GENDER NEUTRAL LANGUAGE USE AMONG UNIVERSITY LECTURERS: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN INSTITUTIONS WITH AND WITHOUT GENDER MAINSTREAMING POLICIES

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Abstract:

Despite the wide spread awareness regarding the need to reduce gender bias in communication styles, it still exists in organizations and its negative effects on women's behaviour and perceptions in the workplace remain a great concern. Consequently, the importance of gender neutral language (GNL) use in reducing gender stereotypes and discrimination cannot be overemphasized. Gender differences between gender and non-gender policy organizations has not been given much attention among university lecturers in the investigation of GNL use in Nigeria. This study examines the main and interaction effects of gender and institution type on GNL among public and private university lecturers. Using a two-way factorial design, 161 lecturers were randomly selected from four faculties and twelve departments while convenient sampling method was used to select the target respondents. A questionnaire focusing on socio-demographic profile and a GNL test was administered to the participants. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, t-test analysis and analysis of variance at 0.05 level of significance. Three hypotheses were tested. The results revealed that gender differences and institution type interacted to influence GNL use among the participants of the study. Gender and institution type are important in developing interventions for GNL use in academia.

Keywords: gender differences, institution type, gender neutral language, university lecturers

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1. Introduction

The use of language in communication plays an important role in organizations, however, the choice of words in communication is one of the strongest means through which gender discrimination is perpetrated. Gender discrimination manifests in the choice of words that individuals make in everyday communication. Maass & Arcuri ([1996](#)) asserted that the words used to refer to a particular group automatically activate the traits associated with such a group and therefore, the language used by the writer or speaker will influence the cognitive process of the reader or listener. Gender discrimination is activated by gender-related words, both in speaking and in writing, even in people who do not intend to discriminate. Litosseliti (2013) noted that effective communication has always generated controversies between males and females both within and outside the organization. Language is an ideology that manifests in social situations and therefore words that celebrate the female or male gender should be viewed as communicating a gender based ideology (Akinmameji, 2016). Cameron (1985) suggested that since language reflects human thoughts, language structure and usage are viewed by feminists as a means of gaining insights into the sexist attitude which guides their behaviour in society. Language may be used to discriminate against women through the job selection process and in the words used in writing women's job evaluations. Studies have shown that gender discrimination is reflected in the language that individuals use to describe men and women in both job evaluations and job advertisements (Gaucher, Friesen, & Kay, [2011](#)). Moscatelli, et al. ([2016](#)) observed that hiring decisions about female candidates were more likely to be motivated by the use of words or written reports that referred to women's sociability rather than their competence. Gender discrimination in the use of words is also reflected in letters for male applicants which usually include more research-related adjectives whereas letters for female applicants usually reflect more reference to their teaching ability or training. In other words, agentic and communal characteristics are used in letters of recommendation for faculty positions in a way that discriminates against female applicants (Madera et al., [2009](#)). Other studies have also suggested that speakers' or writers' use of language in institutional settings reflects gender differences in power (Mullany, 2007; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015).

Language can also be used in a subtle way to create gender bias by using words that have similar meanings but with different levels of abstraction. This allows readers or listeners to be influenced in a way that is consistent with their stereotypical beliefs even though they may not know it. Rubini, Menegatti and Moscatelli ([2014](#)) indicated that linguistic abstraction is a subtle method used to represent women in a less favourable way and creates gender discrimination without intending to, or even speakers or writers being aware of it. These authors reported that a university selection committee's evaluation of female applicants included the use of negative terms at a more abstract level and positive terms at a more concrete level than those of male applicants. Also, the women that were rejected were described more unfavourably than the men that were

rejected. More importantly, the discrimination was perpetrated only by male committee members. The study reveals that discrimination against female applicants was mainly based on the use of a greater number of negative adjectives. Reid & Ng (1999) argued that due to the awareness and criticisms against gender inequality in job recruitment and career development, men seems to use language abstraction as an implicit means to maintain their power. This is done in academia by depicting women as less-deserving scientists than their male colleagues. The issues of gender bias in words used to describe men and women exists in the workplace (Heilman & Eagly, 2008). The problem of bias against women in academia is a well-known and researched phenomenon (Taylor, 2007). Women are less likely to enter and succeed in academia at the same rate as their male counterparts. Women are outnumbered by men in research and publications. There are few female Deans and Professors while female Vice-Chancellors are rare (Poole, 2005). Women in Nigerian universities hold less than 35 per cent of academic posts. Engineering, medicine and the science disciplines remain strongly dominated by men, while the highest concentrations of women are found in the humanities and social sciences (Ogbogu, 2006).

Most of the challenges in communication are associated with men and women due to the differences in the social construct of gender. Differences in language use between males and females have been attributed to factors such as the traditional gender role in society, the participation of men and women in social activities and their various contributions (Dong, 2014). The phenomenon of language and gender in society is an interesting area of study, especially in terms of the issue of gender neutral language in the workplace (OCR, 2015). Gender bias in communications still exists in the workplace and it has made it difficult for women to be viewed as being equal to men. Language shapes our thinking and so if words that imply women's inferiority to men are constantly used, it tends to become part of our mindset, therefore, it is important to modify our language when our ideas are being formed (UNESCO, 2011). The masculine bias in language has been observed in three major languages such as English, French and Spanish (Gastil, 1990; Gabriel et al., 2008 & Carreiras et al., 1996). For instance, there are many more English words to refer to men than to women (Maass & Arcuri, 1996), Gustafsson, et al. (2014) suggested that the pronoun 'he' was more frequently used than 'she' and also appeared in more positive contexts.

In the Nigerian context, the sociocultural value of women is negatively conceived in English as well as in the indigenous languages. Yusuf (2006) asserted that the identity of the woman is portrayed as peripheral and denigrating in many aspects. This is not so different from a general representation of the socio-cultural perception of women among the diverse ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria and the perception which is being transmitted from one generation to the other. Stahlberg et al., (2007) noted that masculine linguistic forms imply a male bias in mental representations and it makes listeners think more of males than females. However, feminization is not always beneficial to women. A woman introduced as Dr Mrs is likely to be seen as less persuasive than a man or than a woman introduced with the masculine form, Dr. (Mucchi-Faina, 2005). Merkel et al.,

(2012) indicated that masculine terms used to refer to female jobholders were associated with higher status than feminine job titles. Using feminine job titles for women has the disadvantage of emphasizing their gender and the stereotypes attached to it. Budziszewska, et al. (2014) revealed that women described with feminine job titles were seen as less competent by both men and women. Therefore, gender differences in language use may lead to frustration and anger between male and female (Drynan,2011).

The use of gender-unfair language, especially those in favour of men, restricts the visibility of women, which may be disadvantageous for them (Horvath and Sczesny, 2015). Also, gender unfair language makes women find jobs advertised in the masculine manner less appealing (Gaucher et al., 2011). Consequently, women reported a lower sense of belonging when gender-exclusive language was used compared to gender-inclusive or gender-neutral forms, in fact, women reported feeling ostracized when gender-exclusive language was used (Stout and Dasgupta, 2011). Similarly, Horvath and Sczesny (2015) observed that when a masculine job title is used in job advertisements, it's an indication that men are perceived as fitting a high-status leadership position better than women but when the job is advertised with a gender neutral language, women and men are seen as equally qualified. The concept of gender neutral language (GNL) was introduced to create a healthy working environment and improve both verbal and written communications in the workplace. Maass et al., (2013) indicated that GNL was introduced as an attempt to reduce stereotypes and discrimination in language in order to further curb gender inequality in organizations which might consequently bring about health and well-being benefits (Holter, 2014). GNL avoids using gender specific pronouns for the purpose of minimizing the assumptions about the gender and sex of people (Adams, 2015). GNL treats both male and female equally and does not indicate one's gender which makes it possible to address people without making gender assumptions (Stevenson, 2014). Vervecken and Hannover (2015) noted that the use of GNL for traditionally male occupations boosted children's self-efficacy and reduced the difference between success attributed to female and male job holders in occupations involving both genders. The government also approved the GNL policy in order to support its commitment to employment equity. This is in line with the position of Hodel et al., (2013) who suggested that GNL is more accepted when it is backed by official regulations and when the use of biased language is sanctioned.

The social role theory suggests that behavioural sex differences arise from the social roles ascribed to men and women (Eagly et al., 2000). Men are expected to display agentic or competence traits such as being assertive, influencing others, efficient and initiating tasks while women are expected to display communal traits such as being nice, being concerned with the welfare of others, showing sympathy, helping others, maintaining relationships and being generous (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). The nature of these stereotypes can negatively affect women in certain jobs. This is because top jobs are usually considered to belong to men and viewed as requiring agentic qualities. Therefore, attitudes are usually less positive toward female leaders than male leaders, and it is therefore more difficult for women to

be successful as leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The gender social role therefore reflects the unequal status and power in favor of men and this inequality is subtly expressed in words used to describe men and women (Moscatelli et al., 2016).

Evidently, gender bias in language has clearly shown that inequality in the social structure is reflected in the structure of language. Merchant (2012) observed that gender differences in communication styles between men and women is capable of creating stereotypes in the roles of men and women in the workplace. Gender stereotypes exists in the workplace and constantly results in gender discrimination (Heilman & Eagly, 2008). Some of these stereotypes have negative effects on women's behaviour and perceptions in the workplace and the society at large. It therefore follows that gender differences in communication styles in the work place is capable of causing conflict between men and women. Taylor (2007) also noted that gender differences in language use has created the problem of decreasing the number of women in the academic working environment. There is little research on the issue of GNL in the academia. More research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of language-related policies in the academic working environments.

It is evident that empirical studies of gender and language have largely been carried out in Europe and America while such research in relation to Nigerian context remains scarce. The 1999 Nigeria constitution makes provisions for equality of women, guarantees the rights and protects the interest of women (Adebayo and Akanle, 2014). The United Nations organized World Conferences on Women to deliberate on how to provide gender equity in many areas of life as gender biases in rights and entitlements remain pervasive in Nigeria (National Gender Policy, 2007). Furthermore, some of the many conventions that Nigeria participated in and ratified (Gberevbie et al., 2014) were designed to help eradicate gender inequality in the society.

Despite all these efforts, gender discrimination remains a great concern in the country. The present study investigates the influence of gender, types of institution and their interaction effect on GNL.

The following research questions are raised:
1) Can gender difference influence GNL?
2) Can institution type influence GNL?
3) Can gender differences and institution type jointly influence GNL?
   Three hypotheses were tested:
1) There will be a significant main effect of gender on the use of GNL.
2) There will be a significant main effect of institution type on the use of GNL.
3) There will be an interaction effect of gender and institution type on the use of GNL.

2. Method

2.1 Design and Participants
The study adopted a two-way factorial design. The independent variables investigated were gender differences and Institution type, each at two levels and the dependent

variable was gender neutral language. A multi stage sampling approach was adopted in the selection of participants. Two universities (one with a gender policy and one without a gender policy) were purposively selected at the first stage. Faculties and departments were randomly selected at the second stage and lecturers' offices were randomly selected at the final stage. The sample size of the study consisted of a total number of 161 university lecturers. The average age of the respondents was 37.94 years with a standard deviation of 13.74 years while the average work experience was 7.18 years with a standard deviation of 8.02 years. 104(64.6%) respondents were males while 57(35.4%) were females. 68(42.2%) respondents were Muslims, 92(57.1%) were Christians while 1(0.6%) represents were others.127(78.9%) of respondents were married, 30(18.6%) were single, 1(0.6%) were divorced, 1(0.6%) were widows112(69.6%) of respondents were selected from institution with gender policy, while 46(28.6%) were from institution without gender policy, 124(77.0%) of respondents were PhD holders, 33(20.5%) were master's holders and 3(1.9%) were B.Sc holders. The federal university has a gender policy. The university is committed to the attainment of gender equality in the society. The policy is applicable to all academic and non-academic staff of the university.

2.2 Measures

The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire which was divided into two sections. Information such as participants' age, gender, institution type, marital status, name of institution, level of education was captured in section A which consists of the social demographic characteristics of participants. Section B was a 7-item GNLT measure to assess awareness of contemporary gender-neutral language terms. The measure was derived from the Language Portal of Canada based on UN Guidelines for contemporary gender-neutral language. Participants were asked to respond to use of language that reflects the way they write. Example of an item on the test is: "Stella loves to write and dreams of becoming a famous poetess, poet, female poet". Correct responses were coded 1 and incorrect answers coded 0. The higher the score, the more sensitive respondents' recognition of GNLT. Pre-test of the GNLT measure recorded a Kuder-Richardson coefficient of .72

2.3 Procedure for Data Collection

Having randomly selected the faculties and subsequently the departments that would participate in the study, lecturers' offices were selected from the departments. Occupants of the selected offices were visited in order to obtain their consents and having been assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, their consents were sought and obtained. The same procedure was adopted at both universities. The questionnaires were administered to all the lecturers who gave their consents however, some were not available at the time of collection. All questionnaires were administered in English and there were no incentives for participants. A total of 200 questionnaires were administered at both universities, however, only 161 lecturers were able to adequately complete and return their questionnaires for scoring and analysis.

3. Results

Table 1.1: Descriptive showing the demographic characteristics
of the respondents from the two institutions sampled in the study

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	104	64.6
	Female	57	35.4
Religion	Islam	68	42.2
	Christianity	92	57.1
	Others	1	.6
Marital Status	No respond	2	1.2
	Married	127	78.9
	Single	30	18.6
	Divorced	1	.6
	Widowed	1	.6
Institution	University of Ibadan	112	69.6
	Lead City University	49	30.5
Educational qualification	PHD	124	77.0
	MSc	33	20.5
	Bsc	3	1.9
	Others	1	.6

Table 1.2: Descriptive showing the average age and work experience

	Mean	Std. Deviation
AGE	37.9474	13.74546
Work experience	7.1835	8.02372

Table 1.3: Summary of 2x2 ANOVA showing the influence
of gender and institutions on gender neutral language

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Gender	5.760	1	5.760	5.325	<.05
Institution	2.486	1	2.486	2.298	>.05
Gender * Institutions	8.086	1	8.086	7.475	<.01
Error	166.582	154	1.082		
Corrected Total	180.709	157			

The result of the hypothesis summarized in Table 1.2 shows that there was significant main effect of gender (F (1,154) = 5.34, p<.05) on gender neutral language test (GNLT). There was no significant main effect of institution on gender neutral language (F (1,154) =2.30, p>.05). Furthermore, the result also revealed that there was significant interaction between gender and institution on gender neutral language (F= (1,154 = 7.45, p<.01).

Table 1.4: Descriptive showing the mean GNLT based on the
gender, institution and interaction of both gender and institution

| Gender	Institutions	Mean	S.D	N
Male	UI	2.7564	1.00887	78
	LCU	1.9600	1.09848	25
	Total	2.5631	1.08166	103
Female	UI	2.6765	1.09325	34
	LCU	2.9048	.99523	21
	Total	2.7636	1.05345	55
Total	UI	2.7321	1.03089	112
	LCU	2.3913	1.14462	46
	Total	2.6329	1.07285	158

The result from the table 1.3 reveals that females ($\overline{X}$ =2.90) in the non gender mainstreaming policy context (LCU) utilised gender neutral language more than males ($\overline{X}$ =1.96) in the same context and those (males ($\overline{X}$ =2.75) and females ($\overline{X}$ =2.67) in the gender mainstreamed context (UI). However, males ($\overline{X}$ =2.75) in the gender mainstreamed context (UI) utilised gender neutral language more than females ($\overline{X}$ =2.67) in the mainstreamed context and males ($\overline{X}$ =1.96) in the non gender mainstreamed context. Females ($\overline{X}$ =2.67) in the mainstreamed context also performed better than males ($\overline{X}$ =1.96) in the non gender mainstreamed context. This demonstrates that gender have a moderating influence on the impact of gender mainstreaming policy context among the academicians.

The interaction graph in Figure 1, depicts that females in the non-gender mainstream policy context were more inclined to use gender neutral language than women and men in the gender mainstreamed context. On the other hand, males in the non-gender mainstreamed policy context were less inclined to use gender neutral language compared to women and men in the gender mainstreamed context. It was also demonstrated that men in gender mainstreamed context were more inclined to use gender neutral language compare to their female counterpart, which may be due to the impact of the gender mainstreaming policy. The hypothesis is thus supported.

Figure 1: Interaction graph showing the influence of gender and institution on GNLT
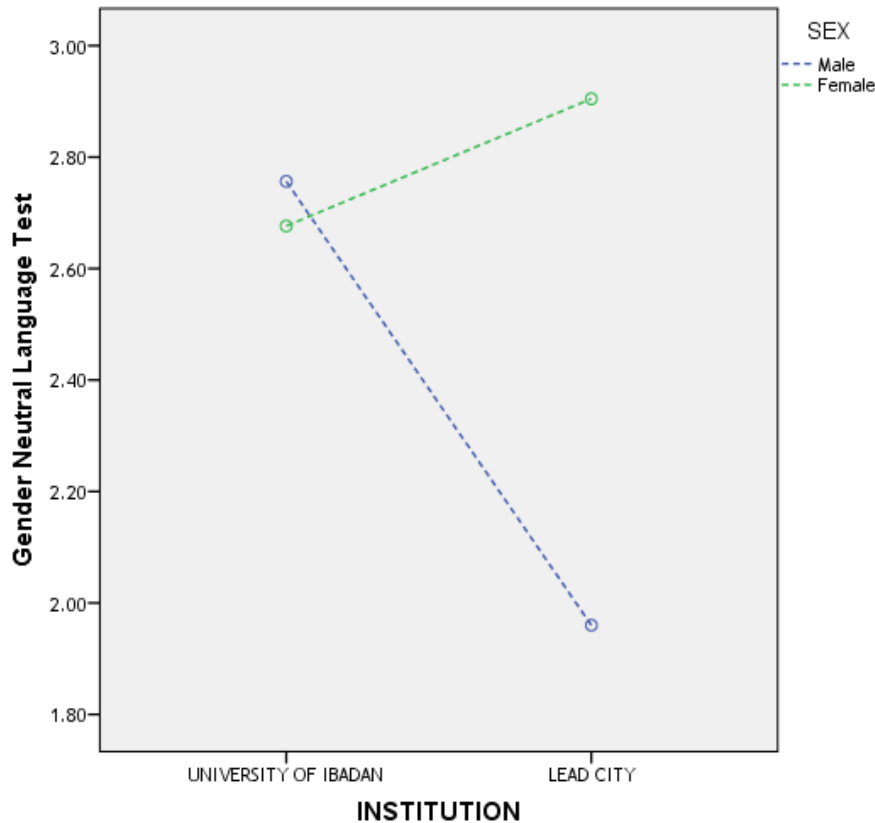
4. Discussion

It was hypothesized that there would be significant main and interaction effects of gender and institution type on the use of GNL. Results indicate that gender independently influenced GNL, institution type did not have a main effect on GNL but there was an interaction effect of gender and institution type on GNL among the study participants. Female lecturers in the institution without a gender policy reported more use of GNL than their male counterparts as well as both males and females working in an institution with a gender policy. However, male lecturers working in an institution with gender policy reported more use of GNL than their female counterparts as well as males working in an institution with non gender mainstream context. Female participants in the gender mainstream context also performed better than males in the non gender mainstream context. This indicates that gender has a moderating effect on GNL in the gender mainstreaming policy context among the lecturers. However, a further t-test analysis reveals that the influence of gender on GNL was not significant. This result is an indication of the inconsistencies in the existing literature on gender and language. However, the main effect of gender on GNL is similar to the observation of Horvath, et al. (2016) who reported that women's visibility increased for most professions when GNL was used instead of the masculine forms. Hansen, Littwitz, and Sczesny (2016) also revealed that GNL resulted in more gender-balanced mental representations of the roles ascribed to men and women.

Attempts have been made to explain the association between gender and language use in organizations. Gender differences may explain the communication style between men and women in the workplace in the sense that women tend to have a more favourable attitude toward GNL than men, although there is no consensus among researchers on this outcome. Some studies reported that men use less GNL than women (Douglas and Sutton, 2014), other studies reported no gender difference in the use of GNL (Sczesny et al., 2015). Language use has been viewed as being linked with sexist attitudes of language users. Swim et al., (2004) found that the use of sexist language is regarded as an example of subtle sexism. Bosak et al., (2012) reported that a higher prevalence of men in certain social roles was a major challenge preventing GNL from becoming popularly used. According to them, once women and men occupy equal social roles, this difference in accessibility between men and women should decrease and more gender-balanced mental representations should emerge.

Gender and language use in academics in Nigeria can be attributed to the country's traditional beliefs and practices. Gberevbie, et al. (2014) asserted that Nigerian men are seen as superior to their female counterparts. Adebowale (2009) noted that Nigerian children are socialized by parents in line with prescribed gender stereotypes which has greatly contributed to the inequality in the formal labour sector, including universities. Nigeria is a patriarchal society; men dominate all aspects of women's lives and women are in the subordinate position (World Bank 2005). The traditional beliefs and practices have contributed greatly to the suppression of the aspirations of women. This is especially so because most women require the permission of their men to embark on pursuing any endeavour in life, including academic endeavour. Also, the political will to implement international instruments that protect women's rights is not there.

Consequently, there has been no attempt to examine the minimum percentage of lecturing positions reserved for women in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The pattern of education has also contributed to the oppression of women. According to Lauer and Lauer (2002), the traditional roles assigned to women limit their commitment to higher education, which in turn reduces their prospects in formal labour participation. Females are in some cases, withdrawn from schools into marriages, while their male counterparts continue to pursue further education. These practices have made it difficult for women to make career choices in life. Some illiterate and poor parents in the rural areas still have not realized the importance of education for girls. Their belief is that it is a waste of resources to train a girl-child since the girl will be married into another family (Nwajiuba, 2011). Consequently, the lack of equal educational opportunities for girls will surely come to bear on the gender imbalance in employment.

Theoretical evidence has shown some of the factors responsible for gender differences in communication. The dominance approach to gender differences suggests that men and women live in a world where power and status are not equally distributed and this inequality has had a negative impact on women's language (Nemati & Bayer, 2007). This is because women are dominated by men, their manner of speaking is different to men and that indicates their subordinate status in the society (Litosseliti,

2013). Thus, women's language is associated with weakness, shyness, powerlessness etc., which disqualifies women from positions of power and authority. Men control women in the manner of interactions and in terms of language use itself (Merchant, 2012). The different approach to gender differences suggests that as men and women belong to different sociolinguistic subculture, they have developed different linguistic behaviours (Abbas, 2010). This results in the different communicative styles of men and women. Although men and women live in the same society, they have different life experiences since their childhoods. The reason is that they have learnt different linguistic behavior and style based on their sex when they interact with other people in society. Girls are taught to use female language so that they are familiar with using ladylike language (Hamdan & Hamdan, 2013). The dominance and difference theorists provided different accounts of men's and women's styles of communication however, both theories view language differences as a result of childhood socialization practices (Cameron, 2005).

The deficit approach indicates that women's way of speaking is deficient in comparison to that of men whether by nature or nurture (Cameron, 1998). Women use language in a way that shows that they are subordinate to men while men's use of language shows power. Women's language use deficiency is also reflected in their limited vocabulary which lacks authority and assertiveness (Simpson, 2011). Female language use has a subservient status which makes it appear deficient, unconventional and even incomplete when compared to males' language. These theories, therefore, suggest that gender neutral language use is expected to be influenced by gender differences.

However, some of the reasons individuals may use or reject GNL include the fact that it is new and seems unusual to speakers' language behaviour or habits (Blaubergs, 1980). Therefore, people may view GNL as irritating and therefore may refuse to use it. Formanowicz et al., (2013) observed that the idea of GNL use was first introduced by activist movements and so people respond negatively to its acceptance. Sczesny et al., (2015) noted that language users who use GNL spontaneously were found to have used it in the past and are likely to continue using it and Stahlberg et al., (2007) revealed that language users who grew up with schoolbooks using predominantly masculine generics tend not to question the usage. They maintain that the way gender is viewed and used in a language may be associated with societal gender equality.

4.1 Implication and Recommendation

The above findings revealed that participants' gender and institution type interacted to influence GNL. This outcome has contributed to the existing knowledge in the field of GNL use in academia. Given the negative consequences of GNL on women, the findings could be used to develop an intervention study on language use in organizations. It is therefore recommended that policy makers should ensure that measures are taken to ensure GNL becomes a linguistic standard. Women should be given more higher social roles in the society, since occupying the same social roles with men is expected to reduce the gap between men and women and create a more gender balanced mental representation. Language speakers' habits and attitudes toward GNL is also very crucial

since habits guide speakers' linguistic behavior. Also, learning has a role to play for GNL to become a habit. Interventions aiming to increase the use of GNL should concentrate on a simple repetition of non-sexist expressions, so that these expressions become established habits.

Guidelines for GNL should be introduced in all professions, which will state the rules guiding language use in reference to men and women in academic publications and all other academic material. Language policies should become part of the organizational culture of various institutions such as universities and business organizations. Moreover, the use of GNL among academicians should be backed by official regulations and when there is a violation of the rule, there should be sanctions. Policies that will ensure equal gender representation should be formulated and enforced by government. Laws and regulations that would prescribe the minimum percentage of women in academia should be enacted. To address the challenges created by traditional practices, Parents should desist from socializing their female children in ways that limit them from acquiring scientific and technological skills. Parents should also stop putting the pressure of marriage on women since it prevents them from going for further studies in order to qualify for higher academic positions. Equal opportunities should be given to all children in educational pursuits regardless of their gender.

4.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

The participants for this study were selected from the university setting, future research may consider samples outside the university community and across a wider range of participants such as business environments, hospital environment, households, etc. Additional Independent variables should be considered in order to explore other factors that could influence the use of GNL. The study is also limited in terms of the results which were based on data from one time point, which has made it impossible to make any conclusions about causality. Future studies may consider an experimental design so as to establish causality.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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