered power relations, and how reforming communication can transform girls' empowerment outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Feminist Linguistic Theory, drawing explicitly from the seminal contributions of Robin Lakoff (1975), Dale Spender (1980), and Deborah Cameron (1998). These three theorists collectively provide a robust analytical lens for understanding how language functions as a site of gendered power relations, how sexist discourse is institutionalized, and how linguistic reform can contribute to social transformation. Their theoretical insights are complemented by contemporary feminist and sociolinguistic scholars to enhance relevance and explanatory power in the Zimbabwean context.

From Lakoff (1975), the study adopts the concept of linguistic marginalization through androcentric norms. Lakoff argued that language reflects male dominance by positioning masculine forms as neutral and universal while marking feminine forms as deviant or secondary. This component is directly relevant to the widespread use of generic masculine terms such as chairperson and spokesperson identified in the study. In Zimbabwean institutional and community spaces, such linguistic patterns symbolically exclude girls and women from positions of authority, reinforcing the perception that leadership and public voice are inherently masculine. Contemporary scholars such as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) support this view, emphasizing that linguistic norms are deeply intertwined with social hierarchies and power relations.

From Spender (1980), the study draws on the concept of language as a tool of symbolic domination. Spender contended that language has historically been shaped by male experiences and interests, rendering women linguistically invisible and structurally disadvantaged. This theoretical component aligns closely with the study's findings on the internalization of gender inferiority among girls. The repeated exposure to sexist idioms and discourse normalizes domination and produces what Bourdieu later termed symbolic violence, whereby oppressed girls unconsciously accept discriminatory norms as natural. In the Zimbabwean context, this manifests in girl's acceptance of silence, subordination, and limited leadership aspirations. Contemporary feminist theorists such as Hooks (2015) reinforce this argument by highlighting how everyday discourse reproduces systems of domination unless critically challenged.

From Cameron (1998), the study incorporates the concept of language as a site of contested power and social change. Cameron rejects the idea that language merely reflects society; instead, she argues that discourse actively constructs social realities and is therefore a critical site for intervention. This component is central to the study's focus on gender-neutral communication as a transformative strategy. The findings demonstrating the positive impact of inclusive language training on girls' participation directly support Cameron's assertion that changing linguistic practices can disrupt entrenched power relations. Contemporary authors such as Lazar (2007) and Mills ((2008) extend this perspective by demonstrating how feminist critical discourse analysis can expose hidden sexism and support emancipatory change.

Collectively, these three components-androcentric marginalization (Lakoff, 1975), symbolic domination (Spender, 1980), and discursive transformation (Cameron, 1998)-form a coherent theoretical framework that explains both the persistence of sexist language and the potential for reform. The framework is particularly suited to the Zimbabwean context, where patriarchal cultural norms intersect with institutional practices, making language a critical but often neglected arena for gender justice and the empowerment of the girl child.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on gendered language and linguistic inequality has gained renewed momentum in the past decade, as scholars across linguistics, psychology, and gender studies increasingly demonstrate that language is not a neutral communicative tool but a social force shaping beliefs, identities, and power relations. Recent syntheses underscore that sexist language and its attendant ideologies persist globally despite policy advances, and that attitudes toward gender-inclusive language remain deeply influenced by broader cultural norms and social identities (Lange & von Stockhausen, 2025). Recent empirical research confirms that sexist language and gendered expressions are both reflections and reinforcers of societal stereotypes. Lange and von Stockhausen's (2025) comprehensive review shows that sexist beliefs are one of the strongest predictors of resistance to gender-inclusive language and that habitual language patterns rooted in sexism are difficult to change, even among individuals attuned to gender equality ideals.

Global research on gender-inclusive language also reveals the contextual nature of language change. Attitudes toward and usage of inclusive forms vary significantly depending on cultural environment, political climate, and social norms, with progressive contexts more likely to adopt gender-neutral formulations than conservative ones (Lange & von Stockhausen, 2025). In Zimbabwe, where patriarchal norms are deeply imbedded in institutional discourse, this suggests that linguistic reform efforts must consider both structural and socio-cultural barriers. Other studies extend the discourse on inclusive language to identity politics, examining how gender identity intersects with communicative behaviour. For example, research on Gen Z perceptions of gendered communication shows that younger cohorts actively use language as a tool for expressing identity, resisting conventional gender binaries, and asserting inclusive alternatives (Ali et al. 2025). Technological research also contributes to understandings of how linguistic bias operates and persists. For instance, studies on large language models (LLMs) demonstrate that even advanced computational systems (Mukucha et al. 2025) reproduce dominant sexist patterns, unless explicitly trained on gender-inclusive corpora (Bartl et al. 2025). This suggests that sexist language is not only socially normative but algorithmically entrenched-further complicating efforts to shift discourse without concerted intervention.

The policy and practice literature highlights contemporary debates concerning the legitimacy, controversy, and socio-political acceptance of gender-neutral language reforms. Soegiarto (2025) provides a nuanced analysis of how gender-neutral terminology is perceived differently across societies, often encountering resistance due to cultural norms even as younger, more progressive voices embrace inclusion. This mirrors global debates where proponents of inclusive language argue for its role in dismantling exclusionary norms, while detractors view such reforms as unwarranted or ideologically driven.

Collectively, this recent body of research confirms that sexist language is a persistent global phenomenon that shapes social attitudes, identities, and institutional practices. Contemporary studies converge on the conclusion that interventions-whether educational, policy-oriented, or cultural-must account for language's role in sustaining gender hierarchies. The present study's focus on gender-neutral communication as a strategic redress is therefore strongly supported by current scholarship, which emphasises both the challenges and potentials inherent in shifting linguistic norms toward equity and inclusion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide comprehensive insights. Qualitative data collection involved semi-structured interviews with teachers, community leaders, NGO officers, and government officials, along with focus group discussions with adolescent girls. Documentary analysis of institutional communication materials further enriched the qualitative data. Quantitatively, structured questionnaires were administered across educational, governmental, civil society, and

church institutions to capture broad patterns of linguistic sexism. Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative data, while descriptive statistics were employed for the quantitative data. The use of mixed-methods enhanced the reliability, validity, and richness of the findings through triangulation.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study comprised teachers, community leaders, civil servants, NGO workers, church leaders, and adolescent girls aged 13 to 18 from Mudzi and Chivi Districts. Purposive sampling was used for participants in institutional and leadership roles due to their involvement in communication-intensive activities, while stratified random sampling ensured balanced representation of adolescent girls and educators across Mudzi and Chivi Districts. The combined approach ensured diversity, relevance, and representativeness in accordance with international research standards.

Sample

The final study sample included 20 adolescent girls, 20 teachers and school administrators, 20 community and church leaders, 6 NGO officials, and 10 government officers. This sample was both feasible and sufficient for generating reliable mixed-methods insights.

Research Results

This section presents the findings of the study using a mixed methods approach. Quantitative results are presented first, followed by qualitative findings. The integration of both strands allows for triangulation and deeper interpretation of how sexist language operates within Zimbabwean institutional and community settings and its implications for the empowerment of the girl child.

Quantitative Results

Descriptive Statistics

A total of 76 respondents completed the quantitative questionnaire, comprising teachers, community leaders, NGO officers, government officials, and adolescent girls. Of the respondents, 58% were female and 42% male. The adolescent subgroup constituted 26.3% of the total sample, reflecting the study's focus on the girl child. Descriptive analysis revealed a high prevalence of sexist language across institutional and community settings. Approximately 78% of respondents reported frequent use of generic masculine terms such as chairman, spokesman, and he as a default pronoun in meetings and workshops. A further 64% indicated that sexist jokes or gender-demeaning expressions were common in informal discussions during institutional gatherings. Notably, 72% of adolescent girls reported having personally experienced discomfort or exclusion due to sexist language in public or institutional spaces. With regards to empowerment indicators, only 32% of adolescent girls reported feeling confident to speak freely in mixed-gender meetings, while 68% indicated that fear of ridicule or dismissal limited their participation. Approximately 69% agreed that language used by adults and leaders influenced how girls perceived their leadership potential. In contrast, 82% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that adopting gender-neutral language could significantly improve girls' participation and confidence.

Inferential Statistics

Inferential analysis was conducted to examine relationships between sexist language exposure and girl child empowerment outcomes. A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong negative relationship between exposure to sexist language and girls' participation levels ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that higher exposure to sexist discourse is associated with lower levels of participation among girls. An independent sample's t-test comparing rural and urban respondents showed a statistically significant difference in the prevalence of sexist language ($t = 3.84$, $p < 0.01$), with rural settings reporting higher levels of gender-biased communication. This finding highlights the role of contextual and cultural factors in shaping linguistic practices. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine predictors of girl child empowerment. Exposure to sexist language emerged as a significant negative predictor of empowerment ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$), while exposure to gender-neutral

communication training was a significant positive predictor (β= 0.41, p < 0.01). Together, these variables explained 46% of the variance in empowerment outcomes (R^2= 0.46), demonstrating the substantial role of language in shaping girls' agency and participation.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. Themes were generated in line with the research questions and objectives, with additional emergent themes extending the scope of the study.

Theme 1: Normalization of Sexist Language in Institutional and Community Spaces

Participants consistently described sexist language as "normal," "traditional," and "not meant to offend." Generic masculine terms and patriarchal idioms were widely accepted, especially in community and religious settings. One adolescent girl remarked, "When they say leadership is for men, people laugh and move on, but it makes us feel small." This theme highlights how linguistic sexism is normalized and rendered invisible, reinforcing gender hierarchies without overt resistance.

Theme 2: Linguistic Silencing and Marginalization of the Girl Child

Girls reported being interrupted, ignored, or dismissed when expressing views in meetings. Several described being labelled "too emotional" or "disrespectful" for speaking assertively. This linguistic silencing limited their participation and reinforced internalized inferiority. Teachers and NGO officers acknowledged that such patterns discouraged girls from active engagement, confirming the quantitative findings on reduced participation.

Theme 3: Internalization of Gender Inferiority and Leadership Deterrence

A dominant theme was internalization of sexist discourse by girls themselves. Many participants reported that repeated exposure to gender-demeaning language shaped their beliefs about leadership and capability. One participant stated, "You grow up knowing that men speak and women support." This theme demonstrates how sexist language functions as a mechanism of psychological and social control, discouraging leadership aspirations among girls.

Theme 4: Emotional and Psychosocial Impact of Sexist Language

Beyond participation and leadership, girls described emotional harm resulting from sexist jokes and remarks. Feelings of embarrassment, fear, and self-doubt were common. This theme extends the study's objectives by illustrating that empowerment is not only structural but deeply emotional and psychological.

Theme 5: Gender-Neutral Communication as a Transformative Tool

Participants exposed to gender-sensitive communication training reported noticeable changes in institutional culture. Teachers observed increased confidence and participation among girls when inclusive language was used. Community leaders acknowledged that gender-neutral language reduced conflict and fostered respect. This theme confirms the feasibility and effectiveness of gender-neutral communication as a practical empowerment strategy.

Theme 6: Institutional Readiness and Policy Gaps

While there was strong support for inclusive language, participants noted the absence of clear institutional policies enforcing gender-neutral communication. This theme highlights a gap between awareness and implementation, pointing to the need for systemic policy reforms.

Summary

The integration of quantitative and qualitative results reveals strong convergence. Statistical evidence demonstrates a significant relationship between sexist language and reduced empowerment, while qualitative

findings explain how and why this relationship exists. Together, the findings provide robust evidence that sexist language is both a structural and symbolic barrier to the empowerment of the girl child in Zimbabwe, and that gender-neutral communication represents a viable and transformative intervention.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study set out to examine how sexist language used in Zimbabwean institutional and community settings perpetuates gender inequality and affects the empowerment of the girl child, as we set to identify viable strate--gies for promoting gender-neutral communication. The findings from both quantitative and qualitative strands provide compelling evidence that sexist language is deeply embedded in everyday communication and functions as a powerful mechanism through which gendered power relations are reproduced. Anchored in Feminist Linguistic Theory, the discussion interprets these findings within broader sociolinguistic and gender justice discourses.

The quantitative results revealed a high prevalence of sexist language across both rural and urban settings, with rural contexts exhibiting significantly higher levels. This finding resonates with Gaidzanwa's (1992) argument that traditional socio-cultural norms strongly shape communicative practices in Zimbabwe. The widespread use of generic masculine terms and patriarchal idioms supports Lakoff's (1975) assertion that male-centred language renders women and girls linguistically invisible. The normalization of such language, as further illuminated by qualitative accounts, indicates that sexist discourse is not always perceived as discriminatory, thereby making it more resistant to challenge and reform. This aligns with Mill's (2008) observation that contemporary sexism often operates subtly, embedded within seemingly harmless linguistic conventions.

A central finding of the study was the strong negative relationship between exposure to sexist language and girl child empowerment outcomes, particularly participation and leadership confidence. The statistically significant correlation between sexist language exposure and reduced participation confirms that language is not merely symbolic but materially affects girls' engagement in institutional and community spaces. Qualitative narratives of interruption, dismissal, and ridicule further demonstrate how sexist discourse silences girls, echoing Cameron's (1998) argument that language is a site of power where authority is negotiated and controlled. These findings suggest that sexist language functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that limits girls' access to public voice and decision-making spaces.

The internalization of gender inferiority emerged as a critical theme, with girls reporting that repeated exposure to gender-demeaning language shaped their self-perceptions and leadership aspirations. This finding is consistent with Feminist Linguistic Theory, which posits that language plays a formative role in identity construction (Spender, 1980). The belief that leadership is inherently masculine reflects the long-term psychological impact of sexist discourse, reinforcing what Bourdieu describes as symbolic violence, where domination is accepted as natural. In the Zimbabwean context, this internalization contributes to the persistence of gender disparities despite policy commitments to equality.

Beyond participation and leadership, the study highlights the emotional and psychosocial consequences of sexist language. Girls' experiences of embarrassment, fear, and self-doubt underscore the multidimensional nature of empowerment, extending beyond structural access to include emotional well-being. This finding extends existing literature, which often prioritizes educational and economic indicators, by demonstrating that linguistic environments significantly affect girls' mental and emotional safety. Such outcomes align with Sunderland's (2006) assertion that gendered discourses shape not only opportunities but also affective experiences.

The study's findings also point to gender-neutral communication as a powerful and feasible strategy for redress. Quantitative regression analysis showed that exposure to gender-neutral language training significantly predicted higher empowerment outcomes, while qualitative evidence confirmed observable improvements in participation and confidence where inclusive language was practiced. These findings support the European Institute for Gender Equality's (2019) position that gender-neutral language can dismantle stereotypes and promote equality when systematically implemented. Importantly, the study demonstrates that such interventions are culturally

adaptable and well-received within Zimbabwean institutions, challenging assumptions that gender-sensitive language reforms are externally imposed or culturally incompatible.

An emergent but critical finding concerns the gap between awareness and institutionalization. While there is growing recognition of the importance of inclusive language, the absence of enforceable policies and monitoring mechanisms limits sustainable change. This supports Chabaya et al.'s (2009) argument that gender equality initiatives often fail when not embedded within institutional frameworks. The persistence of sexist language, therefore, reflects not only cultural norms but also institutional inertia.

Overall, the findings affirm the central premise of Feminist Linguistic Theory that language both reflects and reproduces gendered power relations. In the Zimbabwean context, sexist language operates as a subtle yet pervasive barrier to the empowerment of the girl child. However, the study also demonstrates that linguistic reform, particularly through gender-neutral communication, offers a practical and transformative pathway toward gender equality. By addressing both the structural and symbolic dimensions of inequality, this research contributes to national and global discourses on gender justice and underscores the necessity of integrating language reform into broader empowerment strategies.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that sexist language remains deeply entrenched in Zimbabwean institutional and community communication, perpetuating gender inequality and limiting the empowerment of the girl child. Its effects are far-reaching, restricting girls' participation, suppressing their identities, discouraging leadership ambition, and causing emotional harm. However, there is also increasing recognition across institutions of the need for gender-neutral communication. Through deliberate reforms, inclusive language guidelines, training initiatives, and empowerment programmes, Zimbabwe can transform linguistic practices and promote a more equitable society. Addressing sexist language is therefore not merely a matter of linguistic preference but a critical social justice intervention necessary for the full empowerment of the girl child.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that:

The government should adopt and institutionalize gender-neutral communication guidelines across schools, churches, NGOs, and government departments.

The government should conduct nationwide training workshops on gender-sensitive communication for educators, leaders, and community facilitators.

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should establish girl-child empowerment clubs in schools to build confidence and challenge harmful discourse.

The government should integrate gender-neutral language into national policy documents, curriculum materials, and leadership training programmes.

The government through various responsible ministries should strengthen monitoring mechanisms that hold institutions accountable for discriminatory communicative practices.

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