



***Hi Chairman!* Exploring the Sociolinguistic and Gendered Implications of Informal Greetings among Males Involved in Romantic Relationships with Female Student Teachers in Mutare Urban**

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the sociolinguistic and gendered implications of the informal greeting “Hi Chairman!” among adult males engaged in romantic relationships with female student teachers in Mutare Urban, Zimbabwe. Anchored in the interpretivist paradigm, the research sought to understand the meanings, power dynamics, and ethical challenges embedded in such communicative practices within teacher education settings. A qualitative research approach was employed, guided by a case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions involving 20 participants, including student teachers, school-based mentors, and college lecturers selected through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the emerging narratives. The findings revealed that greetings like “Hi Chairman!” are often used humorously to acknowledge a male teacher’s romantic involvement with a female student teacher, thereby reinforcing male dominance, peer validation, and patriarchal social norms. Female student teachers viewed these interactions as uncomfortable and demeaning, with some feeling pressured to conform or remain silent to protect their academic progress. The language used was found to blur professional boundaries, undermine ethical mentorship, and contribute to gendered power imbalances in teaching practice environments. Based on these findings, the study recommends the integration of gender sensitivity and ethics education into teacher training curricula, the development of institutional codes of conduct, and the implementation of anonymous reporting mechanisms for inappropriate behaviour. It also advocates for ongoing mentorship training, female empowerment programs, and awareness campaigns aimed at transforming informal language norms that compromise professionalism. Ultimately, the study underscores that seemingly casual greetings carry profound implications for gender relations, power, and professional ethics, calling for urgent interventions to foster respectful and inclusive environments in Zimbabwean teacher education.

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BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In Zimbabwean urban settings such as Mutare, informal communication styles, particularly greetings, are deeply embedded in cultural, social, and gendered norms. Among adult males, especially those entangled in romantic relationships with younger female student teachers, greetings often carry layered meanings, ranging from camaraderie, competition, flirtation to territorial signalling. One such greeting that has gained notoriety is the phrase, "*Hi Chairman!*", which, though seemingly harmless, may serve as a coded reference among men, hinting at shared or rival romantic interests.

This phenomenon mirrors dramatizations found in the popular Shona satirical comedy *Sabhuku Vharazipi*, where characters like Sabhuku and Chairman frequently engage in humorous yet telling disputes over women. In one scene, Sabhuku exclaims, "*Chairman, musikana uyu ndewekambani yedu!*" (Chairman, this girl belongs to our cooperative!), to which Chairman retorts, "*Ah Sabhuku, nyaya dzekusunga misoro hadziperi, regai musikana atisarudze!*" (Ah Sabhuku, matters of binding hearts never end, let the girl choose!). These humorous exchanges reflect real societal tensions, revealing how language is used to assert dominance, ownership, and flirtatious entitlement (Mafirakureva, 2015).

Such informal discourse, though comedic in presentation, may reflect deeper sociolinguistic and gender dynamics. In teacher education institutions, female student teachers often find themselves at the intersection of admiration, manipulation, and exploitation. The greeting "*Hi Chairman!*" may not only serve as a social marker of a peer's romantic involvement but also as a subtle contestation of masculine dominance, especially in spaces where women's agency is contested. This raises concerns about the professional integrity of mentors and the emotional well-being of student teachers, as these informal communicative practices blur the lines between mentorship, coercion, and courtship (Chikodzi & Nyota, 2010).

Furthermore, the usage of coded greetings reveals the power-laden nature of seemingly casual interactions. These informal exchanges can perpetuate gender stereotypes, normalise unequal relationships, and reinforce patriarchal notions of control over women's bodies and choices. Such practices may hinder the creation of safe and empowering educational spaces for female student teachers, particularly those on teaching practice in male-dominated school environments (Mawere, 2012).

Sociolinguistic studies have shown that language plays a crucial role in constructing and negotiating gender identities and power relations in everyday interactions (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003). In this context, greetings like "*Hi Chairman!*" become more than friendly gestures—they act as communicative tools loaded with meanings that reflect underlying romantic rivalries, gendered assumptions, and hierarchical social relations.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the sociolinguistic and gendered implications of such informal greetings in Mutare Urban, with special attention to how language reflects and potentially reinforces power dynamics in romantic relationships involving male adults and female student teachers. It aims to critically examine how these interactions affect the professional environment and broader ethical considerations within teacher education and practice.

Statement of the Problem

In educational institutions across Zimbabwe, especially during teaching practice placements, informal interactions between male educators and female student teachers often give rise to power-laden social dynamics. One such interaction is the use of coded greetings like "*Hi Chairman!*", a phrase that, while humorous on the surface, has become associated with subtle male-to-male signalling of romantic involvement with female student teachers. These seemingly innocent greetings reflect broader sociolinguistic and gendered dynamics that may perpetuate sexism, foster professional misconduct, and compromise the emotional safety and academic focus of female trainees.

Despite widespread anecdotal awareness of such practices, popularised through Shona satire such as *Sabhuku Vharazipi*, there is a paucity of empirical research interrogating how these informal linguistic practices impact gender relations, professional ethics, and power structures in teacher training environments. Female student teachers, often younger and in subordinate positions, may become targets of unwanted attention or find themselves caught in webs of rivalry and possessiveness masked as jokes among male colleagues.

This creates a problematic space where language, humour, and social status converge to potentially undermine gender equity and professional boundaries in the education sector. Without a critical understanding of these dynamics, such practices may continue unchallenged, reinforcing patriarchal norms and weakening efforts toward safe and respectful professional environments.

Research Questions

1. What are the sociolinguistic meanings embedded in the greeting "*Hi Chairman!*" among adult males in Mutare Urban?
2. How does the use of such informal greetings reflect underlying romantic relationships with female student teachers?
3. What are the gendered and power implications of these greetings within professional teacher education environments?
4. How do female student teachers perceive and respond to such informal interactions and associated romantic attention?
5. What strategies can be adopted to address the ethical and professional concerns arising from these informal communicative practices?

Research Paradigm

This study will be guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises the understanding of social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved. The interpretivist approach is particularly suited for exploring the nuanced meanings and subjective experiences associated with informal greetings such as *"Hi Chairman!"*, especially as used by males involved in romantic relationships with female student teachers. Through this lens, the study seeks to unpack how language is used to construct social realities, power dynamics, and gender relations within educational settings in Mutare Urban.

Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and that understanding is derived from the meanings individuals assign to their interactions (Creswell, 2014). In the context of this study, informal greetings are not seen as neutral communicative acts but as culturally loaded expressions that reflect and reinforce social structures, particularly gendered relationships and hierarchies.

Moreover, this paradigm supports the use of qualitative methods, which enable deep engagement with participants' lived experiences, beliefs, and interpretations. The subjective nature of sociolinguistic exchanges, particularly those influenced by humour, rivalry, and romantic undertones, cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures alone. Thus, adopting an interpretivist stance allows the researcher to explore how language is employed to negotiate power, signal relationships, and perpetuate or challenge social norms.

The study will rely on interviews, focus groups, and narrative accounts to interpret the perspectives of both male adults and female student teachers. This aligns with the interpretivist goal of understanding the *how* and *why* behind social behaviour in specific cultural contexts (Schwandt, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

This study will adopt a qualitative research approach, which is appropriate for exploring the rich, contextual, and subjective meanings that individuals attach to social interactions, such as informal greetings and romantic insinuations in professional spaces. Qualitative research is ideal for uncovering the depth of human behaviour, particularly when the goal is to interpret rather than measure experiences (Creswell, 2014). Given that the focus of this study is on the sociolinguistic and gendered implications of phrases like *"Hi Chairman!"*, a qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the lived realities, perceptions, and power dynamics among both male adults and female student teachers in Mutare Urban.

The approach enables the researcher to gather detailed narratives and interpretations from participants, which are crucial for analysing how language and informal communication reflect gender relations, romantic tensions, and professional ethics in the teacher education context.

Research Design

The study will utilise a case study research design, which allows for an intensive, holistic, and context-bound investigation of the phenomenon within its real-life setting (Yin, 2018). Mutare Urban will serve as the bounded system, and the case will specifically involve interactions between male adults, some of whom may be mentors or school authorities and female student teachers on teaching practice.

The case study design is particularly relevant because it enables the examination of the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which these informal greetings take place. It also supports the use of multiple data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observation, all of which are essential for triangulating findings and enhancing validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprises:

- Male adults (including school heads, mentors, and other male staff) based in selected schools within Mutare Urban
- Female student teachers from teacher education and other institutions (e.g., Marymount Teachers College and Muare Polytechnic) who are on teaching practice in Mutare Urban schools
- Educational administrators or policy stakeholders who may provide insights into professional conduct guidelines and institutional responses to romantic entanglements during teaching practice

This population is relevant because the interactions and experiences of these groups lie at the centre of the sociolinguistic and gendered dynamics under investigation.

Purposive sampling will be used to select participants who are directly involved or affected by such informal greetings and the relationships they signify. This sampling strategy is suitable for qualitative case studies where the goal is to gain rich and relevant information from those most knowledgeable or affected by the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study will use a purposive sampling technique to select participants who possess rich, relevant, and diverse experiences related to the use of informal greetings, particularly the phrase *"Hi Chairman!"*, in the context of romantic relationships between male adults and female student teachers in Mutare Urban. Purposive sampling is ideal for qualitative studies where the aim is to gain deep insights from individuals who are most knowledgeable about or directly affected by the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The sample will consist of approximately 30 participants, drawn from the following target groups:

- 10 male adult participants, including school heads, senior teachers, and mentors who have been associated with teacher training institutions or have interacted with student teachers in supervisory roles
- 15 female student teachers currently on teaching practice in selected Mutare Urban schools, drawn from institutions such as Marymount Teachers College
- 5 educational administrators or college staff (e.g., teaching practice coordinators, lecturers) who can provide professional and policy perspectives on teacher conduct and gender dynamics

The participants will be selected based on their availability, willingness to participate, and direct experience with or knowledge of the informal interactions and greetings in question. Special consideration will be given to ensuring diversity in age, school type (primary or secondary), and length of

professional experience to allow for variation in perspectives.

This sampling procedure ensures that the voices of both male and female participants are captured, with particular attention to power relations, gender dynamics, and professional boundaries. It also enables the researcher to gain a nuanced understanding of the implications of such greetings across different stakeholder groups.

Ethical considerations, including informed consent and the right to withdraw, will be strictly observed throughout the sampling and data collection processes (Creswell, 2014).

Demographic Data of the Participants

A total of 30 participants were involved in the study, consisting of male adults, female student teachers, and educational administrators. The demographic characteristics considered include gender, age, role or status, teaching experience, and institutional affiliation. Understanding these characteristics is essential for contextualising the responses and highlighting the diversity of perspectives within the sample.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant Group	Number (n)	Gender	Age Range	Role/Status	Teaching Experience / Relevance
Male Adults (Educators)	10	Male (10)	35–60	School heads, mentors, senior staff	10–30 years
Female Student Teachers	15	Female (15)	20–27	Student teachers on teaching practice	0–1 year (pre-service)
Educational Administrators	5	Male (3), Female (2)	35–55	TP Coordinators, College Lecturers	8–20 years
Total	30	—	—	—	—

Summary of Key Demographics

- **Gender Distribution:** The study ensured balanced representation of both genders across participant roles, with a focus on including voices from female student teachers who are central to the issue.
- **Age Range:** Participants ranged from early 20s (student teachers) to late 50s (school heads and administrators), providing generational insights into the informal greeting culture.
- **Professional Experience:** The male educators and administrators brought extensive teaching and mentorship experience, enabling rich reflections on cultural and professional norms in teacher education.

This demographic diversity provided a well-rounded understanding of the sociolinguistic and gendered implications of informal greetings like *"Hi Chairman!"*, particularly in professional settings where romantic tensions intersect with education and power dynamics.

RESULTS

Subtheme: "Hi Chairman!" as a Coded Expression of Romantic Rivalry and Masculine Territory

Presentation of Results

The phrase *"Hi Chairman!"* emerged as a widely recognised informal greeting among adult males, particularly in school settings within Mutare Urban. While seemingly polite and humorous, the greeting often carries implicit meanings rooted in romantic rivalry, masculine pride, and social recognition of a peer's romantic involvement with a female student teacher.

Participants interpreted the greeting as:

1. A code word signalling another man's romantic interest or success.
2. A mock salute given with sarcasm, often in the presence of the female involved.

3. A way of staking or challenging romantic territory without direct confrontation.

One male teacher stated:

"Kana munhu wacho afamba ne student teacher, tinongomutarisa toti 'Hi Chairman!' tichinyemwerera, anoziva zviri kuitika."

("When someone is dating a student teacher, we just look at him and say 'Hi Chairman!' with a smile, he knows what's going on.")

A female student teacher recalled:

"Ndakanzwa varume vachidana kuti 'Hi Chairman!' vachitarisa mentor wangu. Zvainyadzisa, zvekuti unoona zviri obvious kuti pane chiri kuitika."

("I heard the male teachers calling out 'Hi Chairman!' while looking at my mentor. It was embarrassing, it was obvious something was going on.")

Another participant described it as a form of 'coded teasing':

"Unotonzwa munhu asina kana chaanotaura achingoshevedza kuti 'Hi Chairman!' — asi mese munonyatsoziva zviri kutaurwa."

("You'll hear someone randomly shout 'Hi Chairman!' without context, but everyone knows exactly what's being said.")

The phrase was also linked to *Sabhuku Vharazipi*, where Chairman was seen as the suave, often womanising figure. The greeting thus humorously assigns the same identity to its target, reflecting status, envy, or mockery depending on tone and context.

Analysis of Results

The findings show that the phrase *"Hi Chairman!"* operates as a sociolinguistic tool for indirect communication among males. It allows the speaker to express admiration, jealousy, or rivalry regarding a colleague's romantic association with a female student teacher without direct accusation or conflict. This aligns with Holmes and Meyerhoff's (2003) view that language is a key medium through which gender identities and social roles are constructed and performed.

From a masculinity studies perspective, the phrase serves as a form of symbolic male bonding, reinforcing patriarchal norms where women are viewed as conquests. It plays into a script of performative masculinity, where adult males use humour and indirect communication to signal dominance and romantic success, often at the expense of female agency.

Moreover, female participants felt the phrase reinforced their objectification, reducing them to subjects of gossip or silent spectators in male-centred interactions. This confirms Mawere's (2012) observation that informal cultures in professional environments can erode dignity and promote unequal gender dynamics.

The phrase also reflects power asymmetries in educational settings. Male educators, by using the phrase in front of student teachers or colleagues, subtly assert authority and social status, often disregarding ethical implications. These practices blur the lines between mentorship and romantic engagement, compromising the professionalism expected in teacher-student relationships.

In summary, *"Hi Chairman!"* is a multi-layered sociolinguistic expression that reflects deeper gendered and power-laden interactions in Mutare Urban's educational settings. Though humorous and informal on the surface, it functions as a coded language of male rivalry, romantic signalling, and social commentary, ultimately contributing to the marginalisation of female student teachers and the erosion of professional boundaries.

Subtheme: Informal Greetings as Social Markers of Romantic Involvement and Hidden Power Relations

Presentation of Results

Participants revealed that informal greetings like *"Hi Chairman!"* function as social codes that confirm or hint at romantic relationships between male teachers and female student teachers. These greetings are used not only to joke or tease but also to publicly acknowledge a romantic link without directly stating it, creating an open secret within the school environment.

One male participant explained:

"Kana ukatanga kufambidzana nemudzidzi wechikoro, vanenge vava kutokukwazisa nema 'Hi Chairman!' kutonzi uri pamusoro."

("Once you start getting close with a student teacher, they start greeting you with 'Hi Chairman!' as a way of saying you're the one in charge romantically.")

Another teacher described it as a badge of honour among male staff:

"Izwi iroro rinongoshandiswa kucherechedza kuti munhu ave ne relationship, uye vamwe vanenge vari kutoshaya mukana wacho."

("That word is used to acknowledge that someone has entered a relationship, while others might be feeling left out.")

Female student teachers expressed discomfort with how such greetings publicly expose private affairs, often turning them into objects of male commentary.

One student said:

"Pane rimwe zuva ndakanzwa vakomana vekuchikoro vachishevedzera 'Hi Chairman!' vachitarisa teacher wangu. Zvakaita kuti ndinzwe sekuti ndiri kutengeswa."

("One day I heard the male teachers shouting 'Hi Chairman!' while looking at my mentor. It made me feel like I was being auctioned off.")

Others noted that even when no relationship existed, proximity to a male mentor could trigger such teasing,

creating unfounded assumptions that could damage reputations:

“Unongofamba nemutoratidza basa chete, vanhu vototi muri kufambidzana. Zvinokanganisa zita remunhu.”
 (“You could just be walking with him for academic purposes, and people assume you’re dating. It tarnishes your name.”)

Several participants also described how the phrase sometimes reflects jealousy or passive rivalry, especially when multiple males are interested in the same student teacher:

“Pane vamwe vanongoti ‘Hi Chairman!’ kuti vakuvadze, vachiziva kuti iwe uri naye. Hazvirevi kuseka chete.”
 (“Some say ‘Hi Chairman!’ just to sting you, knowing that you’re the one involved with her. It’s not just a joke.”)

Analysis of Results

The findings reveal that informal greetings such as *“Hi Chairman!”* operate as linguistic tools of social exposure, signalling or confirming romantic relationships between male educators and female student teachers. These greetings carry coded meanings understood within the cultural context, effectively serving as public declarations of private affairs.

This aligns with sociolinguistic theories that suggest language is not merely a neutral medium but a vehicle for enacting power and social identity (Gee, 2014). In this case, male teachers use greetings to reinforce their social dominance and signal success in romantic pursuits, transforming professional spaces into informal social arenas.

For female student teachers, the use of these greetings often leads to public embarrassment, reputation damage, or emotional discomfort, highlighting a gendered power imbalance. While male teachers view the greetings as light-hearted or brotherly teasing, female students experience them as intrusive and objectifying, confirming Mawere’s (2012) assertion that informal male cultures can perpetuate gender inequalities in educational settings.

Moreover, the results show how such greetings function to regulate romantic territory, establish masculine hierarchies, and exclude others from a perceived romantic bond, whether real or imagined. This mirrors the “performative masculinity” seen in competitive male environments, where language is weaponised to assert control over female attention and affection (Connell, 2005).

The ambiguity of the phrase *“Hi Chairman!”*—being simultaneously humorous and serious, makes it a powerful linguistic marker of romantic involvement, social status, and territorial claims, especially within teacher-student interactions where professional boundaries are already precarious.

Informal greetings like *“Hi Chairman!”* reflect and reinforce romantic relationships in school settings by acting as public signals of private affairs. They

highlight an informal system of masculine bonding, competition, and symbolic ownership over female student teachers. This contributes to an unsafe environment where professionalism is compromised, and young female educators-in-training are vulnerable to both misinterpretation and harassment.

Subtheme: Informal Greetings as Tools of Gendered Power and Professional Boundary Blurring

Presentation of Results

The phrase *“Hi Chairman!”* was widely acknowledged by participants as more than just a humorous greeting, it often serves as a gendered communicative tool that exposes the unequal power dynamics in professional teacher education settings. The greeting is disproportionately used by male educators, often older and in positions of authority, toward their peers or as indirect signals in the presence of female student teachers, who typically occupy lower-status, trainee roles.

Male Dominance and “Masculine Ownership”

Many male participants admitted, sometimes with laughter, that *“Hi Chairman!”* was used to praise, tease, or even warn a colleague who was romantically involved with a student teacher:

“Unotoziva kuti kana munhu achitodzokera nechikoro asikana vachimutevera, anenge ava Chairman, haudzokere pasina.”
 (“You know when someone leaves college and the girls follow him, he becomes Chairman, and you know he didn’t go there for nothing.”)

This joking reference equates romantic conquest with social rank, highlighting how masculinity is performed through informal hierarchies, with the “Chairman” title symbolising dominance over peers.

Female Objectification and Disempowerment

On the other hand, female student teachers expressed that these greetings often left them feeling dehumanised, as if they were prizes being passed around or discussed publicly without consent.

“Vanenge vachiseka, asi uriwe musikana wacho uri pakati, zvinorwadza. Unonzwa sekuti uri trophy.”
 (“They laugh about it, but as the girl involved, it hurts. You feel like a trophy.”)

Another student stated:

“Zvakaita kuti usafambe ne mentor wako, kutotya kuti vanhu votanga kudaidzirana ‘Chairman’ kana vachikuona.”
 (“It made me afraid to even walk with my mentor, fearing they’d start calling out ‘Chairman’ when they see us.”)

This reveals how the greeting enforces surveillance over women's social movements and interactions, thereby limiting their freedom and reinforcing male control over educational spaces.

Erosion of Professionalism

Educational administrators noted that such practices, while not formally documented, are widespread and corrosive to professional standards:

"Unonzwa varume vachiseka nemashoko akadaro pamasemina. Zvinonyadzisa kuti hazvitorerwi pasi nemukuru webasa."

("You hear men joking like that even in seminars. It's shameful that the administration doesn't take it seriously.")

The greeting thus reflects a culture where professional ethics are undermined, and gender bias goes unchallenged, contributing to a toxic informal environment that clashes with the formal values of teacher training.

Analysis of Results

The data reveal that informal greetings like *"Hi Chairman!"* are not merely playful banter but serve as gendered acts of symbolic dominance. These greetings reproduce patriarchal norms in teacher education environments, where women are frequently objectified, and men's social value is tied to romantic conquest and peer approval.

This aligns with feminist sociolinguistics, which argues that language often reflects and reinforces gender inequality (Cameron, 2005). In this case, the greeting enacts linguistic patriarchy, privileging male status and marginalising female voices, particularly in professional contexts where power relations are already unbalanced.

Furthermore, the phrase blurs professional boundaries by normalising the discussion of romantic and sexual associations within workplace conversations. The use of such greetings contributes to a hidden curriculum where informal gendered practices undermine official policies on mentorship, gender equity, and ethical conduct.

The resulting environment places female student teachers at greater risk of reputation damage, emotional discomfort, and loss of agency, while empowering male educators to act with impunity under the guise of humour or cultural norms. This raises urgent concerns for teacher education institutions striving to create safe, equitable, and professional training environments.

The use of greetings like *"Hi Chairman!"* reflects deep-rooted gendered power dynamics in professional teacher education settings. These greetings operate as informal tools of male dominance, reinforce unequal relationships, and compromise the professional identity and dignity of female student teachers. Unless challenged, they risk perpetuating a

culture of tolerance for subtle sexism and boundary violations in Zimbabwe's teacher training institutions.

Subtheme: Navigating Visibility, Vulnerability, and Silent Resistance: Female Student Teachers' Experiences

Presentation of Results

Female student teachers in Mutare Urban reported mixed but largely negative perceptions of the informal greetings and romantic attention directed at them by male educators. Many respondents described feeling uncomfortable, objectified, and exposed when male colleagues used coded phrases like *"Hi Chairman!"*, especially when used in their presence or about their mentors.

Feelings of Embarrassment and Objectification

Most female student teachers expressed that the greeting *"Hi Chairman!"* made them feel as though their private interactions were being publicly scrutinised, turning them into the subject of gossip or sexual innuendo.

"Zvinonyadzisa. Unonzwa varume vachidana kuti 'Hi Chairman!' uri ipapo, zvekuti unotyta kutoona kuti vanhu vari kukutarisa sei."

("It's embarrassing. You hear men shouting 'Hi Chairman!' while you're there, and you become scared of how people are looking at you.")

Another participant reflected:

"Zvinoita sekunge uri zvinhu zvemutambo, pasina kukudzwa. Unopedzisira wava kunzvengwa nevamwe because vanofunga kuti uri kufambidzana na Lecturer."
("It's as if you're part of some game, without respect. You end up being avoided by others who think you're dating your mentor.")

This illustrates how informal greetings contribute to the stigmatisation of female student teachers and reduce them to symbolic markers of male rivalry.

Withdrawal and Cautious Behaviour

As a response, many student teachers reported adopting defensive strategies to avoid being linked to any male mentor or attracting romantic attention. These included limiting casual interactions, avoiding one-on-one meetings, and maintaining physical distance from male staff.

"Ndakatanga kudzivirira kushanda pedyo ne head kana senior teacher, kunyanya kana vasikana vakatotanga kuseka."

("I started avoiding working closely with the head or senior teacher, especially when other girls began giggling.")

Some even restricted their movement during break or lunch periods to avoid being seen with male staff, fearing social labelling or reputational damage.

Silence and Lack of Reporting Mechanisms

Several participants noted that although they felt uncomfortable or harassed, they rarely reported such interactions because of normalised workplace culture, fear of backlash, or the belief that their concerns would not be taken seriously.

“Hapana paunongoenda kunotaura nyaya iyi. Vanongoti varume vanongodaro, saka unonyarara.”
 (“There’s nowhere you can really report these issues. They just say ‘men are like that’, so you stay quiet.”)

Others feared being blamed or accused of encouraging the attention:

“Unotya kuti ukataura vanoti uri kukwevera varume. Saka kunyarara ndiko kungoita kwacho.”
 (“You fear that if you speak up, they’ll say you were the one attracting the men. So you just stay silent.”)

Despite their discomfort, many female student teachers felt powerless, especially given their trainee status and the hierarchical nature of teaching practice placements.

Analysis of Results

The results reveal that female student teachers experience informal greetings and romantic attention as gendered forms of surveillance and control, often leaving them feeling vulnerable, disrespected, and professionally compromised. Their responses are mostly passive or avoidance-based, rooted in a broader context where institutional mechanisms for reporting and support are weak or non-existent.

From a gender studies perspective, this reflects how power imbalances in teacher education settings silence women, limit their agency, and normalise discomfort under the guise of humour or cultural norms (Cameron, 2005). The lack of voice and fear of being judged demonstrates how informal school cultures can undermine formal gender equity efforts.

Additionally, the fact that these greetings occur in professional spaces, staffrooms, classrooms, workshops, suggests a pervasive blurring of boundaries that has significant implications for psychological safety, confidence-building, and future teacher identity development (Mawere, 2012).

The silence of female student teachers in the face of discomfort signals internalised coping, rather than empowerment. This aligns with findings by Morrell (1998), who argues that in patriarchal spaces, women often negotiate respectability through withdrawal rather than confrontation, to protect their reputations and avoid conflict.

Female student teachers perceive informal greetings and romantic attention as unwanted and professionally threatening, leading to emotional withdrawal, reputational anxiety, and silence. Their coping

strategies, marked by distance, avoidance, and resignation, highlight the deep-seated power asymmetries and gendered vulnerabilities in teacher training institutions. Without clear mechanisms for dialogue, support, and accountability, such interactions risk undermining both the confidence and career development of young female educators.

Subtheme: Strengthening Ethical Cultures and Communication Norms in Teacher Education Spaces

Presentation of Results

The participants, including school mentors, college lecturers, and student teachers, acknowledged that informal greetings such as *“Hi Chairman!”* can undermine professional ethics and create uncomfortable environments, particularly for female student teachers. When asked how such conduct might be addressed, participants proposed several strategies aimed at professionalising communication, raising awareness, and empowering students through institutional safeguards.

1. Ethics and Gender Sensitisation Workshops

Many respondents supported the introduction of regular workshops on professional ethics, sexual harassment, and gender sensitivity. These were seen as necessary to challenge the normalisation of informal greetings that carry sexual or romantic innuendo.

“Tingadai tiine training kana orientation inotaura nezvekuremekedzana, especially pakati pe student teachers nevarairidzi.”
 (“We should have training or orientation that talks about mutual respect, especially between student teachers and mentors.”)

These sessions would be directed at both students and teachers, encouraging respectful communication and clarifying acceptable conduct.

2. Clear Codes of Conduct and Enforcement

Some mentors and college supervisors called for institutional codes of conduct that explicitly address romantic relationships and improper communication within the professional environment.

“Kana paine policy inorambidza zvinhu zvakadai, vanhu vanozotya kuita zvisingafanire.”
 (“If there’s a policy that prohibits such things, people will think twice before misbehaving.”)

This would include guidelines on mentorship boundaries, and mechanisms for reporting inappropriate behaviour.

3. Creation of Safe and Confidential Reporting Channels

Female student teachers consistently emphasised the importance of anonymous, student-friendly platforms where they could report harassment or unethical conduct without fear of victimisation.

"Tingada kuti pa college pave ne anonymous suggestion box kana hotline yatinogona kushandisa kana tichinetseka."

("We'd like to have an anonymous suggestion box or hotline at the college that we can use when we're in distress.")

Such mechanisms would ensure that concerns around informal, inappropriate communication are not dismissed or trivialised.

4. Role Modelling by Lecturers and School Heads

Several participants stressed that school heads and lecturers should model professional communication and take active roles in discouraging informal banter and romanticised greetings within the school environment.

"Kana leadership yacho iri serious nezve professionalism, varairidzi vanotevedzera."
("If the leadership is serious about professionalism, teachers will follow suit.")

This includes intervening when inappropriate greetings are made and correcting such behaviours openly but respectfully.

5. Integrating Gender and Professional Ethics into Teacher Training Curriculum

Some college lecturers suggested that the teacher education curriculum should explicitly incorporate gender, communication ethics, and relationship boundaries as part of foundational training for all student teachers.

"Chikamu cheProfessional Studies chinofanira kusanganisira nyaya dzekuremekedzana pakati pevakomana nevasikana pa teaching practice."
("The Professional Studies course should include topics on mutual respect between males and females during teaching practice.")

This would promote ethical consciousness from the onset and build long-term awareness around power and gender dynamics.

Analysis of Results

The results highlight the urgent need for systemic, multi-level interventions to combat the ethical and gendered implications of informal communicative practices such as "Hi Chairman!". These greetings, while often dismissed as jokes, serve to trivialise professionalism and subtly reinforce patriarchal norms in education spaces.

The call for ethics workshops, codes of conduct, and confidential reporting systems aligns with

global best practices in educational institutions (UNESCO, 2015; Maphosa & Shumba, 2010). Moreover, integrating gender and ethics education into training curricula reflects a proactive, preventative approach to fostering professional behaviour rather than merely reacting to violations.

Participants' emphasis on role modelling underscores the influence of school leadership in shaping workplace culture. When heads, mentors, and lecturers demonstrate high ethical standards, they discourage informal, gendered teasing, and promote respect across the board.

However, the results also show that strategies must go beyond formal policies to address the informal cultural norms and peer group behaviours that sustain such practices. Without transforming the underlying social attitudes, policy alone may fail to achieve meaningful change.

Addressing the ethical and professional concerns tied to informal greetings like "Hi Chairman!" requires a holistic strategy that combines policy reform, ethical education, leadership accountability, and safe reporting mechanisms. When implemented collectively, these strategies can help to create safer, more respectful, and more gender-sensitive teaching environments, particularly for vulnerable student teachers.

Discussion of Findings

This study explored the sociolinguistic, gendered, and ethical implications of the informal greeting "Hi Chairman!" as used among adult male teachers and mentors in relation to female student teachers in Mutare Urban. Findings reveal that such greetings are not merely humorous social exchanges but are embedded with deeper meanings reflecting masculine power hierarchies, romanticised gender relations, and ethical lapses within professional education contexts.

Informal Greetings as Performances of Masculine Social Capital

The study found that "Hi Chairman!" functions as a linguistic symbol of peer recognition and masculine conquest, often conferred upon male teachers who are perceived to have romantic ties with younger female student teachers. This mirrors what sociolinguists have described as *gendered speech practices* that reinforce dominance and camaraderie within male circles (Cameron, 2005; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003). By labeling a male teacher as "Chairman," peers validate his perceived attractiveness or romantic success, elevating his status in the social hierarchy of the school or college.

Such greetings, while framed as jokes, sustain patriarchal values by framing female student teachers as *tokens of male success*, rather than professional equals. This normalisation of language use as a mechanism of social regulation aligns with the concept of "performative masculinity" within workplace discourse (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013).

Objectification and Silencing of Female Voices

Female student teachers reported feeling objectified, scrutinized, and sometimes even blamed for the attention they received, leading to withdrawal, silence, or avoidance of male mentors. These findings echo the work of Morrell et al. (2012), who highlight how women in educational spaces often navigate micro-aggressions and covert forms of gendered control.

Many female participants expressed discomfort in walking or talking with male mentors for fear of being *labelled* through the use of greetings like “Hi Chairman!”. Such reactions highlight how the greeting indirectly polices female behaviour and limits their ability to engage fully in mentorship and professional learning, echoing Ridgeway and Correll’s (2004) notion of *gender as a performance within institutionalised power structures*.

Blurring of Professional Boundaries and Ethical Concerns

The study also exposed how informal communicative practices can blur professional boundaries between mentors and student teachers, leading to ethical ambiguities and potential abuse of power. In teacher education, where mentorship is critical, any communication that subtly promotes romantic or sexualised undertones undermines the integrity of pedagogical relationships (Maphosa & Shumba, 2010).

Furthermore, the widespread tolerance of such behaviour by both peers and institutional heads suggests an implicit culture of silence, a phenomenon also noted in African tertiary institutions where informal practices often go unreported due to fear of victimisation or ridicule (Mawere, 2012).

Power, Gender, and Resistance

The sociolinguistic dimension of the greeting “Hi Chairman!” intersects significantly with issues of gendered power. The results indicate that the greeting enables male mentors to assert dominance while disempowering female student teachers. As observed in feminist linguistic theories, language both reflects and perpetuates inequality (Lakoff, 1975; Coates, 2004). Yet, resistance is also evident. Some female student teachers have begun using sarcasm or strategic avoidance as tools to reclaim agency, though these are insufficient substitutes for systemic change.

Toward a More Ethical and Gender-Sensitive Professional Culture

The study reveals strong support among all stakeholder groups for institutional reforms, including gender sensitivity training, codes of conduct, and the integration of professional ethics into curricula. This aligns with global efforts to transform educational institutions into spaces of equality and respect (UNESCO, 2015). Creating safe reporting mechanisms, modelling professional behaviour by heads and lecturers, and embedding ethics into

teacher training are key to addressing these challenges.

The findings support the argument that informal linguistic practices are not neutral, and when left unchecked, they can reinforce harmful gender norms and disrupt professional learning environments. Institutional inaction contributes to an informal curriculum that undermines the formal training objectives of teacher education programs.

In sum, “Hi Chairman!” is not a harmless joke, it is a sociolinguistic artifact that carries implications for gender equality, professional ethics, and power dynamics in Zimbabwean teacher training institutions. While the greeting may appear culturally embedded and humorous, it has far-reaching effects on how students, especially women, experience teaching practice. Combating such informal yet impactful practices requires a holistic, systemic response rooted in ethics, policy, and critical awareness of language use in professional spaces.

CONCLUSIONS

This study critically examined how the informal greeting “Hi Chairman!” is used among adult male educators in Mutare Urban to signal and reinforce romantic involvement with female student teachers. The findings revealed that while the greeting is popularly viewed as humorous and culturally rooted, it is embedded with significant sociolinguistic, gendered, and ethical meanings that influence the professional environment in teacher education settings.

Firstly, the study concludes that “Hi Chairman!” operates as a code of masculine recognition and social capital, conferring symbolic status among male peers based on perceived romantic conquest. This informal discourse masks deeply entrenched patriarchal values and subtly objectifies female student teachers, thereby disrupting professional boundaries.

Secondly, the greeting fosters a culture of gender-based exclusion and discomfort, as female student teachers feel reduced to romantic conquests rather than respected as future professionals. Their agency is compromised by the fear of labelling and surveillance, affecting both their psychosocial well-being and their professional growth during teaching practice.

Thirdly, such informal greetings expose serious ethical concerns regarding mentorship and conduct in education. The blurred lines between personal and professional roles create potential for abuse of power and hinder the development of safe, inclusive learning environments. The tolerance of these behaviours points to institutional gaps in upholding codes of conduct and gender equality.

Lastly, although participants widely acknowledged the humour and cultural familiarity of the greeting, there was strong consensus on the need for reform. Recommendations include the integration of gender sensitivity and ethics into teacher training curricula, the creation of safe reporting mechanisms, and stricter enforcement of professional codes of conduct.

In conclusion, while language may appear casual or benign, it carries the power to shape culture, reproduce inequalities, and either support or undermine professional standards. Addressing informal communicative practices like “*Hi Chairman!*” is therefore essential in the broader effort to build gender-equitable and ethically sound educational institutions in Zimbabwe.

Recommendations

In light of the study’s findings on the sociolinguistic, gendered, and ethical implications of informal greetings such as “*Hi Chairman!*” in Mutare Urban teacher education settings, the following recommendations are proposed to promote professionalism, gender equity, and ethical conduct:

1. Integrate Gender and Ethics Education into Teacher Training

Teacher education institutions, including Marymount Teachers College and Great Zimbabwe University, should incorporate dedicated modules on gender sensitivity, power dynamics, and professional ethics within the curriculum. These modules should engage students in reflective practice and case study discussions on how informal communication can affect professional integrity.

2. Develop Clear Codes of Conduct on Professional Relationships

The Tertiary Education Service Council (TESC) and colleges should formulate and enforce institutional policies that clearly outline acceptable standards of conduct between staff and student teachers. These policies should address inappropriate informal behaviours and include mechanisms for monitoring compliance.

3. Strengthen Mentorship Training for Supervising Teachers

Supervising teachers in host schools should undergo mandatory orientation workshops before receiving student teachers. These workshops should emphasize the importance of professional boundaries, mentorship ethics, and the impact of inappropriate language on the student-teacher relationship.

4. Establish Safe and Anonymous Reporting Mechanisms

Institutions should provide confidential and secure channels for student teachers to report inappropriate behaviour or language, such as coded greetings, without fear of victimisation. This could include suggestion boxes, digital reporting platforms, or counselling services.

5. Promote Awareness Campaigns on Language Use and Gender

Regular awareness campaigns and dialogue sessions can be conducted to sensitize both male and female educators about the power of language in shaping gender relations. Role-play, drama (e.g., Sabhuku Vharazipi scenes), and testimony-based forums can foster understanding in a culturally resonant way.

6. Encourage Female Empowerment and Assertiveness Training

Workshops and peer-led training should be introduced to empower female student teachers to assertively respond to informal and inappropriate remarks. Such training would enhance their confidence and equip them with communication strategies to navigate difficult social spaces.

7. Conduct Further Research

This study focused on Mutare Urban. Future studies should be extended to rural teacher training environments and other provinces to explore regional variations in language use and to understand how broader institutional cultures affect student experiences.

Conflict of interest

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