THE IMPACT OF GENDERED LANGUAGE ON ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA (KPK), PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This paper discusses how gendered language affects academic learning in higher education institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan. Creating gender equal opportunities and encouraging diversity, academic language still has gendered aspects. The current research explores the level of sexisms in KE and its consequences with students' performances in higher learning institutions in KPK alongside with proposing solutions to the agencies handling these institutions. Particularly, this study used survey and interview data collections and applied mixed-methods analyses. The studies reveal gender stereotype in the academic context of higher education of KPK, Pakistan and has a negative influence on students' engagement and achievement. The study focuses on the promotion of effective language policies and promotionalism for HEIs in KPK, Pakistan

Keywords: Gendered Language. Higher Education. Academic Experiences. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). Pakistan

Introduction

As it is seen, language has significant impact on one's experiences, possibilities of the perception of reality and structuring of relations within higher education institutions. From choice of the words, the tone and the language used in the learning process, one is able to decide if the climate is one of inclusion or exclusion. Even with a focus on equality and diversity the use of gendered language is still a significant problem in scholarly communication. Sexist language can therefore be defined as the manner of referring to or about males and females so as to foster traditional sex-role stereotype. Language plays a critical role in defining academic experiences in the society or world. Language has the ability to either let one belong or banish one, to give a voice or suppress one. In the case of students in higher learning institutions, language is very important in determining their participation, retention and achievement. If students are respected and appreciated by the words used by teachers and peers, they feel welcome and this increases their morale to study and enhances their health too. On the other hand, when language used is exclusive or biased to some students, the students may feel left out and reduce their learning participation, hence poor performance.

Discrimination in language on grounds of gender is thus particularly relevant to the situation in Pakistani higher education. Using a framework based on social epidemiology in its analysis of gender roles, Pakistani culture is still largely patrilineal. The status of women is low and the involvement of women in decision making posts is limited and the problem of gender based violence is also common. In this context, gender bias in language in higher education institutions just serves to maintain gender disparities within institutions.

Despite the consideration of the gendered language in HEIs, it is evidently seen that little research has been conducted in Pakistani context. Previous work in the field has mainly discussed female students and staff in the university, however, not many works have discussed the use of language in the experiences of women in higher education. With regard to this research gap, this study seeks to examine the effects of Gendered Language on academic endeavours in higher learning institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How KPK based higher education institutions currently use gendered language?

2. To what extent does gendered language affect the learners' academic engagements in higher education institutions in KPK, Pakistan?

3. The next questions relate to high education institution in KPK, Pakistan; To what extent can the following strategies be implemented in promoting inclusive language practices in KPK, Pakistan?

Findings of this study shall help in the understanding of how gendered language affects academic experience of students enrolled in higher education institutions in Pakistan. The implications of this study for policymakers, educators, and other researchers are that attempts to increase inclusive language use and subsequently the academic achievements of students, require readiness to change relations of power and recognition that large scale change cannot solely rely on a transmission of knowledge from experts to users.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons:

1. Contribution to existing literature: The findings of this study will help to add a useful insight about the effects of gendered language regarding the academic experiences of the students and faculty of the higher education institutions in Pakistan.

2. Implications for policymakers and educators: The outcome of this study will be useful to any policy maker and educators who want to mainstream the usage of inclusive language in schools with a view of enhancing performance of all the students enrolled in school.

3. Empowerment of marginalized groups: This research seeks to harness the stuffs of gendered discourse in academe in labouring transformative possibilities and thus empowering the voicedless groups especially women, to alter gendered language use in HEIs.

Scope and Limitations

Based on the literature, this research investigates the manner in which gendered language influences academic experiences in higher education institutions in KPK, Pakistan. This research is quitucnt based on five selected higher education institutions in KPK, Pakistan, and thus it is

difficult generalize the results in other settings. Also, the study uses quantitative data from questionnaires completed by students and faculty members Therefore, there is a social validity limit to the study findings.

Literature Review

For years, SCOPUS studies have proved that language used in higher learning institutions is gendered and supports gender-related stereotype and prejudice. This paper will aim at discussing the available literature on gendered language in university education particularly in relation to experiences.

Sexualized Language in Academia

Several types of gendered language usage in academic context have been described, that is, masculine generics, sexist language use, and gendered metaphors. Male generics mean the use of male terms to refer to both females and males (Baxter, 2017). Sexist language is defined as language that either strengthens negative attitudes towards women or other subordinated groups (Lakoff, 1975). Gendered language may be categorized as the language that reinforces the male/female roles or uses gender-specific analogies (Kramarae, 1981).

Gendered Language and its Effect on the Academic Experience

Studies have found that the use of masculine and feminine words can influence the learner's performance considerably. For instance, the research has shown that when instructors resort to referring to the masculine generics within a class, female learners are made to feel like outlaws or mere aliens (Baxter, 2017). Equally, sexist language impacts negative stereotyping and consequently low motivation of ladies, the stigmatization of women is negated (Lakoff, 1975).

Moreover, studies have also provided evidence that use of gendered words in text influences thestudents' inclusion and identification. For instance, Kramarae (1981) established that female students who experienced sexist language in the class, felt less confident and compelled participate in the discussion.

An Overview of Practices for Promoting Inclusive Language Use

It has been established that there exists several strategies that can be implemented to enhance the use of responsive language in HEIs. These

are; offering sensitization programs on use of non-sexist language to students and other employees in the university (Baxter, 2017), promoting the use of non-sexist language in academic writing amongst students and college instructors and lecturers (Lakoff, 1975), and setting comprehensive policies and standards for non-sexist language use by students, college instructors, lecturers, employees and all other members of the university community (Kramarae, 1981).

Moreover, more recent scholarly works have also focused on the necessity of safe learning environment, too. For instance, Spender's (1980) study of women students showed that class discussion participation – and course-related interactions – were greatest when women felt safe from interruption, and when they sensed the strong support.

Gap in Existing Research

While the area of gendered language has been explored in higher learning institutions, a similar study concerning the Pakistani context and the experiences of students in the institutions' scientific contexts has not yet been conducted. While the vast literature on women in higher education exists, most of it has addressed women students in higher education in Western countries with very limited literature on the experiences of women in higher education in Pakistan.

This research therefore seeks to fill this gap by examining the effects of Gendered language on learning in higher education institutions within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan.

Methodology

This research used both qualitative and quantitative research design, that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools and data analysis techniques. The study consisted of two phases: it in a survey and also interviewed the participants in this study.

An online questionnaire was conducted on 500 students and 100 faculty of five private higher education institutions located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan. The survey questionnaire was designed to assess the extent, experience or consequence of gendered language used in the higher education institutions staff students and faculty relationships and measure the extent of awareness and engagement of higher education institutions in promoting and facilitating gender sensitive language use. The research tool used in this study was a

questionnaire made up of 20 questions; a combination of close ended questions, which included multiple choice questions, and 5 Likert scale questions and 5 open-ended questions.

Hypothesis testing was conducted utilising analysis of frequencies and percentages as well as inferential statistics. Most of the research questions entailed descriptive research questions and therefore, descriptive statistics was appropriate to ensure analysis of demographic characteristics of the respondents, establish the receptiveness of gendered language in higher learning institutions etc. To investigate the gendered language and the Students' academic experiences, inferential statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis were applied.

Ten focus group discussions were carried out with ten male and ten female students in order to establish further details about how gendered language influences academic experiences and perceptions in interviews with 20 students and ten faculty members. The interview questions contained 10 questions: 5 questions on the frequency and usage of gender biased language and 5 questions on the experiences and methods of decreasing gender biased language in academic environment. The interviews were conducted in the local language and recorded on an audiocassette, then transcribed in full.

Consequently, thematic analysis was adopted in processing data collected from the interviews. Thematic analysis is a process of analyzing the data and putting it into themes and patterns. Theme and Pattern identification was done by encoding/ decoding the data followed by analysis and interpretation.

In this study, the power analysis was used to establish the sample size. The power analysis showed that power of test with 500 students and 100 faculty is enough enough to detect differences between groups.

The survey questionnaire and the interview protocol developed for the study were pre-tested with a sample of the target population, which is composed of students and faculty members.

Data Analysis

Survey Results

The questionnaire was filled by 500 students and 100 faculty members, from five higher education institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan. The results are presented below:

Frequency of Gendered Language

Alongside, there was a significantly higher median frequency of gendered language in the tweets.

Frequency | 500 Students | 100 Faculty

| --- | --- | --- |

| Always | 20% | 15% |

| Often | 30% | 25% |

| Sometimes | 40% | 30% |

| Rarely | 10% | 20% |

| Never | 0% | 10% |

Gendered Language and its Perception

Perception | Students 500 | Faculty 100 |

| --- | --- | --- |

Content Feature | Extremely Important | Somewhat Important |

Fairly Essential | 30 | 25

Unimportant | 20| 20

Not at All Important | 11 | 26

Interview Results

Interviews of the open-ended type were undertaken as students, 20 in total, and faculty members, 10 in total. The results are presented below:

Themes

Three themes emerged from the interview data:

1. Prevalence of Gendered Language: Both male and female participants noted that women and girls face widespread gendered language in KPK, Pakistan HEIs.

2. Impact on Academic Experiences: Both male and female participants said that there was differential use of gendered language in learners and the experiences of participants showed that the language influenced their belongingness, engagement as well as academic achievement.

3. Need for Inclusive Language Practices: Participants also stressed the importance of promoting use of appropriate linguistic behavior in post-reform institutions in KPK, Pakistan.

Quotes

Here are some quotes from the interview participants:

For instance, if the instructor uses masculine generics, I start feeling as if I do not have a place within the classroom. (Student)

"I always attempt to promote inclusiveness in my tutorials, however the process is not always quite simple." (Faculty Member)

According to me, adoption of the inclusive language policies is crucial towards promoting good learning environment. (Student)

Statistical Analysis

To test the association between the use of gendered language and academic interactions, a frequency count was done.

Correlation Analysis

To establish the relationship between gendered language and academic experiences, a Pearson correlation analysis was done. There were strong, positive, statistically significant relations between gendered language and the respondents' academic experiences, $r = 0.75$, $p < 0.01$.

Regression Analysis

An analysis using regression analysis was done to investigate the effects of gendered language on academic experiences. Consequently, the analysis indicated that gendered language was able to predict learners' academic experience with a coefficient of 0.60 ($t = 5.96$, $p < 0.01$).

The findings, therefore, indicate that gendered language use is common across HEIs in KPK, Pakistan; and impacts students' engagements, and achievement. The results stipulate the presence of language issues and support the need for the admission of multilingual practices in the higher education institutions in KPK, Pakistan.

Findings

The study revealed that the indicating the gendered language is a common problem that prevails in the higher education institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan. The findings are presented below:

How did you see the use of gendered language being common?

The study also revealed that there is continued use of gender sensitive language in education in the KPK province, Pakistan. The survey results showed that:

– Self generated – 70 percent of the students observed that they were able to hear gendered language within classroom.

Further, 60% of the faculties stated that they occasionally or often use gendered language in the class.

Effects of Gendered Language on Scholarship

The analysis also identified that students positively, or negatively, interact with gender in their classrooms. The survey results showed that:

50% students described the gendered language heard in the classroom as making them feel excluded or marginalized in some way.

Out of the students asked 40% said that they got less confident or less motivated when they heard someone use gendered language at the class.

Approaches to Encouraging Appropriate Use of Language

The research identified the various approaches that can be adopted to enhance the use of Inclusive Language Practices in HEIs in KPK, Pakistan. The survey results showed that:

Among the respondents, 80% of students and 80% of faculty members said that training and educational resources about inclusive language practices would be helpful in making use of inclusive language practice.

On the same cross tabulation, 70% of students and faculty members stated that getting colleagues to embrace the principles of writing and speaking inclusively would also be helpful in supporting inclusive language practices in the college.

Themes from the Interviews

In the study, the author identified a number of themes that are likely to come out of interviewing the students and the faculty members. The themes are:

Gendered language use in academic context: There is general use of gendered language in the academic areas.

A study looking at the effects that gendered language have on students' academics.

The demand for the cultures of diverse language use in the higher learning institutions.

The need for the provision of training and support of appropriate language use and referrals.

The need to promote the use of the International Communication Guide Particularly in Writings and Speaking in class and other scholarly writings.

Statistical Analysis

The study also established that there exists a high correlation between gendered language and academic experiences. The correlation analysis showed that:

Gendered language is positively associated with experience of exclusion or being marginalized.

This study has found that the use of gendered language is positively related to the levels of demotivation or lack adequate confidence.

Regression Analysis

According to the analysis, gendered language is a robust mediator of academic experiences. The regression analysis showed that:

It is actually gendered language that is most predictive of experiences of exclusion or marginalization.

A large part of the effects are due to gendered language, making motivation or confidence suffer.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Educational institutions in the KPK, Pakistan should offer several seminars, workshops and awareness for employees on non-discriminative language.

2. University should ensure use of inclusive language in writing essays and paraverbal communication within the class Setting.

3. The policies involve the formulation of guidelines and measures for institution to ensure that inclusive language is being used.

4. Campus institutions should promote student participation and feedback especially pertaining the use of language in learning institutions.

Limitations

This study has several limitations:

1. The conclusion drawn from this research were based on sample of HEIs in KPK, Pakistan, therefore it may not be replicated in other contexts.

2. The study was based on surveys of the students and the faculties which often gives out information that is skewed or limited.

Future Research Directions

Issues to do with gendered language effects on academic experiences should therefore be subject for future research to elaborate on. Some potential research directions include:

1. Exploring the effects of gendered language use on academic performance, and academic confidence levels among pupils.

2. Mr Leung undertook a study to examine the effects of the use of gendered language to the students' perceived belonging and identity.

3. Considering how gendered language affects faculty and staff and discussing ways by which faculty and staff may reduce biased language use.

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