

Language as a Mirror of Inequality: A Psychological Analysis of Gendered Language and Sociolinguistic Harm in Nepalese Society

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Abstract

This study discovers the linking of linguistic discrimination and women's mental health in Nepal, drawing from feminist critical discourse analysis and social dominance theory. Language, as both a symbolic and functional medium, plays a vital role in reproducing gendered hierarchies and cultural norms. Through qualitative interviews with women from diverse socio-economic and regional backgrounds, as well as discourse analysis of proverbs, social media, and political rhetoric, the research discloses that prejudiced language practices—rooted in proverbs, daily communications, and digital spaces—function as a form of symbolic violence. These practices undermine women's psychological well-being, reinforcing stigma, chronic stress, and identity conflict. Interviews further revealed that women engaged in mainstream politics, activism, and other professional fields often experience humiliation not only when voicing opposition to gender-based violence but also when articulating their views in their natural linguistic style. Findings display that verbal abuse, character assassination, and derogatory gendered phrases are removed. Participants described pressure to conform linguistically through activities such as code-switching, accent variation, and self-censorship to avoid stigma. High-profile cases—including those involving female celebrities and public figures—reflect a persistent double standard where women's voices are controlled and punished more severely than men's. The study highlights that linguistic prejudice is an organisational issue with direct implications for mental health, individuality, and connection in public life. It calls for language-sensitive mental health guidelines, educational reform to address gender-biased language, stronger legal frameworks against online and offline verbal abuse, and the promotion of inclusive, dutiful communication practices in public discourse. Addressing linguistic discrimination

is essential not only for progressing gender justice but also for fostering unbiased mental health outcomes for Nepalese women.

Keywords

Gender Inequality, Linguistic Discrimination, Nepalese Women, Gender Stereotypes, Sociolinguistics, Symbolic Violence, Verbal Abuse, Patriarchy, Mental Health, Access to Justice

1. Introduction

Women in Nepal play versatile roles: caregivers, professionals, activists, and community builders. Despite significant legal reforms and increased visibility in leadership positions, they continue to face systemic obstacles that limit their full involvement and recognition. This study examines the persistent dichotomy between the growing discourse on women's empowerment and the deeply rooted patriarchal structures that continue to shape Nepali society. It focuses specifically on the linguistic, cultural, and institutional mechanisms—especially the use of stereotypical and derogatory language—that boost gender bias in everyday life.

As a Nepalese woman and a researcher of gender, language, and culture, I have personally observed the direct impact of deep-rooted social biases. These lived experiences, along with research, form the foundation of this paper. Language, particularly in its satirical, stereotypical, and symbolic forms, plays a powerful role in maintaining social hierarchies and controlling women's expression in both private and public spheres.

In Nepalese society, public counterattacks against outspoken women are common and deeply concerning phenomena. For example, one of Nepal's most famous singers was compelled to withdraw a rape case due to severe character assassination and societal pressure. Another celebrated singer has faced ongoing verbal abuse and social ostracization after her divorce. Similarly, two prominent actresses were subjected to intense online harassment merely for expressing their opinions. These cases exemplify the pervasive use of derogatory language and social ridicule as weapons to silence women.

Common phrases like “she's become arrogant,” “a hen that crows brings ruin,” and “a woman out of her place” are frequently used directed at women who establish their voices in public spaces. In contrast, men expressing similar opinions often face little to no criticism. This severe double standard proves how social norms and linguistic expressions are complicatedly connected in maintaining gender inequality. Women who attempt to break social barriers—be they singers, actresses, politicians, or professionals in other sectors—consistently encounter resistance through both societal and linguistic mechanisms.

A closer examination reveals that gender stereotypes remain deeply embedded in both societal structures and individual attitudes, often resulting in persistent gender inequality. Feminism, gender equality, and women's rights have long been

questioned themes not only in global discourse but also within national contexts like Nepal. According to the United Nations (UN), the Conference and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action both emphasized equality, development, and peace. In 1979, the UN General Assembly approved the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), widely recognized as a global charter of women's rights, outlining strategies for eliminating gender discrimination at the national level (UN Women, 2022). Furthermore, Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) focuses on "achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls." It aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, ensuring their full and equal participation in all aspects of life, and by 2015, around 143 countries, including Nepal, had incorporated gender equality into their constitutions.

Nepal has made significant legal progress, such as including women's rights as fundamental rights, enabling citizenship through either parent, or reserving 33% of parliamentary seats for women. Legislative frameworks such as the Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Rights Act (2018), the Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention) Act (2015), and the Domestic Violence (Offense and Punishment) Act (2009) indicate an institutional commitment to gender equity. However, these laws often fall short in practice, with weak implementation and minimal public transformation.

This paper examines how linguistic sensitivity and gender stereotypes intersect to perpetuate the socio-cultural marginalization of women in Nepal. It explores the ways language contributes to systemic discrimination, particularly in decision-making spaces, leadership roles, and public discourse. By analysing linguistic patterns and their real-life outcomes, this study aims to shed light on the broader struggle for gender justice and equality in Nepalese society.

2. Literature Review

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a powerful instrument that reflects, highlights, and maintains societal structures and hierarchies. The connection between language and gender has long been a central focus in sociolinguistics, feminist theory, and cultural studies. Foundational scholars such as Robin Lakoff (1975) argued that clear differences exist between the speech of women and men, and that these differences both reflect and perpetuate women's powerlessness in society. Similarly, Deborah Tannen's (1990), particularly her book "You Don't Understand," highlights how different conversational styles between men and women, often stemming from social conditioning, can create communication breakdowns and contribute to unequal dynamics. Tannen argues that men may dominate conversations through interrupting, taking the floor, or offering solutions, while women may focus on listening and building consensus.

Lazar (2022) advances this discussion through Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), framing language not just as communication but as a social practice deeply rooted in power structures and gender hierarchies. In the South

Asian context, particularly Nepal, these issues are compounded by entrenched patriarchal norms. Gupta et al. (2021) observed that decision-making power in Nepali households remains male-dominated, with women's roles confined to traditional expectations. Niraula (2019) and Bishwakarma (2020) both emphasized how Nepali proverbs and everyday language reproduce misogyny, restrict female autonomy, and transmit patriarchal ideologies across generations. As Sapir (1921) and Bloch and Trager (1944) contended, language is a cultural system that reflects and maintains societal norms, often legitimizing hierarchical structures.

Banet-Weiser (2018) coined the term *networked misogyny* to describe coordinated online abuse targeting women who assert visibility or voice dissent. Adhikari (2023) extends this to Nepal, where female public figures—such as journalists, actors, and activists—are regularly subjected to verbal harassment and symbolic violence in online spaces.

From a theoretical standpoint, Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) helps explain how language and other symbolic tools serve to maintain hierarchical social orders, privileging dominant groups—in this case, men. Linguistic discrimination, particularly against women, is thus not merely a cultural issue but one of systemic inequality.

Linguistic discrimination—defined as the unequal treatment of individuals based on their language, accent, or speech patterns—has profound implications for women's mental health. Piller (2016) notes that women face an intersectional burden due to gender and linguistic bias, resulting in reduced social mobility and internalized stigma. Lippi-Green (2012) further shows that women with non-standard dialects or non-native accents are often viewed as less competent or credible, affecting employment and self-perception.

The emotional labour required to conform linguistically, such as through code-switching, often leads to identity conflict and chronic anxiety (Kraus, 2015). Women from minority or immigrant backgrounds are particularly affected. Remlinger (2002) found that speakers of regional dialects—often women—face marginalization in education and employment, contributing to reduced self-esteem and increased susceptibility to depression.

Samar & Abouchdid (2020) highlight how women in multilingual societies are disproportionately pressured to speak dominant or prestigious languages, intensifying the mental burden. Levon (2015) offers sociophonetic evidence that women's voices are more harshly judged when deviating from standard norms, with consequences for self-worth and professional success. Baugh, J. (2000) coined the concept of *linguistic profiling*, emphasizing its severe socioeconomic and psychological impacts, especially on minority women. Similarly, Scales et al. (2006) found that linguistic discrimination in schools has long-term psychological effects on girls and contributes to educational disadvantage.

Finally, from a global perspective, Ridgeway, C. L. (2011) and Klasen, S. (2020) demonstrate that even in developed contexts, language functions as a subtle but persistent mechanism of gender inequality, affecting everything from interper-

sonal relations to institutional access. Studies on the psychological impact of gendered language also show alarming effects. [Nadal, K. L., et al. \(2014\)](#) emphasize that even subtle microaggressions—phrased as “harmless” jokes or idioms—can lead to symptoms of depression and anxiety among women. Similarly, [Silva and Montoya’s \(2019\)](#) meta-analysis reveals that linguistic sexism fosters a climate of psychological stress and internalized inferiority. These findings align with feminist critical discourse theory, which views language as a form of symbolic violence that reinforces patriarchal structures and marginalizes women.

Robin Morgan and her colleagues’ ([Morgan, 1994](#)) Declaration at the WEDO Global Strategies Meeting offers a powerful metaphor—women have “dwelt in the shadows” despite being the majority, weaving human history through invisibility. This narrative extends beyond metaphor; it situates patriarchal erasure within global feminist movements across geography and generations. Morgan’s assertion, “We are those women who have been maintaining human balance for thousands of years... forced to live like shadows,” strongly resonates in the Nepalese context where women, despite symbolic progress, continue to face systemic marginalization ([Morgan, 1994](#)).

American sociologist [Jerome Davis \(1950\)](#) introduced a critical lens to reputational violence—deliberate slander aimed at destroying a person’s public standing. He argues that such attacks stem from fear, jealousy, emotional insecurity, and the desire for control. Modern scholars such as [Icks and Shiraev \(2014\)](#) have expanded this theory, explaining how character assassination serves political and social functions. It is often used to suppress dissent and maintain dominance. In Nepal, women in leadership or public roles frequently face similar tactics, with their reputations undermined through language rooted in gendered stereotypes.

[Carneliaputri Dewanty and Saryono \(2023\)](#) conducted a feminist linguistic study of TikTok content in Indonesia, revealing how verbal violence can be classified into sexual, appearance-based, intellectual, and character-related abuse. These acts—manifested through hate speech, intimidation, and parody—function as symbolic violence aimed at reinforcing male dominance. Their typology provides a useful comparative lens to understand similar dynamics on Nepalese social media platforms, where women who speak publicly or assert themselves often face ridicule and linguistic suppression.

These frameworks illuminate how language—including metaphor, rumour, and public narrative—functions both as a mirror of societal values and as a weapon of exclusion. In Nepal, dismissive labels like “a hen that crows brings ruin” or “too empowered” not only devalue women’s voices but also serve to enforce their exclusion from leadership and decision-making spaces.

Collectively, these studies underscore that linguistic discrimination is not simply a social inconvenience—it is a form of symbolic violence with tangible impacts on women’s mental health, social participation, and life opportunities. Understanding the interplay between language, gender, and power—especially in patriarchal societies like Nepal—requires an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates

both global and local frameworks. This broader lens expands the concept of gender-based violence beyond physical harm to include linguistic and symbolic forms, reinforcing the idea that language functions both as a mirror of societal norms and as a weapon within the socio-political landscape.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to explore the intersection of linguistic discrimination and women's mental health. FCDA provides a theoretical and methodological framework to analyze language as a social practice that both reflects and sustains gendered power relations (Lazar, 2022).

Data Collection

A multi-method approach was used for data collection, combining primary and secondary sources: First, a corpus of linguistic materials—including traditional Nepali proverbs, everyday discussions, political rhetoric, and social media discourse—was collected to examine how language reinforces gender norms and discrimination.

In addition to conducting interviews with women and analyzing social media discourse, this study also draws upon “Nepali Ukhan Sangraha” (A Collection of Nepali Proverbs), a 465-page volume compiled by Dr. Shiv Prasad Paudyal. The book presents a wide range of traditional proverbs that have been in circulation in Nepali society for generations. It categorizes and documents proverbs that reflect ethnic discrimination, regional and local prejudices, as well as gender-based biases. These proverbs provide valuable insights into the deeply rooted social attitudes toward women, particularly in relation to their capabilities, character, and presence within the family and society. Furthermore, the text sheds light on how women's participation in decision-making processes and their rights to property have been historically constrained. Thus, the collection serves as an important resource for understanding the structural discrimination that women in Nepal have endured over centuries.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 women from both urban and rural areas of Nepal. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse linguistic, social, and occupational backgrounds. Interviews focused on themes such as experiences with linguistic prejudice, feelings of marginalization due to speech patterns or accents, coping strategies, access to justice, and perceived mental health effects.

Ethical approval was obtained, and confidentiality was ensured throughout the research process. The aim was to capture the lived experiences of linguistic discrimination and its perceived effects on mental health.

The data collection process extended over a period of two months. Questionnaires were distributed to 20 women; however, responses were not received on time, requiring repeated follow-up. Ultimately, 16 participants provided written

responses, while 4 women participated in online interviews. All interviews were conducted virtually. In addition, social media comments were systematically observed for a duration of six months. As a Nepali woman who has long observed patterns of online commentary and verbal abuse, these experiences also informed the motivation to undertake this study.

Data were collected through online platforms such as email and Facebook Messenger, particularly in cases where direct access was limited. All interviews were conducted in Nepali and English, recorded with consent, transcribed exactly, and coded thematically.

4. Theoretical Framework

Connecting Social Dominance Theory with Practice: Gender Discrimination in Nepalese Society

This study adopts Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) as its guiding framework to understand the root causes and persistence of gender inequality in Nepal. This theory offers a comprehensive explanation of how societal hierarchies are established and perpetuated through institutional structures and individual psychological orientations. It argues that dominant groups are systematically favoured by social institutions, gaining disproportionate access to resources, prestige, and authority. These patterns are not random but are sustained through ideologies and cultural mechanisms that shape individual behaviour and societal expectations. As a result, dominant groups—such as men in patriarchal societies—retain control, while subordinate groups, including women, are relegated to lower-status and often more vulnerable roles.

The relevance of Social Dominance Theory becomes especially apparent when analysing gender-based discrimination in Nepal. Although international attention has increasingly highlighted violence and inequality faced by Nepali women, the problem is deeply rooted in longstanding cultural traditions and social norms. While slogans like “Two children are a blessing from God” and “Sons and daughters are equal” are frequently promoted, they often serve as mere symbolic gestures during public events rather than indicators of genuine social change. These public messages contrast sharply with the lived experiences of many Nepali women, who continue to face marginalization and limited access to power, justice, and recognition.

Despite some positive shifts in family-level attitudes, particularly regarding the value of daughters, the gap between Nepal’s legal provisions and actual practice remains significant. Women are underrepresented in leadership roles, and their participation in decision-making processes remains limited. This difference reflects what Social Dominance Theory identifies as the divide between formal equality (legal and institutional recognition) and actual experience (social and cultural enforcement of hierarchy). In essence, although policies and laws promoting gender equality exist, their effectiveness is undermined by deeply ingrained cultural attitudes and structural biases.

Interviews and discussions with working women, political figures, and female leaders reveal that notions of dignity, justice, and inclusion often exist only on paper. In daily life, these ideals are difficult to access or enforce. The mismatch between legal rights and societal practices reinforces the systemic nature of gender inequality. Women who attempt to claim their rights or speak out against discrimination frequently face backlash—not just from institutions, but from society at large. Attempts to challenge the status quo (existing order) often result in character attacks, social stigma, and exclusion.

In this context, the cultural tools that sustain dominance—such as language, traditions, and proverbs—play a crucial role. Traditional sayings continue to shape societal views on gender, often reinforcing patriarchal values and justifying inequality. For instance, the widely known Nepali proverb “Chhora paye khasi, Chhori paye farsi”—which translates to “Mutton is served when a son is born, but only pumpkin when a daughter is born”—symbolizes how male children are celebrated with luxury, while female births are treated as insignificant. This metaphor reflects actual practices and attitudes, illustrating how deeply entrenched gender bias is within cultural expressions.

Such proverbs do more than reflect societal values; they actively participate in reinforcing gender hierarchies by socializing individuals into accepting unequal norms from an early age. In line with Social Dominance Theory, these cultural practices and expressions serve as ideological tools that uphold male dominance and discourage resistance. Families, driven by concerns over social reputation, often fail to support female victims of violence or injustice. In cases where support is extended, both the victim and her family are frequently subjected to social ridicule or alienation. This social silencing mechanism ensures that women remain in subordinate positions and discourages them from seeking justice or equality.

Ultimately, the lived experiences of Nepali women—marked by structural exclusion, violence, and stigma—clearly illustrate the core principles of Social Dominance Theory. Whether through institutional barriers, cultural norms, or linguistic expressions, gender inequality in Nepal is perpetuated by a complex web of dominance-enhancing mechanisms. As this study will explore further, understanding these interconnections is vital to developing more effective strategies for achieving gender justice in Nepal.

Research Questions

1. How does linguistic discrimination manifest in the everyday experiences of women in Nepal?
2. In what ways does linguistic discrimination contribute to adverse mental health outcomes among Nepali women?
3. How do cultural and digital contexts influence the relationship between language use and gendered power dynamics?
4. What strategies do women employ to navigate or resist linguistic discrimination in both offline and online environments?

Hypothesis:

1. Linguistic discrimination reinforces patriarchal power structures.
2. Derogatory language contributes to psychological distress.
3. Women who face derogatory or stereotypical language experience higher levels of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal, compared to those who do not.
4. Gendered proverbs and idioms in Nepali culture act as symbolic tools that perpetuate gender inequality and influence women's self-perception and social participation.

5. Discussion

H1: Linguistic discrimination reinforces patriarchal power structures.

This study strongly supports H1. Interviews and case analyses reveal that derogatory phrases such as “a woman out of her place,” “A hen that crows brings ruin,” and “she’s become arrogant” serve as mechanisms of control, silencing women who seek visibility in leadership roles or public discourse. These practices mirror [Robin Morgan’s \(1994\)](#) assertion that women are forced to live “like shadows,” despite formal progress in representation. Language thus acts not as a neutral medium, but as a tool of social regulation.

H2: Derogatory language contributes to psychological distress.

Findings confirm H2, with multiple participants reporting anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal following verbal abuse both online and offline. Consistent with [Davis’s \(1950\)](#) theory of character assassination, women who spoke out against injustice or pursued legal remedies were systematically targeted to undermine credibility and self-worth. Many described feeling emotionally isolated, even when surrounded by supportive networks, highlighting the profound mental health burden of linguistic discrimination.

H3: Gendered proverbs and idioms perpetuate inequality.

Evidence strongly aligns with H3. Proverbs such as “a hen that crows brings ruin” or “she’s become arrogant” reflect enduring patriarchal ideologies that prescribe silence and submission for women. These cultural scripts are deeply internalized and continue to influence perceptions of women’s roles, reinforcing structural and symbolic barriers even in modern contexts.

H4: Online spaces amplify linguistic violence.

Finding validates H4, as digital platforms emerged as a primary site for gendered harassment. High-profile cases—including a singer forced to withdraw a rape complaint after online attacks—illustrate how virtual spaces extend and intensify offline misogyny. Echoing [Dewanty and Sayyono’s \(2023\)](#) typology of verbal violence, the abuse ranged from sexualized insults to attacks on character and competence, often escalating without accountability.

6. Finding and Analysis

The findings indicate that despite widespread discourse on social change and

women's empowerment, many women do not feel secure when it comes to participation and access to justice. Their experiences suggest that mere participation is insufficient; what is required is meaningful and respectful participation. Several women reported that, in addition to struggling to step outside the home, they were also subjected to character assassination and accusations in society, which caused severe psychological distress. Many participants shared that they endured violence in silence out of fear of "what others might say" if they spoke out. Survivors also noted that their inability to raise their voices against violence in a timely manner emboldened perpetrators. Furthermore, they emphasized that legal provisions alone are not enough to bring about societal transformation; laws must also be strictly implemented. Weak enforcement of laws, coupled with a male-dominated social structure, has made it difficult for women survivors to obtain justice.

Language is a powerful social tool that both reflects and shapes cultural norms, identities, and power relations. Across societies, linguistic practices are deeply gendered, often serving to reinforce existing hierarchies and perpetuate discrimination. Nepali society stands at a critical juncture of socio-cultural transformation. While progressive reforms and increased visibility of women in public life mark signs of change, traditional patriarchal mindsets continue to exercise a powerful influence. The societal response to women's achievements often reflects a deep-seated discomfort with female agency and autonomy. Despite national and international reports indicating advancements in gender equality, the lived experiences of many women reveal persistent structural and symbolic barriers.

An obvious double standard is evident in societal attitudes: women who pursue careers or assert independence are frequently subjected to moral scrutiny, while similar behaviours by men rarely provoke criticism. Perpetrators of gender-based violence are often normalized or even accepted by the community, whereas survivors—most often women—are denied justice, support, and validation. Working women, in particular, face compounded challenges, shouldering both professional obligations and domestic responsibilities, while also enduring social pressure, derogatory commentary, and character judgments.

This paradox between formal progress and lived inequality underscores the need to examine the role of language in shaping and sustaining gender-based discrimination in Nepalese society. Linguistic practices—both in traditional discourse and digital spaces—not only reflect prevailing power dynamics but also actively contribute to the marginalization of women.

With the various political movements over time, our policies and regulations have evolved, and women's participation has increased across different sectors. However, along with responsibilities and participation, the nature of violence against women has also changed. Even highly capable women find it difficult to reach decision-making positions compared to men. When they do reach such positions, they often fail to receive support from their colleagues. If a man in a similar role makes a mistake, it is often brushed off as something that just happens occasionally. But if a woman makes a mistake, the prevalent notion remains:

“That’s what happens when women try—they just can’t do it.”

The slogan of gender equality—men and women are equal—is quite popular in Nepali society today. In any social movement, women walk shoulder to shoulder with men under this banner of equality. But when the time comes to divide leadership or make decisive decisions, women are usually left out of the equation. During elections, political parties make grand promises about women’s participation in their manifestos. However, once in power, their true commitment to women’s participation becomes visible—and it is often disappointing.

Actual equal participation of women remains very limited. And even when women do manage to participate, social traditions, sarcastic remarks, doubts about their abilities, and age-old, conservative sayings discourage them. In-depth discussion with five women from political parties, five from journalism, five from schoolteachers, and five from artists, as well as analyses of media reports, reveal how women continue to face barriers. One prominent case is of a rape victim singer who had to withdraw her legal case despite facing violence. Even after years, she continues to face harassment and verbal abuse on social media, affecting her psychological well-being. Unfortunately, such issues have not received much public attention.

Similarly, actresses have faced insults and defamation on social media just for expressing their opinions. The derogatory language used against them mocks the very fabric of civilized society. Although we now have access to education, improved economic conditions, and have transitioned from traditional to modern lifestyles, our language and attitude toward women remain outdated. Many studies have been conducted on such harmful language, and researchers have provided recommendations, but these have not been effectively implemented. Laws alone are not sufficient. Without a change in the societal mindset, even legal remedies fall short.

Women who have broken family restrictions and stepped into public spaces often cannot speak about the violence they experience. And those who do speak up rarely find justice. The delay or denial of justice and the inability to speak about their trauma lead to severe mental health issues, which many women suffer in silence. These struggles have yet to be openly discussed in society.

During my research, I found that many women said even the people responsible for delivering justice often used sarcastic or humiliating language. They would use anti-women language to undermine women’s confidence, demoralize them, and isolate them by threatening or luring those who tried to support the victims. Women holding public positions have also had to endure repeated humiliation.

From personal experiences to news reports and centuries-old misogynistic language, such anti-women sentiments still persist in various forms. One woman shared her experience, saying, “When I told someone about the violence I faced, they just said—this is how it is everywhere, you just have to endure it.” The Nepali community is still not liberal enough when it comes to women. In the name of tradition and culture, women continue to be oppressed. Women who have been

victims of some form of violence and are deprived of justice for years suffer from diminished confidence and struggle to perform well in their work.

In conversations, some women told me, “We tremble in fear even at the sight of those who abused or insulted us.” Yet, ironically, the perpetrators mock them, saying things like, “You’ve gotten too many rights now,” or “This is what happens when hens start crowing”—offensive phrases that still echo in our society.

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that linguistic discrimination in Nepal is not only a communication issue, but also a deeply implanted tool of patriarchal control that harmfully affects women’s mental health and socio-emotional well-being. Drawing from a combination of feminist discourse analysis and social dominance theory, the research findings illuminate how everyday language, proverbs, digital discourse, and institutional communication reproduce gendered power hierarchies, often in subtle but profoundly damaging ways.

Proverbs and idiomatic expressions that degrade women continue to be deeply established in Nepalese society. From a linguistic perspective, evidence suggests that women from marginalized, regional, and socially disadvantaged communities are frequently subjected to criticism for their speech patterns and specific lexical choices. This examination creates an extensive sense of anxiety, leading many women to fear potential errors when speaking in public domains. Qualitative interviews further revealed that women engaged in mainstream politics, activism, and other professional fields often experience humiliation not only when voicing opposition to gender-based violence but also when articulating their views in their natural linguistic style.

Thematic analysis of interviews revealed that women are consistently subjected to symbolic violence through linguistic practices that undervalue their identities, question their morality, and undermine their authority. From the policing of speech patterns and accents to the emotional labour of code-switching in professional environments, the study illustrates how women must continuously adapt to oppressive norms in order to be socially accepted. These pressures are magnified in digital contexts, where anonymity facilitates misogynistic abuse, slut-shaming, and public character assassination. These forms of digital violence extend traditional gendered harms into new technological arenas, worsening the psychological impact.

Although access to education and employment for women has improved in recent years, the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and linguistic stereotypes means that women’s participation in public and professional life remains dangerous. Instead of being supported, women are often examined, blamed, and disliked, particularly when they declare independence or challenge social norms. As one participant emotionally noted, “from the outside, life looks normal—but the pain is within, and only the one who suffers knows how deep it runs.” This deeply personal reflection captures the internalized trauma of individuals themselves.

These findings underscore the need to recognize language as a central vector in the perpetuation of gender-based oppression. Linguistic discrimination is not a peripheral concern; it is a structural issue with profound implications for mental health, access to justice, and social inclusion. Legal frameworks addressing gender-based violence must expand to incorporate linguistic harm—including verbal abuse, symbolic deprivation, and digital harassment—as legitimate and serious forms of psychological violence.

To mitigate these problems, various important steps are recommended. Mental health services must be language-sensitive, with practitioners trained to identify and address the psychological toll of linguistic discrimination. Education systems must reform curricula and pedagogy to challenge gender-biased language and promote inclusive, respectful communication from an early age. Public awareness campaigns are needed to demoralize misogynistic expressions and foster a cultural shift toward linguistic equality. Furthermore, policymakers should incorporate linguistic justice into gender equity initiatives and digital safety regulations.

In conclusion, achieving gender equity in Nepal requires breaking up not only structural and economic barriers but also the symbolic violence rooted in language. Language is both an echo and a reinforcer of social inequality. Until this is addressed, the psychological burden carried by women will remain hidden yet profound. Future research should continue to explore how linguistic practices shape mental health outcomes and should aim to build interdisciplinary policies for involvement and social transformation.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the root causes and consequences of linguistic discrimination and its effects on a healthy society.

1. Reinforce the Enforcement of Gender-Equality Laws: Although Nepal has legal frameworks aimed at ensuring gender equality, the actual implementation remains inconsistent. To combat linguistic discrimination and broader gender-based injustices, the government must ensure that existing laws—such as those against sexual harassment, defamation, and online abuse—are effectively enforced. Special legal provisions should be developed to address linguistic violence, including character assassination, digital misogyny, and public shaming of women based on their speech or expression. Training law enforcement and judicial personnel on gender-sensitive language and the mental health consequences of discrimination is also essential.

2. Promote Mutual Domestic and Caregiving Duties: The emotional and linguistic burden on working women is compounded by their dual roles in professional and domestic circles. Social campaigns and workplace policies should promote the unbiased division of household labour between genders. Men must be engaged in dialogues about gender roles and encouraged to challenge traditional notions of masculinity. Reducing the domestic load on women can help minimize

the psychological toll that arises from balancing societal expectations with personal goals.

3. Reform Educational Curricula to Address Gender Bias in Language: Nepal's educational institutions play a critical role in shaping linguistic norms. School curricula should be revised to include modules on inclusive and non-discriminatory language. Raise awareness about how proverbs and sayings perpetuate gender stereotypes and teach students to critically engage with linguistic practices that normalize inequality. Teacher training programs should integrate feminist critical discourse analysis to help educators identify and challenge subtle forms of linguistic bias in textbooks and classroom interactions.

4. Improve Support Systems for Victims of Linguistic and Symbolic Violence: Women who experience linguistic discrimination, whether in digital spaces or public life, often lack access to mental health services or legal support. There should be community-based support networks, including counselling services, legal aid, and peer groups, that are tailored to the specific needs of women affected by symbolic violence. Mental health professionals must be trained to recognize how language and social stigma intersect with psychological well-being, especially in cases of anxiety, depression, and trauma caused by verbal abuse or character attacks.

5. Foster Respectful Language Norms in Public Discourse and Media: Media outlets and public figures play a powerful role in shaping societal attitudes. Journalists, influencers, and broadcasters should be held accountable for their language, especially in cases where it contributes to gendered stereotypes or online harassment. A code of ethics for gender-sensitive language use should be promoted across media platforms. Social media companies operating in Nepal should also be encouraged to monitor and act on gender-based hate speech and digital harassment, particularly those targeting women's speech, appearance, or lifestyle.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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